

Black Sea Cooperation: a Difficult Path to Overcoming Divisions and Marginalization

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Abstract

The Black Sea area is mostly discussed for its security relevance to Europe and to the rest of the international community. Suffering from a long transition period to market economy and parliamentary democracy, the peoples living in the area have been struggling to overcome the new divisions of the post Soviet era and join the European community of stability and prosperity. Regionalism has been used as a means towards this end. Embraced already by the early 1990s by local political elites of the newly established countries in the region, regionalism became a fashionable policy tool responding to needs of sovereignty boosting, global integration and good neighbourly relations. Primarily used as a foreign policy tool, regionalism has followed a difficult path. This chapter presents an overview of the evolution of Black Sea regionalism, looking at actors, interests and processes. Then it discusses its achievements and shortcomings.

Keywords: Black Sea, cooperation, region, security

Introduction: Definitional plurality

An issue raised in any analysis dealing with the Black Sea region concerns its geographical delimitation. Where are the borders of the Black Sea region? Which countries or areas are covered? Though this discussion was very popular a decade ago when the Black Sea emerged as a regional entity, this is not the case today. The geographical delimitation of Black Sea region, like in other cases, remains open and questionable. From a policy making view definitional ambiguity has served policy flexibility. Analysts on the other hand have well argued on the temporary nature of any region, the latter's definition depending on who, when, and how one defines it. As it has been argued '...the socially constructed nature of regions implies that they are politically contested ... Because regions are political and social projects, devised by human (state and non-state) actors in order to protect or transform existing structures.'¹

Academic interest on the delimitation of the Black Sea region has declined over time. Periodically, whenever a new policy is devised, as in the case of the Eastern Partnership in 2008, the debate on the region's borders is revitalized. The interface of the Black Sea with two major regional projects, that of the European

¹ Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Modes of Regional Governance in Africa: Neoliberalism, Sovereignty Boosting, and Shadow Networks', *Global Governance* 10, 2004, 420-1.

Union (EU) and that of the CIS has supported a fragmented view of the region. So far, there are three main strands with regard to the geographical delimitation of the Black Sea region pointing to the different ways one addresses the question of 'who, when and how' a region is defined.

The concept of a 'wider Black Sea area' was first advanced by the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in the early 1990s, including all littoral states, the South Caucasus, Moldova, and other Balkan states such as Albania, Serbia and Greece. In trying to incorporate economic, political and cultural interdependences and go beyond (pre)existing institutional divisions it reflected the need of the local actors to avoid any new dividing borders and blocks formation. This, all inclusive, or wider definition of the Black Sea region led to open membership (inclusive of EU and non-EU members) and relaxed the concerns of the local elites that their cooperation would neither be of an exclusive nature nor an alternative to other European groupings (first of all the EU itself). Of course, the BSEC being an intergovernmental formation itself, born in the post-Cold War era, identified states as the constituting parts of the region.

The littoral states' approach, a more restrictive definition of the Black Sea as a region, was embraced later on in 2000s by Turkey, the aspiring regional leader, and Russia, placing more emphasis on geographical proximity and common assets, i.e. the sea. This approach aimed at keeping external players at a distance while maintaining an enhanced role of the local powers, i.e. Russia and Turkey, in dealing especially with the issues of navigation in the Black Sea. This was clearly expressed with the creation of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Force (2001) and the Operation Black Sea Harmony (2004), both set up outside the BSEC or any other more inclusive organization to provide a platform for cooperation in protecting water and water-related ecosystems and to increase shipping security respectively.

The EU's approach is also a distinct one, primarily due to its different level of reference. EU's definition incorporates the Eastern Partnership countries (minus Belarus), three EU countries (Romania, Bulgaria and Greece), Russia and Turkey. However, EU's 'wider Black Sea' refers primarily to adjacent, cross-border areas rather than whole state territories, undermining any political role for the region and any attempt for the Black Sea to acquire regional actorness. It rather points to the interdependences and common vulnerabilities among local communities trying to instigate a bottom-up rather than a top-down understanding of regionalism. EU's sectorial programs and the Black Sea Basin Program which covers border areas of the Black Sea basin reflect this approach. For the EU policy, however, the Black Sea as a region is slowly diluting and



increasingly merged within the Eastern Partnership framework, thus more and more the Black Sea countries are identified as Eastern partners.

This definitional plurality indicates that there is nothing stable or permanent about the borders of the Black Sea region and that its geographical delimitation has been (mostly) responsive to top-down policy designs and shifting priorities. The region lacks clear actorness and it is loosely defined.

The regionalism test

It has been argued elsewhere by the author and others alike that the results of cooperative processes among Black Sea states have been poor. The factors behind the success and the failure of regional projects are actually the same. They lie in the geopolitical, material, and ideological context within which regions are shaped. Some of the specific problems that have been identified refer to:²

- sluggishness in identifying, assessing and implementing regional infrastructure projects;
- the need to improve inter-sectorial coordination;
- the lack of flagship projects symbolizing progress toward regional cooperation;
- limited amounts of research and information, especially in support of decision-making;
- insufficient resource mobilization;
- limited private sector and civil society participation;
- lack of coordination and duplication among regional initiatives;
- limited institutional efficiency of regional organizations.

Formal intergovernmental institutions (such as BSEC) have set the pace of regionalism which so far has remained very slow and troublesome. The history behind the evolution of Black Sea regionalism in part highlights the contrasting visions and competing aims displayed by the region's two principal economic and political powerhouses: EU and Russia. Though BSEC, the organization founded in 1992 upon Ozal's initiative, has attempted to bridge geopolitical competition and engage Turkey, Russia and their EU counterparts constructively in their common neighborhood its agenda has not met success.

In a number of fundamental respects—economically, demographically and culturally—several Black Sea states are closely connected with Russia, not least due to their common Soviet past. These links, however, if anything, are not deepening primarily due to the high security dilemma persisting in the region that undermines trust. Geography, of course, also matters a great deal.

² Panagiota Manoli, *Reinvigorating Black Sea Cooperation: A Policy Discussion*, Policy Report III, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation, 2010, 12-13.

Thus, despite deeply dividing disputes between Russia and the Black Sea states, it remains a key economic partner for them primarily due an energy fueled interdependence. However, during the last decade, the EU has become the main trade and investment partner for all its eastern neighbors. The Customs Union with Turkey (and its membership preparations) and the envisaged Deep Free Trade Agreements with the EaP partners solidify trade redirection towards the EU. But, trade with the EU as a percentage of foreign trade of Black Sea States has been declining since 2008.

The competition of Russia and EU takes the shape of normative, civil and material character with a tensed discussion on the power audit of the two poles over their common neighborhood. However, this discourse has taken another direction today recognizing the implications of regional multipolarity. Thus, while a Eurocentric approach was dominant in conceptualizing the Black Sea process, today analysis needs to incorporate the emergence of new poles of gravity in the area. A reassured Moscow and its reappearance as an economic agent and not merely as a politico-military actor on the one hand, and the emergence of Turkey as a regional economic hub with new social and economic networks in the Black Sea communities, bear significant impact on the region. The two G20 local powers move more confidently in shaping their own neighborhood agendas. At the same time, as progress in EU-Black Sea affairs takes a slower step especially in key areas of mobility, trade and democratization within the ENP context, Brussels preserves few instruments to drive pro-European reforms. The US and NATO's presence add to geopolitical competition in the region. This has been extensively studied and considered by some analysts as a stumbling block to cooperation as it exacerbates the security dilemma. Thus, while the EU has managed to devise Black Sea policies beyond the 'Russia first' logic, not keeping the region 'hostage' to EU-Russia agenda, among others through bilateral Action Plans, the Eastern Partnership, the (failed) Black Sea Synergy and projects such as INOGATE, Washington has still not agreed upon a distinct 'Black Sea dimension' in its foreign policy.

At the level of the material basis of Black Sea regionalism, the limitations and challenges are obvious. Most of the local countries that went through a long and painful transition period lack the resources, capacities and experience in regional cooperation. Also, the absence of economic drivers and its counter impact have been recognized as a serious deficiency. As argued elsewhere 'opportunities have been restricted because of the lack of economies of scale and the high cost of transport to neighbouring or world markets. An important reason for weak export performance is the dearth of internationally competitive goods produced in the area apart from natural resources. While geographic proximity has been a positive



factor in trade flows, the low demand in the area is a restraining factor that has been changing the direction of trade. Increasingly thus, trade flows are reoriented towards west European and other international markets. Poor infrastructure has further weakened proximity advantages. Although sea routes have facilitated trade links between Bulgaria and Romania and the opposite edge of the Black Sea, the volume of trade remains very low.³ Consequently, the limited transnational exchanges among regional partners and the absence of vested economic interests have undermined the wave of new regionalism in the Black Sea.

How has regionalism evolved so far? As Cottey has argued, post-Cold War (sub)regionalism in Europe has developed in three phases.⁴ A first, formative phase in the early 1990s when the end of the Cold War created a new strategic context in which (sub)regional cooperation became possible and new challenges emerged. A second phase, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO resulted in new (sub)regional initiatives designed to mitigate the inevitable 'dividing lines' created by enlargement and the ending of the Yugoslav wars triggered a period of intensive institution building in the Balkans. And, a third, post-enlargement phase in the late 2000s, where attention has shifted to the role of (sub)regionalism in a strategic environment where further enlargement of EU and NATO (at least beyond the Balkans) appears unlikely and Russo–Western relations are more problematic. Accordingly, BSEC's emergence in the 1990s responded to foreign policy priorities of local governments around issues of sovereignty boosting, east-west state dialogue, and global integration. Twenty years since its establishment, however, it still operates as a forum rather than an organization whose agenda is shaped around the exchange of information, policy experience and good practices. The littoral states' approach has been increasingly stressing institution building around common assets and the address of developmental concerns.

Another term that has become more fashionable in the study of neighborhood regionalism linking it to EU's external policy is that of governance. Governance dominates much of the conceptual and empirical literature on the European Neighborhood Policy.⁵ Essentially, governance means rule-based action and the

³ Panagiota Manoli, *Limiting Integration: Transnational Exchanges and Demands in the BSEC Area*, *Agora Without Frontiers*, 10 (4) 2005, 278.

⁴ Andrew Cottey, *Subregional cooperation in Europe: an assessment. Regional integration and global governance papers*, Working Paper 3/2009. Bruges: College of Europe and the Comparative Regional Integration Studies Programme of the United Nations University, 3–4.

⁵ Sandra Lavenex, 'EU External Governance in "Wider Europe"'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 2004, 680–700; Katja Weber, Michael E. Smith and Michael Baun (edited), *Governing Europe's Neighbourhood. Partners or Periphery?* New York: Manchester University Press, 2008.

convergence of policies in specific domains. The EU, through the bilateral and multilateral dimensions of the European Neighborhood Policy has attempted to support rule-based action. Still, however this externally promoted 'governance' is presented with obstacles and is contested.

Conclusions

The Black Sea has a long history of interaction among the peoples living in its shores since ancient times and it has been a vital route for global trade. It also has a history of divisions, disputes and great powers' competition. For most of the 20th century it was kept 'closed', divided, and marginalized when the rest of the world was shaped by unprecedented forces of globalization. Overcoming these divisions and marginalization in European and global affairs was the prime concern of the local political elites during the last two decades, along with building modern statehood. This goal has been mainly served through regionalism.

Has this been an efficient and appropriate tool? Some results in terms of institution building have been impressive. Regional institutions covering all possible fields from trade, borders management, environment, S&T, business facilitation, transport, and so on, have been built to serve policy coordination, communication and integration.⁶ Important development tools such as the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDB) have been established and increasingly expectations for their role grow higher.

One of the main criticisms concerns the actual impact of regionalism on everyday life of the local communities. In other terms, the 'prosperity' impact of regionalism remains low as there seems to be no direct link between the performance of regional institutions and peoples' well-being. This is due to the fact that trade facilitation and liberalization among the Black Sea partners remains on paper despite decisions such as the GUAM FTA. There is however a window of opportunity through the mobility and free trade agreements currently negotiated with the EU which could have a positive impact. In parallel to that, the mobilization and support of the civil society at a regional level and what has been labeled by the EU as 'democratic governance' aims at generating policies that correspond to the real needs of the local people.

If one assesses regionalism in quantitative terms such as by looking into trade integration among partners then the results are rather disappointing with intra-regional trade flows growing but still remaining significantly underdeveloped. In the pre-crisis era, in the year 2008, approximately 13% of Russia's foreign trade and 20% of Turkey's foreign trade was conducted with BSEC countries. These figures, however, include mainly energy imports and bilateral (Russia-Turkey and Russia-Ukraine) flows.

⁶ Panagiota Manoli, *Reinvigorating Black Sea Cooperation: A Policy Discussion*, Policy Report III, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation, 2010, 17-22.



Another approach is to look into regionalism through qualitative lenses. What those would be? One argument put forward is that regionalism has contributed to building channels of communication and interaction not merely among the political elites, but most importantly among people who are often called to initiate and implement policies (such as networks of officials on border issues, organized crime, etc.). This also contributes to the difficult task of trust building. Another aspect in assessing regionalism is its potential impact on perceptions' change and the accumulation of historical experience and knowledge on how to cooperate and build common institutions and regional communities. The actors (state and increasingly non-state actors) learn how to cooperate and readjust their policies, a learning process that takes time to deliver. The normality of interaction in regionalism helps engaged actors to share experiences, practices and build networks that inform policy and alter perceptions of interests and modes of contact.