Rethinking EU's Black Sea policy: Linking security and connectivity

Stefan Meister, DGAP

With Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine since February 2022 the Black Sea has become a key area of competition about the new European security order. Although Russia created already a new reality in the Black Sea with the annexation of Crimea since 2014 only the large-scale war against Ukraine has brought real attention to the central role of the Black Sea for European security, EU neighbourhood and connectivity policy. For Ukraine the Black Sea is crucial in terms of trade particularly of agricultural products, as for the EU in terms of connectivity to the Caspian Sea as well as the Middle East. The Black Sea is a key part of the trans-Caspian corridor which connects Europe with the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Its strategic importance is defined by maritime trade routes of global relevance, critical infrastructure and energy reserves. For the EU and its member states, access to alternative trade and transit routes to Central Asia and China additional to the Northern route via Russia and to resources from the Caspian region has become more important since 2022.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Black Sea is an important location at the interception between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, with access to the Mediterranean and Northern Africa. Other regional and external players have become more active in this region including China and the US. With Russia's war in Ukraine the EU has reopened its enlargement policy in offering membership to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, all states based on or linked to the Black Sea. Beside the EU, NATO which is building its biggest military base in Europe in Constanza in Romania will have to play a bigger role for regional stability and security. With the war in Ukraine securitization of nearly all policy areas is growing including trade, critical infrastructure and energy policy. The EU will focus more on a comprehensive security approach with human and energy security, trade and transport, societal and digital connectivity, environmental questions and freedom of navigation. NATO will focus on hard security, in deterring any Russian aggression against its member states, preventing further Russian military expansion in the Black Sea. The war in Ukraine and its membership to the EU and NATO will be major drivers for both institutions and the Black Sea region in the next decade.

Changing security reality in the Black Sea

Russia's annexation of Crimea followed by a military buildup in the Black Sea and control of Sea of Azov was part of a systematic approach of the Kremlin to undermine the sovereignty of Ukraine, create a new reality in European security and was a precondition for the military campaign in Syria and for power projection towards the Middle East and Northern Africa. The control of the Black Sea is crucial to control Ukrainian ports and undermine the economic and security fundament of Ukraine and with this it's very functioning as a state. Russia has broken international law several times in Ukraine and the Black Sea without consequences by NATO, the EU and the international community setting dangerous precedents for Europe. Examples are naval blockades by the Russian Black Sea Fleet for international civil navigation, systematic minelaying of coastal areas of Ukraine with a threat for the whole Black Sea by floating sea mines and attacks on Ukrainian grain silos. The war has a huge impact on the ecosystem of the Black Sea, especially the ecologically sensitive Danube Delta. Therefore, EU and NATO enlargement of Ukraine will play a crucial role to change the

security and power balance in the Black Sea region and create a new reality for Russia but also for Turkey. But NATO membership will not come soon therefore EU integration will be the key element to secure a sovereign Ukrainian state and develop a strategy for reconstruction of Ukraine linked to enlargement policy and a new EU Black Sea strategy

The securitization of energy, connectivity, trade, human security is growing with the Russian aggression. It has become clear that the Black Sea region cannot be treated in isolation but should be seen as an integral part of the broader European and Wider regional security complex. However, the war has also eroded the once prevalent concept of regional ownership based on a comprehensive security model. Hard security, military engagement and the protection against hybrid threats and of critical infrastructure will play a much bigger role in this region. Therefore, the interaction between hard security and elements of comprehensive security is crucial. That can only take place in a coordination between the EU, NATO and regional cooperations like the Turkey, Romanian and Bulgaria demining initiative in the Black Sea. For the EU investment in port, railway and road infrastructure linked to regional security has to become a main element of its neighbourhood and Black Sea policy. EUs Global Gateway initiative needs to become with the next EU budget in the term 2028-2034 more relevant for infrastructure investment. This budget will also decide about the relevance of a new EU Black Sea strategy since it needs substantial funding.

Competing approaches for EUs Black Sea policy

With its Black Sea Synergy (BSS), launched in 2007, the EU developed a bottom-up approach for the region to foster confidence building, regional dialogue and improving economic cooperation and mobility for states and citizens around the Black Sea. The 2024 review of the BSS underlined, how much this approach is rather project driven than a real strategy.[1] We can criticize EUs BSS for its lack of ambitions and limited strategic depth, since it was focused mainly on prosperity and economic development but rather ignored the growing security challenges in the region. But only because it was so soft and fuzzy most of the countries of the region could agree on this policy in peace times. In a way it was the answer for the demand of a rather not so strategic approach, which would not challenge Russia's or Turkeys role in the region. This has now changed with the war in Ukraine, there is a need for more EU engagement in the region with a strong focus on Ukraine, security and connectivity, but also with a demand for a new Turkey policy and better coordination with NATO. The Black Sea is a crucial element of a process of rethinking of EUs neighborhood and connectivity policy which will be a major task for the new European Commission. Currently EU institutions are finalizing a new Black Sea Strategy for the EU.

Two competing approaches are discussed: The first understands the Black Sea as a central element of the new European security order and with this as a key element for a new neighborhood policy. In this context, Ukraine is becoming fundamental for EUs policy towards the Eastern neighborhood and the Black Sea. The latter is a central element of connecting Europe with other regions and to circumvent Russia. This approach is rather supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and builds on concepts developed by Romania. While at the same time EU institutions are always very carefully to focus too

---

[1] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11900-2024-INIT/en/pdf.

much on security policy or if, then on a human security approach. In such a concept different kinds of connectivity (human, digital, trade), security of critical infrastructure, energy security would play a major role. But important is, that the Black Sea will become a core element of a revised neighborhood policy and should play a more independent role in EUs foreign and neighborhood policy. The other concept, rather preferred by the European Commission understands the Black Sea as an element of a revised neighborhood policy which would connect Europe with other regions especially the South Caucasus, Caspian Sea and Central Asia. Connectivity will become a core element of this policy which would link Europe to different regions, countries and develop relations in areas like trade, digital connectivity, energy policy, mobility and human security. In this concept the Black Sea would be just one element of a revised neighborhood policy but not have a unique characteristic. At the same time, it is also with Ukraine and Moldova and possible at a later point with Georgia part of the enlargement policy of the EU.

For the EU the connectivity agenda will be a key element to link not only different regions but also policies. It is not just about connecting Europe with Central Asia via the Trans-Caspian corridor, but also connectivity as a key element of European norm setting in areas like environment, labour rights, digital technology with the target countries linked to questions of governance. The EU is in these areas in competition with China, Russia, Iran and they are also norm setters in the Wider Black Sea region in terms of internet control, control of civil society and the stabilization of authoritarian regimes. The external interference in Romanian and Moldovan elections, energy blackmailing in Moldova and the pressure on Georgian politics are elements of Russian hybrid warfare in Europe.

The role of Russia and Turkey

A key question for the EU is, how to deal with Russia, which will stay for a long time an adversary and main threat to European security. Russia under the current regime will not end the war against Ukraine as long as it is capable to attack the country. Also, Donald Trump will not change this situation. The limited reaction of the EU and NATO to Russia's military buildup in the Black Sea with the annexation of Crimea since 2014 was a crucial precondition for the invasion in 2022. The lesson learned here is, that not acting and the lack of a strategic vision for the region has created opportunities for Russia to project power and create insecurity for the EU member states. Russia and Turkey, as the key countries in the region have their own strategies for the Black Sea: Both define themselves as the dominant actors in the region and for both, this is a crucial geopolitical intersection to project power beyond the region towards the Middle East, the South Caucasus and the Mediterranean. Consequently, for Moscow and Ankara it is an important element of their regional policy beyond the Black Sea. Both want to prevent a strong US engagement in the region because it would challenge their power positions. Although both share this interest, they disagree on other key questions like Crimea, the war against Ukraine and the military balance in the Black Sea.

Since Russia's role in the Black Sea was weakened by Ukrainian attacks on its Black Sea fleet since 2022, Russia even had to give up the head quarter of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, Turkeys position, as a NATO member with the second biggest army in the alliance after the USA, is growing. With the Montreux convention from 1936 Turkey has a key role in controlling the access to the Black Sea. Relations with Turkey are complex for European

countries but it is a key country on all crucial questions of the Black Sea including security which cannot be ignored. At the same time, Crimea is crucial for the military and strategic dominance in the Black Sea and European security. Any ceasefire or other agreement between Russia and Ukraine should not accept a permanent Russian dominance over the peninsula.

Revising EU Black Sea policy

The Black Sea policy should be treated not solely as a geographical approach but as a policy in which the EU's sectoral policies are overlapping in a coherent and harmonized way. The war in Ukraine remains central to any EU efforts towards the wider Black Sea region. Security and stability in the Black Sea can only be ensured with Russia's war ending and its military role diminished permanently. A prospective Black Sea strategy should include Ukraine's reconstruction and economic modernization in the framework of EU integration. A key precondition for this policy are security guarantees for Ukraine. The EU must develop instruments for norm setting in the wider region. Russia has become a significant competitor in on norms in the neighborhood of the EU as we can see it with Georgia moving towards a consolidated authoritarian state. Restoring maritime safety and re-establishing freedom of navigation according to international law is imperative. While the way of enforcement remains unclear, one idea is patrolling ships that sail under the flags of littoral states but are being coordinated by the EU in cooperation with Turkey. While NATO involvement in such patrolling initiatives is unlikely, due to Ankara's hesitance, there might be some leverage to allow the patrol of vessels of littoral states which are both, EU and NATO members.

The Russian aggression has led to increased intra-regional cooperation, such as the de-mining initiative by Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria, allowing the EU to support such endeavors and strengthen ties between littoral states. At the same time, the interconnection between different regions in the wider neighborhood of the EU is growing. It is becoming increasingly important to link policies in the adjacent areas – such as Central Asia, Caspian Sea or the Middle East – to the Eastern neighborhood policy. Thus, the EU should connect the different (sub-)regions and policy areas. EU institutions should assess the possible overlaps of the new Black Sea strategy with other initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership or Global Gateway. Connectivity initiatives should be the key element of the EU policy towards the wider region and be part of the Black Sea strategy. One focal point in Brussels' connectivity policy should be investment into and protection of strategic infrastructure in the Black Sea, such as ports, pipelines, and submarine cables. While the Middle Corridor will not reach the trade volume of the Northern transit route via Russia even in the best-case scenario, it is still crucial for the EU to diversify its trade routes and reduce dependencies, while building up leverage on littoral states such as Georgia and Turkey but also Azerbaijan.

In the context of a broader external contestation of the EU in its neighborhood, the Black Sea has become of increasing interest to other powers like China. Thus, to remain a relevant player, the EU needs to consider the transactional mode of operation of different powers. Yet, it must preserve its normative agenda. The seemingly unconditional offers by China are prevalent among authoritarian governments, as has been showcased with the example of the Chinese

Georgian Free trade agreement signed in 2017[2] and that a Chinese company won the tender to build Georgia's deep seaport in Anaklia on the Black Sea. Therefore, the EU should be more strategic in its investments and conditions for infrastructure construction also excluding Chinese companies. The EU and member states should support Romania's natural gas production in the Black Sea through investments. The yielding of these considerable reserves of natural gas would not only benefit the two littoral states, but the gas export could also support Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria in the decoupling from Russian gas.

Turkey is a key country for the EU's Black Sea policy, more engagement is needed to bring Ankara on board. Turkey should be involved in future EU security initiatives like patrols in the Northern Black Sea or countering hybrid threats. In its efforts to restore maritime safety and re-establish the freedom of navigation, the EU must cooperate with Ankara. As the Turkish government needs Western support to stabilize its economy, the EU might link economic cooperation with the country to cooperation in the Black Sea. EU's support to Turkey's economic and financial stabilization; updating the Customs Union and progressing towards a visa-free regime are potential entry points.

---

[2]

https://www.economy.ge/uploads/files/2017/foreign_trade/tavisufali_vachrobis_shetanxmeba_georgia_china/shetankhmeba_2018/page_0_60_145_179_china_georgia_fta_for_georgia_.pdf.