

# Turkey and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

This paper aims to analyse Turkey's relationship with other states in the Black Sea region, and takes a look at reasons behind the formation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation that was spearheaded by Turkey. The paper also highlights the importance of the region and the struggle by outside powers for influence in the region. These powers include Russia and the United States, alongside Turkey.

**Keywords:** Black Sea, Cooperation, Turkey, Russia, U.S., Control.

## 1. Introduction

The Black sea region is situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, where land, sea, air and river transportation routes meet one another. Following the rule of the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and the Habsburg empires, the region became an area of rivalry. The Balkan Peninsula is a kind of a transit line, which give an easy access from Europe to Asia and vice versa, the black sea has been a zone of contention and confrontation for centuries. It is undoubtedly a contested neighborhood and the subject of intense debate. This reflects the changing dynamics of the region, its complex realities, and the interests of extra-regional powers and the regions relation with the rest of the world. Its strategic position, linking north to south, west to east, as well as its oil, gas, transport and trade routes are all important reasons for its relevance. The black sea represents a remarkable importance with its human potential, significant economic force, energy sources and a wide spectrum of complimentary industries. In the context of the cold war, it was the scene of East-West strategic competition. In the post- cold war era, it has become more complicated and difficult to manage. Throughout the cold war, the decisive political and military presence of the super powers provided stability, albeit strained, in the region for forty years. The demise of the Soviet Union, has on the one hand, liberated ancient sources of tension and grievances that the cold war suppressed and masked, but on the other, allowed for the first time an emergence of a truly cooperative environment around the black sea region [Aydin, 2005].

## 2. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation

From the beginning to the present, the black sea region has been an important factor in international relations, and has been an area of rivalry between the U.S.S.R and the U.S.A . The region had faced several unsuccessful cooperation attempts due mainly to its location in the past. Located in the Gulf, Eastern Mediterranean and Europe, with different people, religion and culture. Of all the attempts made at cooperation, only two resulted in success. The first of these attempts was by Turkey in 1934, under Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, known as the "Large Entente", which did not live long, and the other in 1940, known as the "Little Entente, which lasted shorter than the first Entente. The failure of these attempts at cooperation led to further fragmentation in the region as a result of mistrust, religion, territorial conflict and culture among several other reasons. Since the 1940's no attempt at cooperation was made in the region until 1992, after the collapse of U.S.S.R which had been the dominant power in the region. It was in fact the republic of Turkey that launched a new cooperation initiative as a result of the vacuum created by the U.S.S.R collapse. Due mainly to the vacuum, as well as the non interest in the black sea region by the Euro-transatlantic community, Turkey launched a new cooperation initiative under the name of Black Sea Economic Cooperation

(BSEC), which brought together the twelve countries of the wider black sea region. Established in 1992, the BSEC remains the most institutionalized economic organization with an international legal identity on 1st may, 1999 upon entry into force of its charter. It is the only organization that includes all the six countries (Albania, Armania, Azerbaijan, Greece, Moldova, Serbia and Montenegro). Poland, Slovakia, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Egypt, Isreal, Tunisia, BSEC Business council and the international black sea club have observer status. Three goal were identified for the new regional organization;

\*To achieve cooperation rather than conflict

\*To support regionalism as well as globalization

\*To avoid new divisions in Europe

The organisation since its formation, had peace and security in the region as its major aims, though without a clear distictive policy, but rather had sought to pursue these aims within the framework of economic cooperation among member states. And it was gradually that peace and security came to top the agenda of the organisation. Also several attempts were made to establish a free trade area in the region, but this became practicalllly impossible as member states had to be members of WTO before a free trade area could be established. BSEC had strong intentions of developing non governmental Networks despite its intergovernmental nature, within the black sea region. Fort his reason the establishment of its parliamentary assembly predates the formation of its permanent secretariat in 1994. The assembly was established in in 1993 and meets twice every year, and encompasses three committees; Economic, Commercial, Technological and Envirometal relations; Legal, and Political relations; Educational, Cultural and Social relations. The BSEC took many initiatives aimed at promoting sub-national cooperation, and many bodies were formed including; Association of Black Sea Capital(BSCA), the Bussiness Council in 1992, Black Sea Trade and Development in 1994. And many academic cooperations were undertaken, and standing Academic Committee was founded in Athens in 1998. Most of the intergovernemetal bodies of BSEC were adopted from the EU. It has the summit of Heads of States and Governments, mean while the decision making body of the organisation is the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs which meets twice every year and is chaired by the current chairperson holding the six month rotational chairmanship of of the organisation. The Chairman is supported by a Committee of senior officials organised as working groups. The Troika was also introduced in 1995 to ensure continuity, the participation of past and present chairpersons of the organisation at all meetings. The BSEC permanent international secretariat was established in Istanbul in March, 1994 to coordinate BSEC activities under the guidance of the Chairperson in Office, who coordinates the activities of the Working Groups [Kona, 2005].

### 3. Motivations To Launch The BSEC

Many reasons were advanced for founding the BSEC as a regional organisation by different scholars. Some were of the opinion that many regional organisations emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as Barents European Atlantic council, Central European Initiative as well as the Black Economic Cooperation. The foundation of these organisations were mainly for two reasons. The first, political reasons, is that many Eastern European nations, after escaping from the Soviet Union, wanted an opportunity to stabilize their sovereignty and security, while Western participants wished to balance the increasing influence of Germany in the region. Two, On the economic side, these states wanted to develop a common market after the Soviet market had collapsed and as long as the European community market is not fully opened. Furthermore the countrie were not ready to join the EU, they needed to reshape their market elements and introduce compatible institutional structures [Canli, 2006]. Other scholars explained it in terms of a sense of isolation from these countries outside the process of European intergration, were the products of the rapidly opening of the European political economy. And also as a result of geography, proximity and many shared reasons and concerns made the black sea states natural partners and has prompted them to cooperate. And for such objectives, in june 1992, the Istanbul declaration was signed by the Heads of States or Governments of Albania, Azerbaijan, Armania, Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and Turkey, to integrate the black sea region to the world economy and to convert the area into one of peace, stability and prosperity [Ognyan, 2011].

### 4. Turkey's Interest In The Black Sea

In the early 90's, Turkey displayed a strategic in several of the Soviet republics. It saw it as an opportunity to increase its influence in a region encompassing the black sea, the Caucasus and central Asia. Turkey continued to exploit this opportunity in the Post Soviet era, despite being aware of Russia's interest in region. Turkish analysts were said to be monitoring debates on Russia's foreign policy orientations, and monitored that of Iran also, which it considers a rival for influence in the Caucasus and central Asia [Buyukakinci, 2004]. Turkey's goal in approaching the former Soviet republic, it will appear are mainly to export its own political regime pattern and to cultivate cultural and economic relations at a time when its position in Europe was faltering. Pipeline politics may have primarily influenced secured to central Asia, while avoiding other routes through Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan enjoys a special relationship with Turkey also, underlined by cultural elements and economic considerations. Azerbaijan's

potential wealth makes it of great importance to Turkey. Kazakh oil on the other hand could be transported across Turkey via Azerbaijan. Pipeline politics influenced Turkey to pursue a policy of close cooperation with Georgia, as oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian sea will have to go through Georgia, given the problems between Ankara and Yerevan. Again, Turkey saw an opportunity in using regional cooperation to strengthen its image as a privileged partner of the West, by increasing its influence in the black sea region. Turkey's primary considerations in proposing the creation of BSEC according to many scholars, was to explore alternatives to membership of the EU. Schemes of regional cooperation offer Turkey the possibility of being an important regional actor [Ognyan, 2011].

#### **5. Turkey As A Factor In The Black Sea Region**

The process of stabilization and expansion of democratic transformation in the Black Searegion is very much dependent upon the policies of the second largest country and major regional strategic factor – Turkey. Being a key member of NATO since the 1950s and an applicant for EU membership, Turkey is expected to support and assist the democratic process in the Black Sea region, yet the record of Turkey in helping the Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Black Sea is rather controversial. Ankara supported NATO membership for Bulgaria and Romania, yet in most other positions of Turkey in the region, its interests seem closer to Moscow rather than to those of Brussels. The backbone of Turkey's position is refusal to accept multinational NATO forces in and around the Black Sea. Turkey pursues a classical nationalist strategy of guarding its traditional domains from any outer interference – of the NATO alliance included. Legally based on the Montreux Convention of 1936, Ankara refuses to open the Black Sea for multilateral security operations of NATO like “Active Endeavor” in the Mediterranean, replacing it with its own initiatives like Black Sea Harmony. In this way Turkey presents an interest much closer to the positions of Russia, rather than the positions of the Euro-Atlantic community. There is a stable consensus between Ankara and Moscow that the Black Sea should remain self-sufficient and contained in terms of security and international cooperation. In other words, this means that the region should remain a realm of shared Russian – Turkish interest, as it has always been for centuries. This position could hardly be shared both by the Euro-Atlantic community, and in particular – by the smaller littoral countries (NATO members Bulgaria and Romania included), which rely upon international Euro-Atlantic system for defending their security [Ognyan, 2011].

#### **6. The U.S. Involvement In The Region**

It is obvious that the integration of the Black Sea region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream could not be achieved in reliance solely on the efforts of smaller countries of the region. Much bigger strategic concentration is needed to counter Russia's open hostility towards democracy and independence of post-Soviet and post-communist countries of the region, as well as to compensate for the controversial positions of Turkey. The strategies of both major international players in the region – the US and the EU – are of crucial importance in promoting the interests of Euro-Atlantic community and the reformist ambitions of the newly independent states in the Black Sea region. The US government has always been the main warrant for the opening of the Black Sea – Caspian corridor for free international trade and for collective security planning. Russia aims to block, to cork the Black Sea region, in particular – the South Caucasus, in order to prevent international trade and security penetration to the Caspian and to Central Asia – both key elements of its ex-Soviet strategic domains. The US advocates just the opposite – free access, free trade, free energy flows to Europe and the West. Russia aims at systemic destabilization of newly independent societies as Georgia, instigating ethnic conflicts and full fledged wars when needed, in order to seal the entire Black Sea – Caspian – Central Asia region for its own strategic use. The US aims at opening, at assisting newly independent states on their road to democracy and prosperity as part of integrating the larger Black Sea – Caspian region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream. That's why the US is the key ally for the countries in the region in their ambition for independent democratic development, and those countries themselves are the most devoted partners and allies for America in its pursuit of the Euro-Atlantic strategic agenda for the Black Sea – Caspian region [Ognyan, 2011].

#### **7. Turkey And Russia In The Black Sea**

Turkey and Russia remain the most powerful states in the black sea region, and historically the black sea is a region where the Ottoman and the Russian empires struggled for regional dominance at the expense of other states. This rivalry continued between their future states, modern Turkey and the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup>. Though it was said that the two countries since the formation of BSEC have pursued a policy of cooperation with one another, and that Turkey's lead in the foundation of BSEC was in consultation with Russia, and the two countries had developed a bilateral relationship pragmatically in the black sea region, and have continued to cooperate in the area of naval security, economic relations and energy projects. Initial hopes were that Turkey and post soviet Russia could transform the black sea region into a democratic zone of international cooperation and economic development, but regretfully the

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<sup>1</sup> Oktay F. Tanrisever, (2012), Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea Region: Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict. Centre for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies.

two countries ended up in a serious struggle for regional influence in the Balkans, Central Asia, Caucasus and Eastern Mediterranean throughout the 1990's. Of recent there have been significant rivalries regarding energy, strategies as well as conflicting security strategies in the region as reflected recently in suspended Conventional Forces in Europe (C.F.E) treaty and NATO's European missile defence system, as well as differing positions on ethno territorial conflicts and the process of democratisation in the Black Sea region. The relationship of Russia and Turkey is symptomatic of both cooperation and conflict. Though many analysts see this as pure arising from Turkey's inability to develop a clear vision for the Black Sea region which it could use to harmonise its regional policies with those of Turkey's main Western strategic partners; US, NATO and the EU to be able to counter balance its dependence on Russia in the Black Sea region [Ognyan, 2011].

### 8. Conclusion

Regarding Black Sea, this paper had tried to discuss the formation and importance of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the region itself to many European and Asian countries, and not only that it has shown its importance to the global economic system. And in this connection one can say that Turkey's bold move in creating the Black Sea Economic Cooperation was good step in the right direction no matter what interests Turkey is pursuing. However what one is compelled to make clear is how Turkey engages other key players in the region with regards to its ambitions, countries like Russia and Iran, are equally as strong as Turkey in terms of influence and military capability. For such reasons Turkey's policies must be prioritized as suggested by scholars, allying with the West may not necessarily help check the overwhelming influence of Russia and Iran in the region, and even if it will, necessarily with cooperation also, so that it does not become isolated by the two countries. America is seen to be supporting other nations of the eastern Europe within the Black Sea, against the influence of Turkey and Russia in the region, and so may not likely be dependable for Turkey in this matter.

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