

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN

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Topicality. The Black Sea region is situated in a very important geopolitical manner. Consequently, a large-scale regional collaboration becomes possible within the Black Sea zone and countries get appropriate conditions to launch their activity in this context. *Aim:* The body of the article is going to analyze the BSEC as one of the most successful regional organizations in the Black Sea area. The paper aims to provide an overview of the regional players' activity in the framework of the BSEC which are involved in sustaining and strengthening of this organization and also in continuing the reform process in it, developing in the same time relations of cooperation with the EU and other regional initiatives. *Methods.* This article embraces a row of different scientific methods of data analysis, predictive analytics, historical and statistical overview, descriptive method, case study etc. *Results.* The countries from the Black Sea basin are the most vulnerable to potential risks and shocks due to the instability of the region. This requires the interstate cooperation in the Black Sea area with no tradition in this field several decades ago. In the same time, countries like Turkey, Romania or Russia aspire to play the role of the regional leader, which can cause regional rivalries. With the help of the regional cooperation and the BSEC in particular, regional countries could learn how to work together for the common benefit. The creation of stable markets, interconnected and transparent regional organizations and initiatives would largely contribute to the security and stability of the Black Sea region.

Key words: The Black Sea region, Black Sea Economic Cooperation, regional cooperation, regional organization, the BSEC Declaration, the Black Sea countries, partnership, cooperation.

Regiunea Mării Negre este situată într-o zonă geopolitică foarte importantă. Prin urmare, o cooperare regională de scară largă devine posibilă în regiunea Mării Negre, iar rile obțin condiții regionale corespunzătoare pentru începerea activităților în acest context. În articol se analizează OCEMN – una dintre cele mai de succes organizații regionale din regiunea Mării Negre. Articolul are drept scop asigurarea revizuirii juctorilor regionali în cadrul OCEMN, care sunt implicați în menținerea și consolidarea organizației, precum și continuarea procesului de reformă, dezvoltarea relațiilor de cooperare cu UE și alte inițiative. Metodologia utilizată cuprinde un complex de metode de cercetare: analiza datelor, analiză predictivă, revizuirea istorică și statistică, metoda descriptivă și studii de caz. Concluziile se rezumă la faptul că rile din bazinul Mării Negre sunt cele mai vulnerabile la riscurile potențiale din cauza instabilității din regiune. Acest lucru necesită o cooperare internațională în regiunea Mării Negre, care până acum nu demult nu aveau un istoric în acest domeniu. În același timp, țări precum Turcia, România și Rusia aspiră la rolul de lider regional, care ar putea conduce la rivalități regionale. Cu ajutorul cooperării regionale și OCEMN, în special, rile din regiunea Mării Negre ar putea coopera împreună pentru binele comun. Crearea piețelor stabile, organizațiilor și inițiativelor regionale interconectate precum și transparența va contribui în mare măsură la securitatea și stabilitatea din regiunea Mării Negre.

Cuvinte cheie: regiunea Mării Negre, Organizația de Cooperare Economică la Marea Neagră (OCEMN), cooperarea regională, organizații regionale, declarația OCEMN, rile din vecinătatea Mării Negre, Parteneriat și Cooperare.

JEL Classification: F5; F53; F55; F63; F68; R1.

Introduction. It is common knowledge that the Black Sea region is a unique corner of the planet in terms of culture and civilization, and a meeting point of three great Abrahamic religions. It is the most complex mosaic of diverse ethno-national, confessional and linguistic groups – a true miniature of the Eurasian world.

Unfortunately, the diversity of the Black Sea region is more of a controversial issue rather than a uniting one, as it contributes to the contested nature of the interstate relations. That is why the Black Sea region has always been characterized by a great dynamism (which was, naturally, not always positive).

Therefore, when it comes to the issue of the Black Sea region it is important to mention its geopolitical sense and role in the system of international relations and in the ensembles of relations that appear in the result of fundamental historical transformations.

The analysis of recent events demonstrates why this region is evolving into a complex focal point for European foreign policy: unresolved frozen conflicts in Transnistria, Nagornyi Kharabah, Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Russian and European attempts to introduce new energy projects and pipelines and a shaky trajectory for democracy in Ukraine etc.

Basic content. The crucial importance of the Black Sea region and all incidents which take place in this area are determined by the fact that they are not isolated. Political stability and democratic consolidation in the region are threatened by a plethora of challenges which seriously affect European welfare and security too. That is why the EU is interested in maintaining peace and stability on its Eastern periphery, and following this objective, it has been lately actively pursuing what it calls its “European Neighborhood Policy”.

In 2014 the Black Sea region has grown not only in strategic importance but also came increasingly into the focus of public attention. The persistence and recently demonstrated volatility of unresolved frozen conflicts in Moldova’s separatist region of Transnistria and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and the recent military encounter between Georgia and Russia in 2008, and the rough annexation of the Crimea in 2014 have clearly demonstrated the risks that such “dynamism” poses.

The present-day international relations and world economy are more and more influenced by the processes of regional economic integration. These processes determine the main directions and priorities of economic life creating an environment of global competition and influencing the integration processes within different regions of the world. It is common knowledge that the Black Sea region is one of the key global crossroads where the most important international trade routes intersect (from Europe to Asia, from Central and Northern Europe to the Middle East, then further to the South and East Asia, from the CIS states to the Mediterranean).

The Black Sea region has always played a pivotal role in the Europe’s destiny and made a significant influence on the world’s politics. Throughout its history the Black Sea region developed in the alternately changing conditions of peace and protracted wars and conflicts. But, notwithstanding that fact, the Black Sea region has always been famous for its extensive network of trade relations and contacts. The

well-known Silk Road crossed this region and made an important contribution to the development and mutual enrichment of both continents. Thus, the geostrategic position of the Black Sea region let it become an important trade link, as well as a key energy transit route [3]. The combination of these factors caused the constant struggle of regional and global players for the world hegemony.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc a special dynamics of international relations disappeared. The economic and political chaos which took place in that period caused the interruption of trade routes that forced regional states to seek other ways of their involvement into the global economy. As the international experience shows, the level of economic development of any country depends on the degree of its integration into the world economic system and on its effective economic cooperation with other countries or groups of countries.

Besides, this period was crowned by the processes of the social and economic democratization in the Black Sea area and they were closely connected with the national states' formation in this region. By the mid-1990s the process of transition to market economy began to gain momentum among the Black Sea states. Such dramatic changes in the international political system affected not only the world order, but also the internal status of both regional states and ones close to them. Turkey, the Eastern Europe countries, the Balkans and the Mediterranean countries were amongst those which suffered the greatest impact. And there is no doubt that this dramatic and difficult time resulted in numerous conflicts and crises.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that after the Second World War the Black Sea states were united around two conflicting military and political blocs. It is known that after the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 Greece and Turkey joined it in 1952. While the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia created the Warsaw Pact in 1955 [14, p.16-20]. Consequently, that kind of world order did not contribute to the regional cooperation in the Black Sea basin.

However, after the "Cold War" the Black Sea states had the task to use such favorable conditions as geographical proximity, shared history, cultural ties and interdependence of national economies in the most advantageous manner for mutual benefits in the period of economic globalization. Thus, there appeared appropriate conditions for a large-scale regional cooperation.

In this context the initiative of Turkish Prime Minister T. Ozal to create a "Black Sea zone of prosperity and cooperation" with the Soviet Union, Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria in 1990 was a real achievement. Turkey's main motivation was to create an atmosphere of cooperation that would be based on economic relations in order to prevent future conflicts in the Black Sea region [2, p. 31-32]. It is worth mentioning that after the failure of the EU membership in 1989, and after the fall of communism and the collapse of the USSR, the creation of such entity made it possible for Turkey to establish its regional leadership and, thus, to gain more important international role [10]. However, neither the USSR, nor Greece was willing to let Turkey receive regional hegemony [6, p. 380-400].

In 1992 the Heads of State and Government of eleven countries (Albania, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine) gathered at a summit in Istanbul. This historical event culminated in a solemn signing of the first document on June 25 the Istanbul Declaration "On the Black Sea Economic Cooperation" (BSEC) [11]. This document has secured the commitment of creating favorable conditions for cooperation in fields like: trade, energy, industry, transport, communication, agriculture, science, tourism and environment. Also, one of the tasks before the founder nations was to facilitate the exchange of information, business contacts, and projects. Therefore, signing of the Declaration turned the BSEC into a symbol of a new model of regional cooperation.

In June 1998 at the Yalta summit the BSEC Charter was signed, and in May 1999 it entered into force turning the BSEC into an official regional organization [4]. In most cases, when creating post-communist regional organizations, the main documents are based on the Helsinki Final Act and the principles of the CSCE/OSCE. So, the BSEC was established in accordance with these documents, and its main goals and objectives meet the UN Charter and correspond to generally accepted principles of international law. As indicated in the BSEC Charter, the basic idea of creating this organization is to unite all Black Sea states creating a new paradigm of economic cooperation to prevent future conflict in this volatile region [4]. Moreover, the official document states that "Member States and their peoples aspire to a constructive and fruitful cooperation in a wide range of economic activities" [4].

As we know, the BSEC Member States are not only the Black Sea littoral states but also those which have the direct interests in the Black Sea region. Because the latter is located on two continents

encompassing not only the territory of Black Sea coastal states, but also of the Balkans and the Caucasus [5, p. 126-136]. Therefore, the states which signed the Istanbul Declaration of BSEC in June 25 1992 together with Republic of Serbia which joined in 2004 became the member states [4]. Austria, Belarus, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Tunisia, France, Croatia, Czech Republic, the US and the EU, as well as such institutions as the Energy Charter Secretariat, Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea, the European Commission have obtained the observer status. In addition, a number of international non-governmental organizations and countries have gained the status of sectorial dialogue partners in the BSEC, namely Hungary and Montenegro [16]. Taking into consideration this level of the international community's involvement in the cooperation with the BSEC we can assume that the relevance and importance of the organization is obvious.

It is also necessary to recognize the unprecedented nature of the BSEC's creation. It is the first time in the history of the Black Sea states when they decided to unite their efforts to face common challenges in a spirit of partnership and cooperation. As was nicely put by Neal Ascherson, a leading scholar on the Black Sea history, "it may be that the cause of the Black Sea itself, of its waters and its creatures, is at last beginning to achieve what so many millennia of human activity have failed to achieve: the union of the peoples who live around it" [1, p. 270].

Conclusions. Today, it can be assumed that the BSEC is the only full-fledged regional organization which provides regional cooperation activities at intergovernmental, inter-parliamentary, business, banking and academic levels among all states of the enlarged Black Sea region [8]. Moreover, the BSEC is open to cooperation with other countries, international organizations and financial institutions. The BSEC Member States share a common vision of their economic cooperation as part of the European integration process based on the principles of human rights and fundamental freedoms, prosperity through economic liberty, social justice and equal rights of security and stability [9, p. 5]. However, according to L. A. Ghica, despite the fact that the Istanbul Declaration reflects the need of member states in a joint approach to overcome socio-economic and environmental problems, in 1992 each of the parties set different goals [7, p. 174-204]. The former Soviet republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova took the BSEC as a good way to their integration into the global economy and as means of improving security and stability in the region. Russian Federation and Turkey expected that the organization will be an effective instrument of a mutual containment in this area. Whereas for Romania and Bulgaria it was a real chance to get out of the buffer zone between the former Soviet space and more organized Central Europe from which they were still partially isolated [17].

One of the important aspects of the BSEC's institutional development is each member-state's relationship with the European Union. However, the Black Sea region is very heterogeneous in this context. For example, Greece has been an EU member since 1980, Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, while the rest of the countries are bound up with the EU through the set of trade and partnership agreements of different level and value. Being situated in the triangle between the Islamic world, Russia and Europe most of the Black Sea countries choose the European vector of their foreign policy, however, they still cannot completely get rid of the traditional "Eurasian" nature [15].

The 2007 round of the EU's enlargement turned the latter into an actor of the Black Sea region and raised the issue of further development of regional states' relations with the European Union. As reported by Russian media, in the result of the Black Sea Solitaire Moscow has got a powerful competitor unknown since the days of the Ottoman Empire [15].

In general, the current European policy towards the Black Sea region is developing in the framework of numerous programs and initiatives aimed at improve the regional political stability and economic prosperity by means of reforms and strengthening of regional security and solving conflicts through regional cooperation. In order to implement the joint projects and deepen the unity of the Black Sea region the EU cooperates with the existing regional organizations (the BSEC, GUAM, Community of democratic choice etc.) as well as through the regional initiatives and sectoral programs. The most important are:

- «INOGATE» (Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe);
- «TRACECA» (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia);
- «Black Sea PETrA »(Pan-European Transport Area);
- «DANBLAS» (Danube-Black Sea Environmental Task Force Group) [12].

Moreover, the EU is involved in the implementation of priority programs within the Black Sea region due to the financial support of the EBRD, the European Investment Bank and private funds.

In addition, after Romania's and Bulgaria's EU accessions the cross-border cooperation gains a special importance and development, particularly within the newly formed "the Black Sea Euroregion". It is aimed to promote and strengthen democracy and security in the region, expanding cooperation within the BSEC and GUAM, and to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region dealing with common energy policy, energy transit policy, and «frozen» conflicts' settlement etc. [13; p.: 45-48]. Incidentally, the issue of energy supply to Europe is another important aspect of cooperation that brings the Black Sea region and the EU closer to each other.

To crown all above mentioned, we can state that the BSEC founded in 1992 evolves as an effective instrument of stimulation of dialogue and mutual trust between Member States through its wide range of activities and structures. Also, the BSEC is a foundation for the future development of larger projects. Although the areas of the BSEC mainly concern the economic field and are discussed during the regular meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the Member States twice a year, still they have political significance. Such meetings often provide convenient opportunities for various participants to solve issues discussing them at the conferences and forums organized within the framework of the BSEC. Also, this form of cooperation has a positive effect on the political climate and stability in the Black Sea region.

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Recommended for publication: 17.05.2015