

The Wider Black Sea Region in the Twenty-First Century

Charles King

The place of the wider Black Sea region in the wider Europe has never been a straightforward matter. “We have just crossed the Terek [River], upon a very indifferent raft,” wrote the wife of a Russian imperial official in 1811, “and are now out of Europe.”¹ For many travelers in the nineteenth century, moving across the Terek or Kuban rivers in the north Caucasus, crossing the Caucasus mountains, or sailing across the Black Sea involved moving out of Europe and into Asia, from one clearly defined and civilized space into the realm of the primitive and the unknown. But that view was not universal. Karl Marx once remarked that he regarded the squelching of two inchoate revolutions—the Polish rebellion of 1830 and the Russian expulsion of Caucasus highlanders in the 1860s—as the two most important “European” events of his lifetime.² The German diplomat Max von Thielmann stretched the boundaries even further. “Europe ceases at the Place du Théâtre,” he wrote in 1872, referring to a square in Tiflis, modern Tbilisi.³

The Black Sea region—defined as the land- and seascape from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from the Ukrainian and Russian steppe to Anatolia—is once again squarely within the field of view of European policymakers. The European Union (EU) and NATO now border the Black Sea on the west. Turkey, an EU accession country and NATO member, borders it to the south. Members of the Council of Europe and two NATO aspirants border it on the north and east. A region that a decade ago was on the far edge of Europe’s consciousness

¹ Frederika von Freygang, *Letters from the Caucasus and Georgia* (London: John Murray, 1823), p. 32.

² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, June 7, 1864, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 41:538.

³ Max von Thielmann, *Journey in the Caucasus, Persia, and Turkey in Asia*, trans. Charles Heneage (London: John Murray, 1875), 1:222.

has now become the next frontier of European strategic thinking in terms of energy security, trade links, migration, and other key policy areas.

At various points in history, a distinct region defined by the Black Sea and its hinterlands has been a commonplace of European affairs, although the limits of that region have fluctuated over time. Over the last two decades, there has been considerable effort to revive Black Sea regionalism, in part through the establishment of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation forum (BSEC) in 1992 and its upgrade to the status of a full-fledged organization in 1999. Furthermore, the process of EU enlargement, the EU's need to develop a clear set of policies regarding the future of its "neighborhood" to the east, U.S. dependence on allies around the sea during the Iraq war, and Russia's revived desire for influence across Eurasia have all made the Black Sea region of considerable strategic interest.

This chapter places this newfound engagement with the wider Black Sea world in its historical context, offering a look back at the grand historical sweep of the region and its fitful engagement with Europe. It seeks to place the region's current challenges in the broad context of the many projects for Black Sea regionalism that have defined this zone in the past. The essay is organized around three sets of questions: First, what is a region, and is the Black Sea one? Second, how have projects for making the Black Sea into a region fared historically, and what are the obstacles to Black Sea regionalism today? Third, what are the likely prospects for and pitfalls of Black Sea region-building in the early twenty-first century?

What is a Region?

Searching for a set of timeless, objective traits for establishing what sets off a real region from an imagined one is futile.⁴ There are no clear criteria for distinguishing a "genuine" region from any other piece of real estate. Some areas that share cultural, linguistic or historical commonalities are divided into mutually antagonistic states. Other areas that have few common historical or social features manage to sustain a sense of mutual identity and engage in cooperative foreign

⁴ This section draws on Charles King, "Is the Black Sea a Region?" in Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna Klymush-Tsintsadze, eds., *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security-Building* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 13-26.

policy relationships. Thus, where regions emerge as political concepts, they do so in the main because of self-conscious projects to build them, whether cooperatively or through the tried-and-true mechanisms of imperial expansion and state conquest. In the end, regions exist where politicians and strategists say they exist.

Where do regions come from? How do they become consolidated? Why do only a few of them succeed in creating integrated interests? These are some of the central questions in the now vast literature on regions and regionalism. Within this body of research, three themes stand out. First are the sources of regional connections and identities. How do patterns of migration and trade connect communities over time and space? How do speakers of different languages, with allegiance to different cultural, national or religious traditions, come to see themselves as part of larger territorial entities beyond local communities and across nation-states? What is the relationship between regional integration in one sphere, such as economic interdependence, and connections in other domains, such as culture or politics?

A second theme is the way in which outsiders come to conceive of particular territorial zones as regions. What is the relationship between how outsiders perceive regional boundaries and the way the inhabitants of those zones understand themselves and their immediate neighbors? What constellations of power—political, military, economic, intellectual—enable one group of people to reify innocuous geographical or cartographical boundaries into meaningful frontiers of culture, power, and identity?

A third theme is the problem of regionalism itself, that is, distinct projects for crafting a sense of belonging to a broad community based on territorial proximity, common domestic policies, or cooperative foreign policies. These projects might be limited to a territory within a particular country (the regionalism of the American South or of the Scottish Lowlands, for example) or may focus on bringing together a group of nation-states (the regionalism of the Pacific Rim). But why do some succeed while others remain quixotic efforts to crafting a regional space in the face of powerful countervailing interests? Like nations, regions may be “imagined” by political elites, but they are not imagined out of thin air.⁵ Defining who is inside and outside a region

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991).

is an essentially political process involving systemic constraints, the goals of political elites, domestic institutions, international organizations, and transborder communities, none of which may have exactly the same vision of what constitutes the proper boundaries of the region in question.⁶

Scholars have offered radically different answers to such questions. Systemic theorists and political economists usually see the growth of regions as a function of rising or declining hegemony, or as a response to the pressures of globalization.⁷ Neoliberal institutionalists and constructivists emphasize the existence of common foreign policy goals or shared identities. Both may be reciprocally enhanced by the very institutions of cooperation that they originally spawned.⁸ State-level explanations focus on the patterns of interaction among states with similar regime types or domestic interest groups, or the multilevel interaction between domestic elites and international institutions.⁹ Other theorists see “regional security complexes” not as aberrations in a world of nation-states, but rather as some of the basic building blocks of the international system.¹⁰

⁶ See Ole Waever, “Three Competing Europes: German, French and Russian,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (July 1990), pp. 477-493; Iver B. Neumann, “A Region-Building Approach to Northern Europe,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January 1994), pp. 53-74.

⁷ For accounts of regionalism based on power relationships and hegemony, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Charles A. Kupchan, “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 40-79. For political economy perspectives, both welcoming and wary of regional trade arrangements, see Jagdish Bhagwati, *The World Trading System at Risk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner, “The New Wave of Regionalism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 589-627; Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner, eds., *The Political Economy of Regionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁸ See Volker Rittberger, ed., *Regime Theory and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Gregory Flynn and Henry Farrell, “Piecing Together the Democratic Peace: The CSCE, Norms, and the ‘Construction’ of Security in Post-Cold War Europe,” *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 505-535.

⁹ Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century’s Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

One of the central findings in this variegated literature is that common identities are not an essential component of regions as historical phenomena or as political projects. Rather, regions involve a set of essential connections and interests that bind together peoples and polities. In this regard, the Black Sea is a reasonable candidate for status as a distinct region. There is no “Black Sea identity” common to Romanians, Turks, Georgians, and others; even in coastal areas where such an identity might once have been found, it has long been supplanted by loyalty to the nation-state. Yet depending on the criteria we use, the wider Black Sea has clear qualities as a distinct—although elastic—zone. In ecological terms, it stretches from central Europe to the Ural mountains. The rivers that run into the Black Sea drain all or part of twenty-two countries, and the effluents carried in those riverways have a profound effect on the sea’s ecology. By contrast, if the criterion for membership is a border on the sea itself, then the Black Sea region is much smaller, including only six countries. If the criterion is membership in a political organization, then the region is rather larger, including the twelve countries united in BSEC.

Over the long stretch of history, the degree to which the Black Sea has been a united region has fluctuated, a long sine wave oscillating between cooperation and conflict. But even during those times when the sea has been a zone of confrontation, it has remained a unique playing field on which the interests and aspirations of the peoples and polities within it have been played out.

The Black Sea in Historical Perspective

For most of the last two centuries, the strategic environment of the Black Sea zone has been shaped by the interaction of three factors: the shifting balances of power among European and Eurasian states and empires; the political ambitions of smaller states and peoples directly affected by the actions of these powers; and the status of the region as a transit point for goods on global east-west and north-south trade routes. In many ways, these factors continue to define the issues and interests in the Black Sea world today, and it is thus worth an examination of their historical roots and how interactions among them have changed over time. Moreover, regionalism as a political program—the attempt to define the Black Sea world as a distinct place whose con-

stituents should be bound by common interests—has itself repeatedly emerged as a response to these same issues.

The year 1774 saw the crucial opening of the Black Sea to Russian-flagged commercial vessels, a concession that Catherine the Great had received from the Ottoman sultan as a result of her victory in the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774. Russia had been engaged in the Black Sea world long before the 1770s. The first diplomatic contacts between Russia and the peoples of the north Caucasus, for example, run back to the reign of Ivan IV (the Terrible) in the sixteenth century. Nearly two centuries later, Peter the Great began a series of military campaigns on the northern littoral of the Black Sea as well as along the western coast of the Caspian, forays that were eventually abandoned, with territory retroceded to Ottoman or Persian authority. However, by the 1770s, Russia's aspirations in the region were bound to two clear strategic goals: opening up the sea to European commerce, which would be controlled and directed in the interests of the Russian state; and unseating the Ottoman sultan and placing a Russian prince on the throne of a revived Byzantium.

The first goal entailed encouraging commerce along the northern rim of the sea. The establishment of new trading depots and cities such as Odessa and Kherson created points of exchange where European merchants, Russian officials, and traders, peasants, and nomads from the hinterland could interact. The second goal—political and military dominance—went unrealized. Although the Ottomans were now a faltering empire, they proved far more resilient than the military defeat of 1774 had suggested. Moreover, as it became increasingly clear to European strategists that Russia aimed to profit at the sultan's expense, Europeans were quick to buttress the sultan as a buffer against Russian encroachments. Not only had Catherine made the sea something of a Russian commercial lake, but she and her successors also strengthened their ties with the regional powers of the hinterland. In 1801 Russia annexed the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti—which comprised much of modern Georgia—and thereby established a clear foothold south of the Caucasus mountains. Further territorial acquisitions in 1812 placed Russia in effective control of the coastline from the Danube, across the northern littoral, and toward the Caucasus coast.

The fear of Russia's intentions around the Black Sea was only enhanced by the wars of the early nineteenth century. Two conflicts

between Russia and the Ottoman and Persian empires in the 1820s sealed the territorial gains of the late eighteenth century and hardened Russia's position along the Danube, along the Caucasus coast, and south of the main chain of the Caucasus mountains. These changes set the stage for the Crimean war, the only conflict of the nineteenth century that involved all the strategic players that had, by now, attained a clear interest in the fate of the Black Sea zone. Russia was defeated in 1856 by the combined forces of Britain, France, the Ottomans, and Sardinia; the Russian Black Sea fleet, which had opened the war with a stunning attack on Ottoman forces wintering on the sea's southern coast, was scuttled and coastal defenses, by treaty, destroyed. Yet that setback was only temporary. By 1870 Russia had repudiated the terms of the postwar treaty and launched a modernization and rebuilding program of its coastal defenses and naval vessels.

Throughout the long period of Russian expansion to the south, the interests of local elites played a significant, if often background, role. The princes of Kabarda in the north-central Caucasus sought Russian protection against the depredations of the Nogay, Kalmyks, and other nomadic peoples. The kings of Kartli-Kakheti appealed to the tsar for assistance against attacks from Persians and Dagestani highlanders. Nobles in the Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia looked to Russia as a lever against their nominal sovereign, the sultan.¹¹ Yet from the 1870s forward, the complex interaction of local interests with imperial designs would become one of the defining features of the Black Sea strategic environment.

The Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 began with Russian concerns for Christian populations in the Ottoman empire, concerns that were enhanced by local minorities' appealing for intervention on their behalf. The Treaty of San Stefano, which formally ended the war, created a massive Bulgarian principality, a state that was still formally a dependency of the Ottomans but was in practice influenced by Russia. As had happened earlier in the century, however, the European powers grew concerned about Russia's rising influence in the Near East and held an international conference to revise the terms. The resulting Treaty of Berlin whittled down the Bulgarian principality, but many of the other provisions of San Stefano remained in place. The Black Sea

¹¹ See Sean Pollock, "Empire by Invitation? Russian Empire Building in the Age of Catherine the Great" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2006).

world became not simply a battleground between empires but a strategic environment that was profoundly influenced by the interests of new states recognized as fully independent in the wake of the last Russo-Turkish conflict: Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, and eventually a fully independent Bulgaria as well.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Black Sea region had become a zone not only of strategic importance but also of growing commercial significance. Between 1880 and 1914, the level of European and global engagement with the sea was greater than perhaps any time since the Middle Ages, when Italian merchants crisscrossed the sea on their way to and from China. The coal deposits of the southern coast, the grain fields of the north, and the oil wells of Romania and the Caucasus attracted a host investors and businessmen. The region was no longer a far-off frontier but a vital resource for European empires, nation-states, and commercial enterprises.

The next major conflagration around the sea—the First World War—engulfed all the old empires and newer nation-states. When the war ended, four states now encircled the sea, all four of which were, in different ways, young countries. All were built on the ruins of older states or empires, but each had either new borders or, in the case of republican Turkey and the Soviet Union, radically new bases for state-building and social order. For three of these states, the central strategic conundrum was how to deal with the existence of the fourth. The organizing idea embraced by Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—nationalism—was at odds with a Soviet ideology that abjured the notion of nationality and proclaimed its own universality: the liberation of all toiling masses from imperialism and capitalist exploitation. The international relations of the Black Sea region thus necessarily concerned how to build a system of alliances to ward off the Bolshevik threat while consolidating the independence and borders of the new states that had emerged from the post-war peace treaties.

In this environment, several of the leading political figures in each of the non-Bolshevik states banded together to form a political movement that represented the first modern attempt to think about the Black Sea as a distinct political unit—the earliest instance of modern Black Sea regionalism. Their aim was to create a community of small states across the Near East to ensure secure borders and real independence against the attempts of neighboring states or outside powers

to exercise hegemony on or around the sea. The so-called Promethean project—named after the Paris-based journal *Prométhée*, the project's flagship publication—consisted originally of a group of Eurasian émigrés and exiles, all dedicated to the liberation of the captive peoples of the Soviet Union. With the active financial support of the interwar Polish government, the Prometheans lobbied foreign governments and attempted to expose the injustice of the absorption of Ukraine and the Caucasus states into the new Soviet Union. In the 1930s, the Prometheans called for the creation of a political and economic alliance of Black Sea states, including Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as a future independent Ukraine and Georgia. As one Ukrainian Promethean declared, the strategic value of such an alliance was clear: “With its left wing touching on Poland, passing by the friendly lands of the Cossacks of the Don, Kuban, and Urals, and with its right wing reaching out to the oppressed peoples of Asia, Turkestan, and other areas, this bloc of states will stop once and for all the imperialist tendencies of Russia, whether of the Red or White variety.”¹²

The Promethean project ultimately failed, of course, at least for the better part of the twentieth century. The Second World War ushered in the triumph of Communism in Romania and Bulgaria, effectively creating a unified strategic front on three of the sea's four coasts. During the war, policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide were energetically pursued by both the Axis and the Soviets, with entire populations deported and the demographic features of the seacoasts radically transformed. The result was the integration of politics, culture, and economics from the Balkans to the Caucasus on a scale that had never before been seen. Trade, agriculture, and industry were carried on within the confines of state-regulated plans, which were in turn coordinated with the production targets and needs of the Soviet Union. The southern coast remained outside this scheme, since Turkey was taken under the defensive umbrella of the West, joining NATO in 1951.

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the Cold War produced a period of relative peace on the sea. The same period saw the development of the coastal regions on an unprecedented scale.

¹²Dmytro Boug, “La Mer Noire,” *Prométhée*, no. 73 (December 1932), p. 22. On the Prometheans see Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Timothy Snyder, *Sketches from a Secret War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

The riches of the sea were now the property of four states, each with a government-directed program of rapid development, from Romania's building of the Danube-Black Sea canal, to the Soviet Union's investment in intensive agriculture on the plains of Ukraine, to Turkey's expansion of fishing fleets and upgrading of coastal roads. All were engaged in a contest to catch up with the rest of Europe and break through to modernity, and all would equally suffer the unintended consequences that such a contest produced.

Serious environmental change was the most immediate result. Environmental transformation is not new around the Black Sea. The grasslands in the north and west began to disappear in the late eighteenth century, broken by ox-drawn plows. Wooded riverbanks were clear-cut at the same time, as were dense forests in the upland Caucasus. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the combination of mechanized agriculture, industrialization, urban growth, and new energy technologies accelerated change along the coastline and began to transform the sea itself. According to Laurence Mee, one of the world's leading experts on Black Sea ecology, the sum of these developments was, by the end of the twentieth century, "an environmental catastrophe."¹³ Hypoxia—the draining of oxygen resources from the sea due to the build-up of excessive organic matter—is a problem in many of the world's inland seas, but the rapid growth of agriculture and urban centers over the last half century has had a particularly deleterious impact on the Black Sea. From 1973 to 1990 the area affected by hypoxia increased from 3,500 square kilometers to some 40,000 square kilometers, particularly in some of the shallowest reaches of the sea, the northwestern shelf along the coasts of Romania and Ukraine.¹⁴ Over the last two decades, hypoxia levels have fluctuated considerably, and there has even been some indication of an improvement. But the basic problem remains: With massive levels of organic matter flowing into the sea from some of major rivers of Europe and Eurasia—including the Danube, the Dnepr, and the Don—oxygen

¹³ Laurence David Mee, "Protecting the Black Sea Environment: A Challenge for Co-operation and Sustainable Development in Europe," Centre for European Policy Studies (Brussels) and International Centre for Black Sea Studies (Athens), 2002, p. 4. From 1993 to 1998, Mee coordinated the Black Sea Environmental Program in Istanbul.

¹⁴ Yu. Zaitsev and V. Mamaev, *Marine Biological Diversity in the Black Sea: A Study of Change and Decline* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 1997), p. 15.

depletion and the attendant decline of major fish species present considerable challenges.

The human consequences of these changes have been profound in the last few decades. Fishing fleets have been dry-docked. Fish processing centers have closed. A major source of protein has progressively disappeared from regional diets, especially along the southern coast. Migration from the coastal areas to urban centers inland has increased and has fueled the growth of cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Kyiv, and Tbilisi. Tourist facilities, troubled by coastal erosion and polluted beaches, have declined in many regions. Today, human communities and countries that ring the littoral face perhaps the greatest environmental, economic, and social crisis in the sea's entire history. For more than two millennia, empires, states, and nations have staked out claims to the waters of the Black Sea. In the twenty-first century, the major question will be whether the sea—depleted of resources and presenting more of a threat than an opportunity to the citizens of the region—will still be worth having.

Prospects and Pitfalls

The countries around the modern Black Sea region have inherited a long history of conflict, cooperation, and interaction. This history will form the context for future debates about the Black Sea's strategic, economic, and even natural environment.

The remarkable feature about the Black Sea today, however, is that despite the many territorial disputes and the mutual distrust inherited from the past, armed conflict among the states of the Black Sea zone is now unlikely—although not unthinkable. In only one instance has a territorial dispute between two states led to war: the Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which ended in a stalemated ceasefire in 1994. The only other major instance of potential international strife concerned the status of the old Soviet Black Sea Fleet, whose ships and personnel were claimed by both independent Ukraine and the Russian Federation. That stand-off was settled in 1997, when the two governments agreed to divide the naval assets and to provide Russia with a lease on the port at Sevastopol. (The Russian lease is due to expire in 2017, however.) Relations between Russia and Georgia have fluctuated from tense to inimical, but neither country has yet had an

incentive to engage in all-out war. In a part of the world where modern borders have frequently been changed by force, the near absence of international conflict is a notable feature of the regional security complex that has emerged around the sea in the last two decades.

Today, it is not the strategic ambition of states but rather their internal weakness that represents the chief threat to peace and stability. With some exceptions, poverty is deep and endemic; it is not merely the result of the transition from state planning to the market, but rather a structural and long-term feature of local economies. Moreover, the eastern Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, and the Caucasus are significantly behind other parts of east-central Europe in terms of democratic reform.¹⁵ Even in the most reformed countries, the newest EU member states of Romania and Bulgaria, levels of civic freedom and civic engagement are closer to those in Honduras than in Hungary. Several countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine—have actually regressed on the democratization scale since the early 1990s, despite the hopeful “color revolutions” of 2003 and 2004.

The farther east one moves across the zone, the less able government institutions become. In some areas, they work simply because they happen to provide revenue sources for office holders, in the form of bribes and kickbacks. Even within the region’s EU member states, social services are often inadequate, and in many others, daily survival often depends on social networks of family, clan and ethnic group, which in turn discourages individuals from thinking of themselves first as citizens and only secondarily as members of a distinct communal group.

Environmental degradation and potential ecological disasters represent hazards to both present and future generations. Transit migrants and asylum seekers increasingly regard the region as an accessible waiting room for eventual migration, whether legal or illegal, into the EU. Refugees and displaced persons from armed conflicts in the Caucasus—some of them displaced for more than a decade—have placed further burdens on states that have difficulty providing for their own citizens, much less those of neighboring countries. It is no exaggeration to say that the population movements of the 1990s and the early 2000s—the flow of economic migrants, asylum-seekers,

¹⁵ Freedom House, *Annual Survey of Freedom Country Scores*, www.freedomhouse.org.

transit migrants, and refugees—may yet transform the demographic structure of the region in as profound a way as the region's last major period of mass population movement: the multiple rounds of ethnic cleansing and war-time displacement that took place from the 1860s to the 1920s.

The particular problems of weak states are most striking in the outcome of the region's secessionist wars. In the early 1990s, several small wars and insurgencies raged across the wider Black Sea zone, but by the middle of the decade most had settled into relative stability. In the Balkan and post-Soviet conflicts, full-scale peace agreements or temporary ceasefires were signed; in some instances, large-scale international reconstruction efforts were put in place and foreign peacekeepers deployed. In four important instances, however, the end of all-out war did not produce a real solution to the conflicts. Instead, unrecognized but functional states grew up in the former conflict zones, *de facto* countries that have done an exceptional job of surreptitiously acquiring the accoutrements of sovereignty.

South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transdniestria have spent the better part of a decade as really-existing entities in the wider Black Sea zone. The internationally recognized governments that host them—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova—have continually called for outside help in settling the disputes, and multiple rounds of peace talks have been underway since the early 1990s, sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations, the Russian government, and Western countries. But in no case is a final resolution any closer than in the period from 1992 to 1994, when ceasefires were agreed in each conflict. The secessionists won the wars of the Soviet succession, and it should not be surprising that the unrecognized victors have been loath to cede control back to the recognized governments that they vanquished.¹⁶

In this limbo between war and peace, Eurasia's unrecognized states have created real institutions that are now brakes on the reintegration of these territories into the recognized countries. All have the basic structures of governance and the symbols of sovereignty. All have military forces and poor but working economies. All have held elections

¹⁶ For a full discussion of the unrecognized states, see Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics* (July 2001); Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2004).

(in some instances reasonably democratic ones) for political offices. All have set up currency structures, border regimes, and educational systems separate from those of the recognized states. Most current maps show only six states around the Black Sea, but if a baseline test of a “state” is simply the ability to exercise sovereign control over a defined piece of territory, then there are in fact at least ten, perhaps more, depending on who is doing the counting.

It was in part to deal with the problems of state weakness and to ensure that internal disputes would not erupt into international war that the littoral states and their neighbors launched a program of regional cooperation in the early 1990s. In June 1992, at a summit meeting in Istanbul, the heads of state of all the Black Sea littoral countries and other regional neighbors met to proclaim the emergence of a broad cooperation program, a set of initiatives that would eventually include policy areas such as the environment, crime and corruption, investment, taxation, and education. Six years later, the eleven member states—Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Greece—signed a charter that upgraded BSEC to the status of an international organization and created a permanent secretariat, now located in an impressive villa just up the Bosphorus from central Istanbul. (The charter came into effect in 1999, and Serbia and Montenegro joined as a single country in 2004.) A Black Sea parliamentary assembly, an investment bank, a multinational naval unit, a summer university, and a policy research center were also established.

Clearly the most pressing area of concern was the environmental degradation of the sea itself. Already in April 1992, all six Black Sea coastal states signed the Bucharest Convention on environmental protection; a year later, in a meeting in Odessa, they agreed to establish conservation zones in the coastal areas of each state, coordinate anti-pollution policies in the river systems that feed into the sea, and—for the first time ever—share vital scientific information on pollution and biodiversity. In 1996, under the aegis of BSEC, the first multi-country analysis of the causes of Black Sea pollution was completed, with assistance from the United Nations and other international organizations, and every five years, scientists in all coastal countries work together to issue a “state-of-the-sea” report, a diagnostic venture that is a major step

away from the mutual suspicion that prevented such efforts during the Cold War.

There are already some signs of improvement. Nutrient enrichment has declined over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, which has in turn produced a slow-down in oxygen depletion that threatened many species. Industrial pollution has also eased somewhat, while overfishing has been scaled back (although confrontations between Ukrainian and Turkish fishing vessels remains common due to a lack of clear demarcation of territorial waters). Industrial pollution, still acute in some areas, has become less of a problem on the sea as a whole simply because of the shutdown of large industrialized centers from Bulgaria to Georgia. As the economies of littoral states begin to recover, though, serious environmental problems will no doubt return.

In areas other than the environment, BSEC has not lived up to its original grand vision. BSEC member states conduct only a small percentage of their trade with other members. National airlines are far more likely to connect their capitals with major European and North American hubs than they are with neighboring states. Heads of state meet at summits, ministers travel to ministerial conferences, non-governmental organizations occasionally work out action plans on an issue of common concern. But the emergence of a genuinely vibrant and cooperative region stretching from Greece to Azerbaijan is still a long way away.

The reasons for BSEC's difficulties are not difficult to uncover. A regional organization that includes three mid-size powers with divergent interests and goals—Greece, Turkey, and Russia—has inevitably faced problems of definition and direction. Each of these anchor states has its own vision of a foreign policy role in the region, but none is sufficiently wealthy to finance the kinds of programs that would have made that vision a reality. Moreover, BSEC's emergence was less the result of any genuine commitment to regional cooperation than the product of a peculiar concatenation of geopolitical interests. In the early 1990s, Turkey sought a new regional role, perhaps to demonstrate to the EU its potential as a force for stability and prosperity. The newly independent states of Eurasia were eager to join any international organization that would have them. Greece and Russia, in turn, were eager not to allow Turkey to define a new regional organization without them. The far trickier issue, however, has been to fig-

ure out what this new club is supposed to do, now that the membership list has been finalized. Moreover, other forms of regionalism have inevitably competed with BSEC in defining the Black Sea space. For example, GUAM (the generally pro-Western caucus of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, established in 2001) represents a latter-day echo of the old Promethean project—with the attendant aim of defining the region in such a way as to check Russian influence.

No politician around the sea today believes that BSEC should be a substitute for the kinds of regionalism that really matter: membership in NATO and the EU. While presidents and prime ministers in BSEC countries repeatedly affirm their commitment to building a Black Sea region, in practice there is little incentive to cooperate fully with countries whose prospects for membership in the truly important organizations are even slimmer than their own. From time to time, Romania has expressed an interest in using its new status as an EU member state to help craft a forward-looking policy of engagement with the Black Sea zone, but other regional players, from Turkey to Russia, have not been enthusiastic. The latest EU initiative in the region—the Black Sea Synergy project—may yet turn out to be a competing form of regionalism in a zone that has already seen many failed attempts to encourage cooperation.¹⁷ For all the energetic summitry that has defined BSEC and related forms of regionalism around the sea, meetings of heads of state and government ministers have resulted in the main in agreements to meet again. Today, it continues to be the processes of EU enlargement, NATO expansion, and U.S. and Russian foreign policy that are the driving forces behind the international politics of the Black Sea zone.

As the century progresses, the politics of energy will also bring together the countries and peoples of the wider Black Sea zone in new ways and will remain a source of rivalry in others. In the early 1990s, the promise of oil and gas from the fields around the Caspian Sea, one of the largest sources of marketable hydrocarbons outside the Middle East, sparked an energetic contest among individual states and multinational corporations. For much of the decade, the various channels that Caspian oil might take were the subject of wide-ranging debate. Some companies and governments advocated traditional routes to

¹⁷ “Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Countries of the European Union and of the Wider Black Sea Area,” Kyiv, February 14, 2008.

ports on the eastern coast of the Black Sea and then via tanker to the Mediterranean. The Turkish government objected that the resulting increase in traffic through the Bosphorus would surely lead to a major environmental catastrophe, such as an oil spill along the heavily populated coasts, in the heart of Istanbul. Others argued for a new pipeline that would bypass the Black Sea region altogether and head south through Iran, a proposition rejected as politically unpalatable by the U.S.

The politics of pipelines finally ended with an agreement to construct an underground transit system from the south Caucasus to the eastern Mediterranean. By 2009 the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is expected to carry a million barrels of oil per day. BTC has already had a measurable effect on the economies of the transit and terminus countries. But the future political and even strategic impact of BTC and other proposed oil and gas routes is uncertain. On the one hand, increased revenue can fund vital infrastructure projects and contribute to rural development in some of the most endemically poor parts of the Black Sea zone. On the other hand, increased revenue coming to the Georgian and Azerbaijani states may well be earmarked for military modernization and create the conditions for an eventual attempt to retake lost territories—Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh—by force. The politics of oil and gas have not only strategic-level implications for the entire region but also domestic political and security dimensions in the countries that currently benefit most directly from the region's hydrocarbon wealth.

Toward a New Regionalism?

On the face of things, none of this would seem to bode well for the future of Black Sea regionalism. A set of relatively weak states can hardly hope to build a strong region. A zone with widely different levels of development in terms of the domestic economy and democratization is an unlikely candidate for interstate cooperation. Moreover, the widely divergent foreign policy orientations of the region's constituents have made real cooperation a challenge. The general rapprochement between Turkey and Russia—occasioned in part by commonalities of interest in the energy sphere and in part by common antipathy toward U.S. policies in Iraq—contrasts sharply with the staunchly pro-American foreign policies of Romania and Georgia. And with so many competing forms of regionalism on the table—BSEC, GUAM (a cooperative

forum of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), the EU's Black Sea Synergy program, NATO—where exactly the wider Black Sea region lies is still an open question.

The incentives for regional cooperation are clear. The sea itself is a naturally fragile ecosystem that has been ravaged by decades of overfishing and urban and rural pollution. Cleaning up the sea can only be accomplished in concert. Trade is also crucial, especially for countries whose products are unlikely to find buyers on European markets. The development of regional infrastructure projects—from improving port facilities in Odessa, Batumi, and Varna, to building road and rail links—is a clear interest that all countries share. Even bringing tourists to the zone and marketing its natural beauty, from Turkey's alpine coastline to the beach resorts of Bulgaria, Romania, and Crimea, can become a target of cooperation.

Yet in the early twenty-first century, the obstacles to regionalism are likely to remain stronger than the incentives. Still, two key developments in the region could produce either an impetus to regional cooperation or doom regional efforts for the foreseeable future.

First is the resurgence of armed conflict. The threat of interstate violence will likely remain low. However, the persistence of unresolved border disputes has the potential to unleash larger-scale conflict. The declaration of independence by Kosovo in February 2008 only highlighted the power of simmering disputes in one part of the region to have an impact across the wider Black Sea zone. The "Kosovo precedent" has been a theme in regional politics ever since it became clear that the Serbian province was moving clearly in the direction of a unilateral declaration. The four other unrecognized states in the region have called on Russia to offer the same recognition that the U.S. and various EU member states accorded Kosovo. Russia has expressed little direct interest in such an outcome; indeed, the status quo seems more in Moscow's interest than pushing for the creation of still more weak and unpredictable countries in Russia's direct zone of interest. Still, small sparks could start large fires. An attempt by Georgia or Azerbaijan to take back Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh by force would inevitably produce a Russian intervention. Even non-military developments will have an impact on the unrecognized states. Sochi—the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics—is only an hour's drive from Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia. Individual Abk-

haz will no doubt find employment opportunities on the large construction works that will ring Sochi. Olympic organizers will find Abkhaz hotels an easy overflow space for tourists and visitors. These developments will inevitably raise serious questions about the international community's relationship to Abkhazia and, by extension, to the other unrecognized countries in the Black Sea zone.

Second is the pace and nature of the future enlargement of Euro-Atlantic institutions.¹⁸ Trade patterns, the movement of labor, and security structures will all change as a result of the next rounds of EU and NATO expansion. The Black Sea zone is the next frontier for both organizations, yet countries that are farther along the path toward membership, or that come into either organization in the next wave, will be unlikely to see much profit in cooperating with their neighbors who have fallen behind. In turn, those countries that are left out of the process of enlargement may well come to see some form of Black Sea regionalism as a powerful alternative to other Euro-Atlantic institutions. Cooperation between Turkey and Russia is already strong and may come to represent a "soft" and informal strategic alternative to the E.U. and the U.S. Much will depend, of course, on the future direction of U.S. foreign policy in the greater Middle East, but Black Sea regionalism will continue to be wrapped up in larger questions of strategic orientation and the available options for countries that are unlikely to be bound to the full range of Euro-Atlantic structures in the near future. The Black Sea could well become a region of a few small countries committed to Europe and Euro-Atlanticism in the midst of larger states that are at best ambivalent about their place in the West.

None of these potential developments means that the Black Sea will cease to be a region. As in the past, it will continue to be a distinct geographical zone marked by intensive ties of commerce, migration, and cultural commonalities. But whether the existence of this region will translate into a solid form of regionalism, beyond the endless summit meetings and declarations that have so far accompanied region-building efforts, will be determined by factors external to the region itself.

¹⁸ For a strong statement about the need for further eastern enlargement into the Black Sea zone, see Ronald D. Asmus, "Europe's Eastern Promise," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2008). On the impact of earlier rounds on democratization, see Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).