
U.S. Perspectives on the Black Sea Region

By

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The Black Sea region is growing in significance for the U.S. and transatlantic foreign policy community. The Black Sea lies at a strategic crossroads of geography and culture, where Russia intersects with the European Union, where energy producers of Eurasia connect to energy consumers of central and Western Europe, where Islamic traditions meet Christian traditions, and where Europe and the Middle East meet.

The Black Sea region is of considerable strategic importance to the United States. We now have three NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Allies bordering the Black Sea: Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria. Two European Union members are Black Sea littoral states. The Black Sea region is a crossroads in high level policy debates over energy security, with planned routes to bring central Asian gas to Europe. We have also become increasingly concerned about the region as a conduit for smugglers, whether contraband; trafficking in persons; drugs; or worse, weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. interests in the Black Sea are focused on advancing democratic and market reforms; on strengthening economic ties, energy diversity, and a cleaner, more sustainable environment to preserve the Black Sea's natural beauty and resources; and improving security throughout the region. At its foundation, it follows from the same goals we have worked so hard to achieve in Europe for the past fifty years: peace, democracy, and prosperity. Our approach seeks to promote cooperation among countries in the region. We are heartened that a regional identity has begun to develop with organizations such as the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), and we hope to see this cooperation strengthened. The European Union also increasingly recognizes the importance of the Black Sea with its policy called Black Sea Synergy.

Both the U.S. and the EU [European Union] agree that a coordinated policy effort in the region is essential in addressing some of the more pressing issues of the decade: issues such as Iran, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism, and energy security. Reaching out to countries of the Black Sea region to promote democracy, economic growth consistent with a sustainable environment, and regional security is the natural next step in the transatlantic vision of a Europe whole and free. By focusing on cooperation in these areas, we envision the Black Sea region as a nexus of security, energy diversification and trade, and political and economic freedom linking Europe with the Caspian basin, Central Asia, and the broader Middle East. In order to promote cooperation in our focus areas, the U.S. has supported and will continue to launch concrete projects in the region. I would like to highlight some of this work we have been doing:

Democratic and Market Economic Reform

A commitment to democratic values is the pillar of U.S. foreign policy in the Black Sea region. Turkey is a strong and stable democracy, as are Romania and Bulgaria. The Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine are symbolic of the progress that these two countries have made toward building participatory democracies. Georgia's May parliamentary elections were another step forward in building democratic institutions by offering voters a real opportunity to choose their representatives

from a wide array of choices and showed a clear improvement over the January presidential elections. The U.S. continues to support Georgia and Ukraine's aspirations of further integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Other states in the region are also putting into place stronger democratic institutions.

When we speak of democratic values, we are referring to open political systems, free and fair elections, and a vibrant and independent media landscape, which are the prerequisites for a strong civil society. So what have we done to promote these values and institutions?

- The U.S. has provided \$10 million to fund the Black Sea Trust in partnership with the German Marshall Fund to promote cross-border and civil society NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations] across the region through small grants.
- We have also supported a number of Resident Legal Advisor programs in countries including Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Turkey. The advisors have provided technical assistance to their counterparts on all current issues relating to the rule of law and the implementation of international legal best practices, reforming criminal procedure codes, [and] establishing jury trials, with the goal of improving the judicial systems in these countries. In addition, the Department of Justice has provided assistance on legislative drafting and training.

Energy, Economy, and the Environment

Respect for the rule of law is also an essential element of a market economy and an open trading and investment regime. It goes hand in hand with economic development so efforts to promote rule of law are part and parcel of improving the investment climate. We look to work with the nations of the Black Sea region to support their individual and cooperative efforts to fight corruption and build transparent and accountable institutions of government. Part of good governance is good stewardship of the environment. We have used our observer status in BSEC to promote environmental awareness, such as a seminar on sharing best practices across the region last September. We are also working to improve energy connectivity. USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] is currently funding a project to analyze how to integrate high voltage electrical transmission systems throughout the region. And we are actively promoting diversification of sources of energy across the region, including support of the Nabucco project.

Security

In the security realm, we are working with Black Sea countries bilaterally and through our NATO Alliance partners in several areas:

- Maritime cooperation
- Border security
- Aerial surveillance
- Civil - military emergency preparedness

By focusing on transformation and building niche capabilities, Black Sea nations can better address emerging regional threats together. We applaud existing regional security measures such as BLACKSEAFOR [Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group], Operation Black Sea Harmony, and the Black Sea Border Security Initiative. We encourage Black Sea nations to build upon such efforts and focus on niche capabilities to achieve a stable and secure region. We see the U.S. and NATO in a supporting role; we are committed to working toward a secure Black Sea region.

We particularly welcome the counterterrorism initiative called Operation Black Sea Harmony. The Turkish Government has taken the lead on this program to share intelligence on sea traffic among all the coastal states. We are actively encouraging countries around the Black Sea to take part in this security operation. It involves monitoring the movement of vessels on the Black Sea and allows for the interdiction and boarding of suspect vessels. We welcome Russia's decision to formally join the program. It is an excellent example of countries cooperating to improve security around the region.

On the civilian side, the U.S. helped to design and bring into being the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative [SECI] Regional Center for Combating Trans-border Crime based in Bucharest. This "SECI Center" brings together law enforcement personnel from countries throughout the region to share information on transnational organized crime and to coordinate multinational operations against it. This organization has been so successful that the European Union intends to support it in the future.

Similarly, we have supported the Governments of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova in establishing — under the auspices of their Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) — a Virtual Law Enforcement Center (VLEC) to promote information sharing and coordination of operations against trans-border criminal activities.

We provide a wide array of law enforcement training and technical assistance to most of the countries in the region to support policing and criminal justice sector reform and modernization, as well as border control.

We also support individual governments in the area (e.g., Ukraine) to bolster their own ability to detect and thwart nuclear smuggling.

Conclusion

The United States is committed to achieving peace, prosperity, and security across the Black Sea. We will continue to work with all countries of the region, regional organizations like BSEC, and other partners such as the EU to achieve these goals. At the recent NATO Summit in Bucharest, leaders noted the importance of the Black Sea in their closing communiqué:

"We reaffirm the continued importance of the Black Sea region for Euro-Atlantic security. In this regard, we welcome the progress in consolidation of regional ownership, through effective use of existing initiatives and mechanisms. The Alliance will continue to support, as appropriate, these efforts guided by regional priorities and based on transparency, complementarity [sic], and inclusiveness, in order to develop dialogue and cooperation among the Black Sea states and with the Alliance."

It is with this inclusive effort in mind that we will seek to promote all three of our goals in the region: democratic and market reform; improved energy security and connectivity, greater economic growth, and prosperity; and security. We believe to do so not only benefits the countries of the Black Sea region, but is in the strategic interest of the United States.