

# Balkananalysis.com

- [Reviews](#)
- [Bosnia](#)
- [Croatia](#)
- [Serbia](#)
- [Montenegro](#)
- [Kosovo](#)
- [Macedonia](#)
- [Greece](#)
- [Turkey](#)
- [Russia & Caucasus](#)
- [Bulgaria](#)
- [Romania](#)
- [US Foreign Policy](#)

- [About Us](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Reprints and Commissions](#)
- [For Writers](#)
- [RSS Feed](#)
- [Useful Links](#)

**All Balkananalysis.com Archive Content- Only at CEEOL.com**



[« Previous—Next »](#)

## [Why the EU Needs a Strategy for the Black Sea Region](#)

1/3/2007 (Balkananalysis.com)

*By Lara Scarpitta\**

It is old news that geography matters in foreign policy. A dormant EC/EU had to learn this vital lesson in 1989, when communism crumbled behind its safe walls. Faced with the sudden prospect of bordering poor, unpredictable and unstable neighbours, it responded by anchoring the former soviet satellites of Central Europe with the offer of EU membership. But now that a new enlargement has been completed, geography matters even more. With the accession of Romania and Bulgaria on the 1st of January, the EU's new eastern border has moved south, to the shore of the Black Sea. Across its waters, however, lies one of the most unstable and conflict-prone regions of post-Soviet Eurasia.

For centuries, the Black Sea region has been a theatre of violent conflicts and power struggles, due primarily to its geographical location and character as a transit route.

## [Security & Intelligence Briefs](#)

### Archives

**Search Balkananalysis.com**

right now on  
**ebay**

**Greek islands**

Product	Price
<a href="#">1917 GB Forces in Greek Islands Mail x 2 / Marines.</a>	\$39.00
<a href="#">Greek Islands Map Ortelius Huge 1570</a>	\$24.95

During the Cold War, all Black Sea states (except Turkey) were within the Soviet sphere of influence and at the periphery of international strategic interests. But as the Soviet Union began to break down in 1991, the Black Sea region plunged into chaos, torn apart by several ethnic and separatist conflicts. The end of the Cold War's artificial stability freed long concealed (and suppressed) historical grievances and a number of new independent states such as Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Empire.

Nevertheless, most of them are still very weak democracies, facing territorial separatism, ethnic tensions, undemocratic trends in domestic politics, slow economic progress, environmental degradation and endemic corruption of public officials. The long years of armed conflicts have caused disruption to trade and damaged infrastructure. Due to its potential for conflict, the region has attracted relatively little foreign investment and most such countries are still today heavily dependent on the Russian economy. Unemployment rates are generally very high, with almost all states suffer from a hemorrhagic migration abroad of a consistent percentage of

[Frommer's \\$20.25](#)  
[Greek](#)  
[Islands](#)  
[\(Fromme](#)  
[r's S.\)](#)  
[Book |](#)  
[John S. B](#)

[Fodor's \\$18.05](#)  
[Exploring](#)  
[the Greek](#)  
[Islands,](#)  
[2nd Edition](#)  
[\(Fodor](#)

[THE \\$14.48](#)  
[GREEK](#)  
[ISLANDS](#)  
[greece](#)  
[crete NEW](#)  
[HB rrp?20](#)

[View all 33](#)  
[items on eBay](#)

Search Now:

Search New and Used  
[amazon.com.](#)

the working-age population.

Today the Black Sea region is also a major source and transit area of several security threats, from terrorism to international organised crime as well as arms and human trafficking. It is home to four so-called "frozen" conflicts – Transnistria, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia - the unresolved separatist issues which followed the breakdown of the USSR.

Despite years of diplomacy and talks, hopes for finding a peaceful and long-standing resolution for these conflicts remain bleak. Apart from fuelling bilateral tensions, these 'frozen' conflicts have been a bane for the region's democratic and economic development, breeding instability and corruption and favouring the proliferation of organised crime. Uncontrolled territories in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, have become safe havens for the activities of powerful organised criminal groups involved in people smuggling, human trafficking as well as goods and arms trafficking. The phenomenon of arms trafficking is widespread in the region and much of the large weapons stockpiles abandoned by Russia in the early 1990s have ended up on

the grey and black markets. The region is also a major source of drug production and a trafficking route for drugs coming from Central Asia and the Middle East (especially Afghanistan) into Europe. Large profits are also being made from smuggling people across the region with a promise of a better life in the West, and there is evidence that these profits are being reinvested into drugs and arms trafficking, as well as financing terrorist activities, as a recent Europol report highlighted.

This situation carries significant implications for EU security. A power vacuum in the region can potentially result in a security vacuum with consequences which are self-evident yet highly unpredictable. Because of its sudden and new geographical proximity to the wider Black Sea states, the EU will no longer be immune from the backlashes of instability and conflicts in the region, but rather will be directly exposed to a whole range of security threats, from organised crime to drugs and arms trafficking, as well as refugee and illegal migration pressures.

Aside from these security concerns, however, the Black Sea region offers many positive opportunities. The most

obvious is in the field of energy. Thanks to its proximity to the oil-rich Caspian Sea and its vast energy resources, the Black Sea region can play a major role for the EU's energy strategy, to secure alternatives to Russian energy supply.

Many ambitious pipeline projects were launched in the 1990s to guarantee direct access to Caspian oil via the Black Sea. These include the U. S. East-West Energy Corridor and the EU Traceca project (Transit Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia).

Although these failed to materialise when conflicts erupted in the Balkans and in the South Caucasus in the 1990s, it is in the interests of the EU that these projects be reinvigorated to ensure greater Western access to Caspian energy resources.

Perhaps most importantly, the Black Sea region matters for its strategic importance, owing to its proximity to the Middle East. Since 9/11, the US has played an active role in the region to safeguard its vast security and economic interests, especially access to Caspian oil and gas reserves. American 'pipeline politics' has gone hand in hand with its war on terror and the U. S. administration has been keen to support the NATO

aspirations of some Black Sea countries.

Yet is the EU ready take up these challenges with similar energy? Can it exploit the region's huge and lucrative potentials and prevent the Black Sea from becoming a permanent source of security threats?

Most likely, it will only be able to do so partially. The reasons are multiple. First, the EU does not have a Black Sea policy, or at least not a coherent strategy as such. It has opted instead for a patchwork of policies and approaches: enlargement to South-eastern Europe and Turkey, the "European Neighbourhood" policy and a structured cooperation with the South Caucasus states.

Indeed, therein lays part of the problem. While the EU enlargement policy - with its strict conditionality and convergence to EU norms and standards - has (at least so far) been relatively a success story, other policies failed to deliver the expected results. Bilateral cooperation with post-Soviet Eastern neighbours like Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, as well as with the South Caucasus states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), put in place since the mid-1990s hardly proved a recipe for

stabilisation and prosperity. The over 3 billion euros from the EU's TACIS funds allocated in the last ten years have failed to convince reluctant post-Soviet governments to introduce sound democratic and market-based economic reforms. Part of the problem is that the EU lacks sufficient leverage to push for such reforms. This is hardly a surprise if one considers that most of these states are still heavily under Russia's influence. The 2006 energy crisis in Ukraine and Moldova, as well as Russian import bans on Moldovan and Georgian wines and water are a stark remainder of Russia's economic power over its neighbours.

The EU, by contrast, continues to have a limited impact on the region. But the EU 'stabilisation' policy has also been too weak in its incentives to push for reforms. The so-called Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), lacked not only a prospect for membership but also a strict conditionality and were based primarily on a multidimensional cooperation on economic and cultural questions and a political dialogue on issues concerning minorities, human rights and security in Europe.

The "European Neighbourhood" policy, launched officially on the eve of the 2004 'big bang'

enlargement, was aimed at addressing some of these problems. But judging by the results so far, the innovative offer of “everything except institutions,” has not been the trump card the EU was looking for as an alternative to enlargement. The colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia have not given way to the expected substantial democratic reforms. Moldova continues to struggle to control its separatist region of Transnistria and there are no signs of Belarus abandoning its totalitarian regime. Little progress has been made in fulfilling the various Action Plans, the EU’s own financial commitment for the region for 2007-2013 has increased but remains marginal and the EU has continued to politely dismiss the long-term membership aspirations of some of its pro-Western neighbours.

Paradoxically, with these differentiated approaches towards its neighbours the EU has in fact achieved the rather unexpected results of widening the economic, political and social gap between them. While in Romania and Bulgaria the EU accession process has arguably ensured the successful creation of sound democratic institutions and fast economic growth, the EU’s eastern neighbours have

witnessed a halt or reversal of their democratic process, as highlighted by the 2005 Freedom House Report, with most struggling with macroeconomic and structural difficulties and declining standards of living.

So what should the EU do? For a start, think strategically. After the 2007 enlargement and with the accession negotiations already underway with Turkey, the EU has already become an actor in the Black Sea region. Developing a coherent and well articulated Black Sea policy to protect EU economic and strategic interests has therefore become imperative.

No doubt, anchoring the countries of the Black Sea region is not going to be easy, not least of all because without a realistic prospect of EU membership for most of these states, the EU lacks its most powerful point of leverage. On the positive side, however, the EU is now in a far better position to develop an ambitious and realistic policy for the region than it was some years ago. It can now draw on its expertise and the instruments developed in the past decade, by abandoning rhetoric and reinforcing its concrete actions.

The coming months may be

crucial for the development of a coherent EU Black Sea strategy. German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier made it clear that Germany intends to achieve concrete results in Black Sea Region during its presidency by examining the effectiveness of the European Neighbourhood policy.

Still, by itself this policy is not sufficient. The stability of the region requires political courage and long-term strategic thinking. The EU should certainly put 'some meat on the bone' on its neighbourhood policy, by offering to its neighbours concrete and lucrative economic incentives in exchange for serious and tangible commitments to democratic and market-based reforms and the protection of human rights. But a credible EU Black Sea policy also needs to demonstrate that the EU is serious about the resolution of all the 'frozen' conflicts in the region. The support for the EU Border Assistance Mission between Ukraine and Moldova and the appointment of a EU Special Representative for Moldova in 2005 is a positive sign that EU commitment heads in this direction.

However, concrete steps must be taken at regional and bilateral levels to find durable

peaceful solutions. In this respect Brussels must also find the political courage and determination to take the initiative diplomatically with Russia. Unfortunately, EU reactions to Russia's allegedly 'imperialist' policy to its near abroad have remained weak and not much more has been done beyond expressing disappointment.

Finally the EU needs to step in with greater support and financial involvement to support regional cooperation efforts. So far the EU has paid lip service to regional cooperation preferring to focus instead on bilateral relations. As active regional partners and new EU members, Romania and Bulgaria are likely to play an active role in this respect.

Romanian President Traian Basescu has made it clear on several occasions that Romania intends to promote more assertively the idea of a strategic vision for the Black Sea region and a greater involvement in regional dynamics. Black Sea economic cooperation in particular can offer the EU an ideal forum for promoting projects in the field of energy as well as non economic areas, such as the protection of the environment, controlling immigration and fighting arms and human

trafficking. Ultimately, the extent to which the EU will be able to secure its immediate and distant neighbours in the Black Sea region will depend on its ability to increase its role and impact on the region and become a pulling factor for democratic change. A democratic and fully integrated Turkey will be crucial in this respect.

The benefits of a coherent, realistic and forward-looking strategy towards the Black Sea region are enormous. If the EU's 'close' and 'distant' neighbours can successfully complete their economic and political transition, security threats will be weakened. Similarly, the creation of stable democratic institutions, functioning economic structures and vibrant civil societies will undermine the operation of criminal groups. To achieve this long-term objective all EU instruments and forces should be mobilised. Otherwise, the region may well plunge once again into chaos. However, this time EU citizens may not be immune.

.....

*\*[Lara Scarpitta](#) is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies of the University of Birmingham. Before embarking*

*on a PhD, Lara worked in Holland, Italy and recently in Brussels where she worked as an intern in the Cabinet of Vice President of the European Commission Franco Frattini, EU Commissioner for Freedom, Security and Justice.*

Archived in [Turkey](#),  
[Romania](#), [Russia &](#)  
[Caucasus](#), [US Foreign Policy](#),  
[Bulgaria](#), [Georgia](#), [Armenia](#),  
[Azerbaijan](#)

Copyright © 2007 Balkananalysis.com