

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

The vast democratic transformation of the Black Sea region presents new opportunities for U.S. policy, as well as a number of challenges. The author outlines the state of democracy in the region, explaining why the developments there command the attention of U.S. decision makers and what the policy options are.

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Historically, the Black Sea has stood at the confluence of the Russian, Ottoman and Persian Empires and has been a central theater in the “Great Game” which was played out along its shores throughout the nineteenth century.¹ The contours of the Black Sea region which were established in the competitions between the great European powers in the Crimean War and World War I are still evident today. The geopolitics of the region remain heavily influenced by the internal character and foreign policy aspirations of the larger regional powers, Russia and Turkey. The middle powers, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria, continue to seek security and stability in regional cooperation and, particularly, in closer relations with European institutions. The smaller littoral states, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, watch the great regional powers fearfully, envy the more cosmopolitan and Europeanized middle powers, and are bloodied by every tremor along the tectonic plate of the former imperial powers.

Today, the same factors, which rendered the Black Sea region a “black hole” in European history, argue that this region is of central strategic interest to Europe and the United States.

The Black Sea region has been the entry point to the broader Middle East for centuries. The borders of the democracies of the region touch Syria, Iraq, Iran and the shores of the Caspian Sea. As the U.S. discovered to its dismay on 1 March 2003, without the cooperation of Black Sea states, in this instance Turkey, it cannot easily reach the northern approaches to the broader Middle East. Each nineteenth century European power understood that the nation which controlled the Black Sea could control the most important real estate in the Middle East. If the U.S. is to be successful in its efforts to support the democratization of the Middle East, it will have to build a secure, prosperous, and democratic Black Sea region in the process.

The region was the beginning of the Silk Road of trade with Asia. While silk and spices have lost much of their allure since the times of Marco Polo, the energy reserves of Central Asia are becoming increasingly important to our European allies and to the stability of world oil prices. Today, the member states of the European Union (EU) import approximately 50 percent of their energy needs; by 2020 imports will rise to 70 percent of consumption. This increase will be delivered to Europe across and around the Black Sea region, on routes such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

The Black Sea region is rapidly becoming part of Europe. With the exception of Croatia, all current candidates for EU membership are from the Black Sea region. Romania and Bulgaria are expected to gain EU membership in 2007 and Turkey sometime around 2014. The western and southern shores of the Black Sea are also the borders of NATO and soon the EU. These facts so impressed the heads of state of member states of NATO that at the Istanbul Summit in July 2004 the NATO Joint Communiqué recognized that the Black Sea region was an essential part of Euro-Atlantic security.

¹ For a fuller discussion see Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson, “The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom” in *Policy Review*, (June- July 2004).

It is not, however, only US interests which tie us to the Black Sea region, but also our political values. Both the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine occurred in countries along the shores of the sea. The possibilities created by these democratic revolutions not only inspired President Bush's Second Inaugural Address and his speech in Bratislava, but they changed the structure of politics in Minsk, Chisinau and as far away as Almaty, Bishkek and Beirut. Without doubt, the largest and most dramatic democratic changes are occurring in this part of the Euro-Atlantic.

Sadly, it is not only our hopes that draw our attention to this region, but also our fears. The most sharp and dangerous fragments of the former Soviet Union lie scattered in an arc across the northern shore of the Black Sea. A belt of "frozen conflicts" begins in Transdnistria in eastern Moldova and runs through Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia to the mountain heights of Nagorno-Karabakh, between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In each of these "frozen conflicts" created in the civil wars of the dying Soviet empire, brutal warfare and ethnic cleansing have occurred and could reoccur. In Transdnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, transnational crime has found a home and developed a base for trafficking in weapons, drugs, women and children. These criminal enterprises destabilize the governments of the region, threaten Europe with illicit traffic, and ultimately pose a danger to the U.S. with their capability and intent to sell weapons and technology to our enemies.

Finally, the most negative expression of Russian foreign policy aspirations now occurs along the northern rim of the Black Sea region. Whether we are intent on protecting new democracies from outside interference and coercion or are simply concerned about the damage Russian policy is doing to its own people, we are forced to focus on the region.

In short, the democracies of the Black Sea lie on the knife edge of history which separates the politics of nineteenth century imperialism from European modernity. Reactionary forces in the region (separatism, historical Russian aspirations, and criminal interest) would prefer a return to a balance of power system where the powerful rule over spheres of interest and the powerless would serve either autocrat or kleptocrat. On the other hand, those democratic reformers who view themselves as the direct descendants of the leaders of Solidarity and Charter 77 who freed Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, aspire to see their new democracies following the path of Poland and the Czech Republic into a European system based on liberal values and shared security.

Which of these forces ends up defining a modern Black Sea system is a matter of great consequence for the U.S. and Europe. Not only would a return to the politics of the past constrain our ability to work for democratic change in the greater Middle East and damage the energy security of Europe, but if the new democracies fail to make the Black Sea a part of the Euro-Atlantic system, the lives of a quarter of a billion Europeans will be nastier, more brutish, and (inevitably) shorter.

Romania and Bulgaria are undoubtedly the success stories of Southeast Europe and the Black Sea. Both were invited to join NATO in 2002 where they have performed well and contributed to missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. As I mentioned earlier, both are

expected to join the EU on 1 January 2007 leading their region into the institutional core of Europe. The two factors that retard the political and economic development of both Romania and Bulgaria are deeply entrenched governmental corruption and a weak and often compromised judiciary. But, even in this, there is a good news story to be told. In the recent Romanian Presidential election for the first time, the issue of corruption dominated the campaign and swept reformer Traian Basescu into the Presidency. His Government has launched a large-scale offensive against corruption in government and business. Forthcoming elections in Bulgaria may offer a similar, albeit long overdue, opportunity to accelerate reform. Clearly, Romania and Bulgaria are two democracies whose long-term prospects look extremely bright.

Turkey achieved an historic milestone on 17 December 2004 when the EU finally agreed to open membership negotiations. Despite this confirmation of Turkey's European destiny, there are strong indications that Turkey's national and geopolitical identity crisis is far from over and that Turkey may be entering a difficult and problematic stage. In June 2004, in order to maintain some manner of regional hegemony, Turkey played a key role in blocking the extension of the NATO surveillance operation ACTIVE ENDEAVOR to the Black Sea. Internally, the ruling AK Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-Justice and Development Party) seems to have taken a turn for the worse, characterized by strident anti-Americanism, cultural anti-Europeanism, and a resurgent xenophobia. (The television footage of Turkish riot police savagely beating young women at a peaceful protest for political rights that appeared on television is but the most recent negative development.)

In foreign policy, during the term of Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey has quietly broken off its strategic relationship with Israel, refused to negotiate with Armenia on the opening of their common border, and demanded of the United States a draconian treatment of the Kurdish population of Iraq. In diplomatic parlance, Turkey has become "unhelpful."

Perhaps, most worrying are reports of Turkish-Russian discussions of a coordinated policy in the Black Sea region, which would inevitably be conducted at the expense of smaller, pro-European democracies. The motivation for Turkey's negative regional behavior appears to be a classic case of Great Power insecurity and a fear that Turkey will lose its distinct identity in the economic and demographic uncertainty of modern Europe. We can hope that the negative trend in Turkish politics is related to the turmoil in the Middle East and the problems and contradictions which a secular Islamic government encounters in the course of European integration rather than a response to the flowering of democracy around the Black Sea. Nevertheless, Turkey has entered a dangerous period both for itself and for US-Turkish relations which deserves serious attention.

Ukraine is possibly the best known and most inspiring of the Black Sea democracies. The triumph of Viktor Yushchenko and the Ukrainian people is without question the most significant event in the advance of democracy in Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. That said, President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko have a Herculean task in front of them. First and foremost, they must unite a nation even as they

undertake the reforms which are necessary for Ukraine to become a European democracy.

The most dangerous year for a new democracy is its first year, and for Ukraine the critical period is through the Parliamentary elections in March 2006. In this defining twelve-month period, Viktor Yushchenko will have to address the criminal conduct of the Kuchma period, define and negotiate the rules of the game for the business community, and make significant progress both within the Action Plan of the EU's Neighborhood Policy and in an intensified dialogue with NATO. Any one of these tasks would be formidable, but the new government must accomplish this and more, and do so in such a way that convinces the people of Kiev, Lviv, and Donetsk that they share a common future in a united pro-Western Ukraine. The critical task will be to establish transparent business practices and to eliminate the "grey economy" without resorting to large-scale renationalization which would destroy the confidence of foreign investors and dangerously inflame sectional resentments.

The further danger for Ukrainian democracy lies in the hostility of Moscow towards pro-European democracies in the former Soviet space and the fear that democratic reform inspires in the criminal clans, which have dominated the "grey economy" of Ukraine up until now. Sadly, but necessarily, the stability and security of EU and NATO membership is some years off and over the immediate political horizon. The U.S. and its European allies must bring their entire diplomatic and economic power to bear to ensure that Russia, or criminal groups emboldened by Russia, do not undermine the Yushchenko Government.

Georgia's democratic revolution is only slightly less well-known than Ukraine's and is succeeding against even longer odds. Georgia, under the leadership of President Misha Saakashvili, has finished an extraordinary first year of reform, which saw the breakaway province of Adjara reunited with the constitutional government in Tbilisi. By all indicators, such as its qualification for participation within the Millennium Challenge Account, Georgia is delivering on its commitments to economic reform and the democratic transformation of its society and government. Like Ukraine, however, Georgia has encountered serious and continuous obstruction from Russia. The Russian Government has refused to comply with its international treaty obligation to withdraw its troops from the Soviet-era bases on Georgian soil and has consistently supported separatists in the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia. Late last year, Russia blocked the OSCE from reinforcing a peacekeeping mission in South Ossetia in order to protect its ability to ship prohibited weapons and explosives through the Roki Tunnel to paramilitary gangs in South Ossetia. And, at the December OSCE Summit in Sofia, Bulgaria, Russia forced the OSCE to close the Border Monitoring Operation which patrolled the northern border of Georgia with Ingushetia, Dagestan and Chechnya. Russia's actions could very well prove to be the death knell for the OSCE; the U.S. must ensure that they are not for democratic Georgia.

Despite Russian attempts to destabilize the Saakashvili Government, Georgian democracy continues to mature and was strong enough to withstand the recent tragic

death of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, who was a mainstay of the Rose Revolution. Georgia should not be winning, except it does. It seems that Georgia has the essential quality of scrappiness that animated successful democratic movements in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic States against the monolith of Soviet power; they care more and are willing to work harder for democracy than the reactionary forces are willing to work to restore autocratic rule and criminal enterprise.

In contrast, the other smaller states of the Black Sea regime, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia, retain more characteristics of post-Soviet autocracies than of emerging European democracies. To varying degrees, recent elections have not met European standards. Opposition parties are harassed and opposition candidates are occasionally threatened with criminal charges or simply imprisoned. Both civil society and the free press are under duress in these countries, as we can see from the recent assassination of the editor of an opposition newspaper in Baku.

For the most part, the major factors retarding the democratic development of Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia are the persistence of frozen conflicts on their territories and the negative effect these conflicts have on their economic development and domestic politics. The standoff between Moldovan government and the Smirnov clan in Transdnistria has proliferated corruption and crime throughout Moldova and served as an excuse for President Voronin to limit the political and press freedoms of Moldovan citizens. Similarly, the impasse on Nagorno-Karabakh has served to maintain extremists in both Azeri and Armenian politics, and succeeded in isolating both countries from constructive interaction with their Black Sea neighbors and with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

This brief survey of the mature, nascent and inchoate democracies of the Black Sea region reveals a special class of democracies which are torn between the desire of their peoples for a European future (and all the economic and political freedoms these peoples associate with Europe) and the lingering grip of a brutal past. In short, this is a region of Europe where the future of democracy is still at risk.

If the Black Sea region is an area of enormous democratic potential, but where democracy remains at risk, then the policy of the U.S. has to be to support new democracies, to dissuade or deter foreign powers from intervening in their development, and to ensure that the Euro-Atlantic institutions they seek remain open to them.

The prospects for democracy in the Black Sea region will be substantially enhanced by the formal integration of Romania and Bulgaria in the EU. Their accession must remain on track for 1 January 2007 in order to convey to the other states of the region that the possibility of near-term European integration exists and that painful reforms have their reward in security and prosperity. The U.S. can assist Romania and Bulgaria in achieving their goal by pushing hard for judicial reform and strict standards of official conduct. The Department of Defense should make its long-delayed decision on the repositioning of US European bases to the sites offered by the Romanian Government in the vicinity of Constanza on the Black Sea. Nothing could make more clear that the

United States shares the view of the EU that security and stability in the Black Sea region is essential to Euro-Atlantic security.

Existing institutions, such as NATO and the OSCE, must be made to perform in service of democracy in the Black Sea littorals. We must revisit the decision to block Active Endeavor from being extended to the Black Sea and overturn the archaic Montreux Convention, which is sometimes invoked as the justification for barring NATO surveillance from transiting the Bosphorus. Similarly, we must demand that the OSCE fulfill its peacekeeping and monitoring responsibilities throughout the region. Even if we are successful with both NATO and the OSCE, the Black Sea region remains “institution-poor.” Regional initiatives, such as the confused GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova) or the moribund Black Sea Economic Cooperation Forum have not filled the gap. As a consequence, we should engage with regional leaders, such as Romanian President Basescu, Georgian President Saakashvili, and Ukrainian President Yushchenko, on the formation of new structures for a Black Sea strategy.

Whatever we hope to accomplish in the Black Sea region will be impossible without the willingness to confront Russia where its conduct goes beyond the acceptable. But we must also communicate frankly to Turkey that we expect our friends and allies to support other democratic states and to work for the peaceful resolution of conflicts in their region. Just because Russian officials become peevish when we point out that the poison used on Yushchenko and the explosives used in the car bombing in Gori, Georgia came from Russia, does not mean we should ignore this conduct. Just because Turkish officials become indignant at the mention of a genocidal campaign conducted by Ottoman authorities against Armenian civilians in the early years of the last century does not mean that coming to terms with history should not be discussed between democratic allies. If the west is to succeed where democracy is at risk, it must be clear in what it says and does.

Beginning with the conflict in Transdnistria, negotiators need to redouble their efforts to find creative solutions. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine has opened up the possibility of ending the criminal enterprise in Transdnistria and its secessionist conflict with the constitutional government in Chisinau. For negotiations to succeed, however, we should expand the so-called Pentagonal format to include both the EU and Romania, as essential and constructive partners. In Nagorno-Karabakh, we must press Azerbaijan and Armenia back to serious negotiations and insist that negotiations begin from the point reached at 2001 meeting in Key West. Finally, we must show far greater resolve and enthusiasm when parties take a meaningful step towards peace. President Misha Saakashvili’s enlightened peace plan for South Ossetia has been greeted by a resounding silence in Brussels and Washington, which is dumbfounding. It is also callous and derelict.

Both the Millennium Challenge Account and EU’s Neighborhood Policy were designed to assist emerging democracies in their efforts to accelerate economic development and strengthen the capacity of democratic institutions. Both the U.S. and the EU are active in the Black Sea region, but formal coordination does not yet exist. The four freedoms of

market access, labor mobility, investment and travel offered in Europe's Neighborhood Policy are the obvious complement to what the U.S. can offer in terms of security support and developmental aid. Closer coordination is essential. Congressional-funded NGO's, such as the National Endowment of Democracy, IRI and NDI, should be encouraged to address a wider spectrum of democracy-support activities. Elections are not the only things that matter in the Black Sea region. Strengthening civil society, the press and parliamentary oppositions are also key.

For better or for worse, the extent and character of democracy in the Black Sea region will be defined to a great extent by the successes and failures of democratic change in Ukraine. Without a democratic Ukraine, peace in Moldova will remain elusive and the democracies of the South Caucasus will be isolated from Europe. The ultimate disposition of Ukraine may well finally answer the question that has nagged at us since 1989: "What is the size of Europe?" If the Orange Revolution succeeds and European institutions maintain an "Open Door" policy towards Ukraine's candidacy for membership in NATO and the EU, then we can assume that all the democracies on the Black Sea have a place in Europe, including, some day, Russia.

What is occurring around the Black Sea may be the beginning of the final phase of the completion of a Europe whole and free. Over the five years remaining in this decade, the rapid democratic transformation of Central, Eastern, and now Southeastern Europe will come to a conclusion, and a new (and far larger) community of Euro-Atlantic democracies will result. While democratic change is ultimately the responsibility of the Black Sea states themselves, the U.S. has a significant role to play both in supporting and protecting these young democracies. How well it plays this role will affect the lives of tens of millions of people and, quite literally, shape the future of the West.