

Security Risks and Dilemmas in the Wider Black Sea Region: Back to “Realpolitik” or Simply Going through a Crunch?

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The current turbulent developments in Georgia and a blitz “hot” war” with Russia reaffirmed my belief that it is important to focus on the slightly broader strategic setting in which the South Caucasus security and stability equation is imbedded – the Wider Black Sea/Caspian Area (WBSCA). It is not the first time, as experts admit that one finds the Black Sea/Caspian region in competing zones of geopolitics and dogmas. Today, with all its complexities, the problems confronting and confounding so many of the world’s troubled regions are exposed. The WBSCA and specifically the South Caucasus (one of its most dynamic, vibrant regions and now we can add turbulent as well) are both the front and principal artery through which many of these problems are transmitted to the globalized world.

It is an area where public “goods” and “bads” criss-cross, intersect, interconnect and, at times, even intertwine. Some of the broader area’s effective energy and transport corridors, links, accesses and hubs are used no less effectively for all kinds of illicit trafficking, including small arms, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), counterfeit money and nuclear materials.

In its broadest sense, the wider Black Sea/Caspian Area can no longer be considered in isolation from the larger important dynamics that are emerging. Whereas previously it was a road to “somewhere else”, today it is a vital crossroad in its own right; a place where occurrences happening elsewhere intersect and impacting tens of millions of lives and not only on the regional level but far beyond it – just the perspectives the disrupted European energy security would be enough to mention!

So what are we talking about?

¹ The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Georgia or the International Centre for Black Sea Studies

The Wider Black Sea/Caspian Region – The eye of the EU’S next political storm or the shining sea of stability?

It appears that some recent new geographic, geopolitical or geo-economic methodological notions would matter for the perspectives of the EU - Wider Black Sea Area/Caspian (WBSCA) relationship. This can serve as an appropriate subject for academic or even some polemical analyses.

The discussion here is not about the Organization for Black Sea Cooperation (BSEC) - one of few full-fledged regional international organizations in Black Sea/Caspian area. Nor is it about its current state of affairs and strategic perspectives of BSEC. Rather, the focus here is on the WBSCA, Europe and the perspectives on their perspective interaction. Some experts assert that perceptions or misperceptions nourish or even re-shape existing reality. It applies full the BSEC-EU interaction dynamics. These fascinating strategies and synergies have intersected each other in the WBSCA. Some of them have stayed and impacted, while others disappeared without any trace. But each has created some expectations, re-charged some concrete political and public opinions.

I would advise for the proper current strategic focus and the adequate perspectives for future, it is necessary to look beyond the routine of daily developments within BSEC and reflect on some strategic dynamics and paradigms that clash in within the WBSCA. They impact developments far beyond the vicinity. The initial steps within that just developing “Synergy” project with the European Union has already raised certain “strategic questions” and not only for the main regional actors but academia and experts.

During the past three years there has been much preliminary discourse with some elements of interaction between the WBSCA and the EU. It has taken place mainly through the BSEC institutional capacity and seems to be heavily trafficked with concrete concepts and some practical projects that have emanated from just one direction – the Black Sea area. The EU’s outlook regarding the WBSCA is too much general and still blur though as some European expert admitted ironically recently that “the EU’s policy towards the Black Sea bears some resemblance to Mahler’s music, i.e. it sounds worse than it really is”. But we, regional actors, and specifically from the “grey zone” of the broader region – Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, countries which are neither in NATO or

the EU or will be there in the nearest future, need to see some tangible results of those activities on the ground and regarding the on-going problems and risks.

Is it a region, a strategic space, “corridor” or a “Wider Area”?

When trying to define an issue or a problem, it is often useful to start by discerning what it is not, before endeavoring to describe what it is. The Wider Black Sea area lies at the crossroads of European, Eurasian and Middle Eastern "security frameworks" - in a broader and multi-functional notion of the term which embraces political, economic, environmental, cultural and many other ingredients of the contemporary concept stability and security paradigm. While geographically located at the edge of each, the Region has never been at the centre of any of these frameworks nor has it even become a supplemental component in any of these strategic constructions.

One of the main goals of BSEC, is shared by the EU: to boost economic cooperation within a defined geographical area. Nevertheless, neither the WBSCA nor BSEC (as its institutional configuration) are an alternative to the EU. Now, nor in the foreseeable future is BSEC an economic competitor (if anything, it is a complementary economic partner and resource). BSEC is not a nascent political union (Far from that! Unfortunately even just opposite!). One could even argue the WBSCA is not even a “region,” in the sense that Scandinavia, say, is perceived clearly as a “region.” Neither is it, as some analysts assert, simply a “periphery”, “black hole” or “the Bermuda Triangle” through which a space traveler might pass or worse, just even disappear, on the way to somewhere else. Rather, the EU, the WBSCA and BSEC can be seen in terms of a solar system in the making; the Sun in this case is clear, but the exact orbits of some of the surrounding planets are still in a state of flux.

This area can be described as a “strategic corridor” and a “strategic space,” sharing, perhaps, in terms of external perception, many of the same characteristics with “Central Asia”. The WBSCA has only recently emerged as a critical node in the strategies of some regional States on the territory of the former Soviet space, including the Russian Federation and traditional littoral states like, Turkey, Romania or Bulgaria. Importantly, the entire area has become integral to the evolving policies and strategies of the states of the Eastern Mediterranean; to a new and vital Russia, which has a crucial role to play

throughout the WBSCA; to the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea Basin and Central Asia; the Middle East; and, of course, to Europe. It is obvious that at this dynamic converging point, US interests (particularly now with its greater presence in the Middle East, Central Asia and specifically on the shores of the Black Sea) are not trailing very far behind (they may actually already be far ahead).

The Wider Black Sea Area - EU Interaction Gambit

How the WBSCA should fit the new strategic landscape vis-à-vis the EU can be determined only after examining the relationship, interactions and perspectives between the two in this regard. Certain formidable steps have already taken place. As admitted above, synergies have been identified and some constructive dialogue has been initiated. However, these dynamics require strategic vision, direction and concrete results.

One must put oneself into the EU's shoes to understand how the region is viewed. Viewing the WBSCA (and BSEC, its only full-fledged institutional mantra) from Brussels's perspective facilitates the identification of those things that are lacking and needed in order to add value to the relationship process; making it an irreversible and mutually beneficial one. There is, to some extent in the EU a deep-seated wariness. It is not about the region per se but about the individual BSEC countries. In part, this wariness stems from the EU's internal politics and from the seemingly endless debate on the "wider" versus "deeper" direction it should take.

In some quarters of the EU the WBSCA continues to be perceived as EU periphery. This is so despite the fact that Black Sea states Romania and Bulgaria have become members of the European Union. Psychologically, it is seen as a problem-ridden distraction that can no longer be completely ignored, but contained or dealt with on an individual state bases with aid and technical assistance. Permitting cynicism for a moment, this rationale is what appears to lie behind the Neighborhood Policy ("ENP"). And it seems to me that "Black Sea Synergy" may bear the same but in this case some regional rationale.

The EU has been kept busy with its own issues of enlargement, new member countries as well as bigger strategic issues such as trade, relations with the US, Russia, China, India and the emerging economic "tigers" from wider Asia. A distinct wariness towards the region exists even inside more "enlightened" EU circles. There appear to be a number of reasons for this weariness. However, within this camp there is a definite sense that

more should be done, if only out of self-interest i.e. the growing importance of WBSA energy to the EU. By simply by looking at a map, anyone in the EU can instinctively know the combination of chronic instability and economic malaise emanating at its borders from the WBSA is dangerous. Unfortunately those who recognize this danger do not know what to do, and fear failure.

Such an assessment may appear harsh or even pessimistic. However, perhaps the seeds of a strategy may be discerned from it as well. Ultimately, political and economic events on the ground, (e.g. an expanding and inter-connected energy and transport infrastructure) will be the driving force that shapes EU policy towards the wider Black Sea area.

There is a military concept known as “getting within your opponent’s decision cycle”. Without suggesting the existence of a confrontational charge between the EU and the WBSA or BSEC concretely, the concept may be relevant here. It is possible to suggest that a self-serving EU-BSEC engagement strategy, one that is strictly oriented on EU interests, stands the greatest chance of success. Ironically, such a strategy would also serve the best interests of those BSEC Member States, who are (aspiring) candidates for future accession as well as those states pretending to be on equal terms with the EU.

Irrespective of whether it is motivated by fear of expansion of instability on its own borders or energy disruptions, the EU needs new relationships in the WBSA. With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania the Black Sea has become part of the EU. The European Union has never before had a coastline on the Black Sea. It is possible to assert the WBSA has become the EU’s “near abroad”. If properly reformed and recalibrated to fit the strategic realities and the developing synergies within the region (and beyond), BSEC could help deliver relationships and tangible, practical projects and initiatives. The cooperation could produce mutually beneficial results to both the EU and the wider Black Sea/Caspian countries.

No one can predict where events and relationships might lead. In this case, the axiom that the journey is more important than the destination, or in corporate - speak, the process is more important than the product, is paramount. The EU, irrespective of whether it is motivated by a fear of further expansion or of instability on its new borders or of possible energy disruptions, needs new relationships in the Black Sea region.

Precisely because it seems that the EU is becoming a less capable actor in the WBSCA, it needs BSEC to be more capable. It needs a BSEC that can help deliver relationships as well as tangible, practical projects and initiatives. Yes, BSEC needs to be reformed and recalibrated! It has already been said but is worth repeating: if BSEC were high-tech company, it could be perceived as some sort of Cisco Systems, producing the routers that convey the ideas, issues and trends concerning the ENP around the Region and between the Wider Black Sea area and the EU.

In high-tech speak, it would provide the high-level “connectivity” which the EU needs urgently. It must also influence and produce the “content” that will help dispel any misconceptions, prejudices and fears that the EU may harbor about the region. The focus must not be limited to the purely political and technical aspects of the accession equation. It must deal effectively and promptly with perceptions and prejudices.

In short, the WBSCA’s potential and BSEC’s capacity must be seen in Brussels as an essential enabler of the ENP. An entity that can help deliver the relationships and programs needed to be effective from an EU perspective. In so doing, BSEC, would not “sell-out” its role of promoting the self-interest of its members. Rather contrarily, it would actually position itself to enhance that responsibility.

Thinking Strategically, Acting Thoughtfully...

Some may say it is easier to talk than to implement these ideas or concepts. However, others can ask what the strategic questions to which precise and clear-cut answers must be found? It is worthwhile to focus on at least some of the questions that may resonate strategically. I raised those “strategic”/polemical questions many times earlier. I have not heard some answers to them and decided to muse over them one more time in a different context.

How BSEC should fit into this new strategic landscape vis-à-vis the EU?

As has been admitted above, is a level of deep-seated wariness towards the WBSCA exists within the EU. It goes far beyond the “Christian Club” argument or the endless (and probably ultimately inconclusive) debate on “Europe’s” natural borders. The wariness stems in part from the internal politics of the EU itself, and that other seemingly endless

(and again possibly ultimately inconclusive) debate on the “wider” versus “deeper” direction that the EU should take. In reality, it will probably be a combination of both. Concern may also find some of its roots in the notion that the EU would simply inflate expectations in the WBSA by working on more of a multilateral level, while at home igniting even more expansion related fears. This weariness is combined with a camp that does not know what to do.

The West likes “success”. It is from this very perspective that the “wider” nature of the Black Sea/Caspian area does not promise to make Europeans happy soon. These fears are very important to understand. It is from this very perspective that the “wider” nature of the Black Sea area does not promise to make Europeans happy soon. This has resulted in a muddled, middle-of-the road policy course with no particular strategic destination in mind. It fears failure of throwing good money and resources down a “black hole.” When oilmen gather at night over a beer, they often talk about the two Golden Rules of the oil industry: The first is that “it is all about the money.” The second rule is “never forget rule number one.” To this a third one can be added: “It’s all about relationships and delivery, stupid.”

This larger strategic question of How BSEC should fit into this new strategic landscape vis-à-vis the EU, must not be asked only (or even primarily) in the context of what Europe wants. Rather it needs to be posed in the context of what it can actually do. At a time when most, logically, see Europe’s periphery further than it was only a few years ago, most Europeans see it smaller than before. There is no real enthusiasm for additional expansion in Europe. Even the absorption of the newly independent Central European states (like Romania and Bulgaria) caused real heartburn.

At this moment, Turkey has virtually no chance of being admitted to Europe. Europe, by almost any reckoning, is today much less than it used to be. Its economy, with a few notable exceptions among its members, is tepid at best. Its demographic condition borders the catastrophic. It has all but ceased to invest in military capabilities. It refuses to support the security organization that has sustained a vital alliance system with the United States for nearly half a century.

Most sensible observers understand that Europeans have no appetite for NATO projecting power beyond Europe, or for that matter even within Europe, for example toward the

Balkans. The very notion of a “European” foreign policy has foundered on local nationalisms and the stagnant bureaucracy in Brussels. We have every right to ask today: What is Europe, and what is it capable of doing? The answers are not clear and are becoming less so.

From this perspective one can ask if it is even desirable to think about BSEC as a sort of “hinge” to Europe. What would it be hinging to? In the last two decades, the strategic Eurasian map has changed fundamentally. While the Soviet Union existed, the logic that all strategy stopped at the Soviet border was perhaps justifiable, but it is not justifiable today. Eurasia is now one of the most intense strategic competitions in the world. China is there; India is there; Russia is still there; the United States is there; the Arab Gulf states are there; Iran and Turkey are there; Japan and South Korea or other Asian vibrant economies are there; and of course Europe—or at least some of it—is there.

The bubbling brew of economic, political, cultural interests abuts much of the Black Sea region. It cannot remain immune from events in larger Eurasia nor can it be isolated from the strategic dynamics that will increasingly inform the competitions there. At the very least, it is necessary to understand the shape and character of those competitions. An independent view of how they could play out that is not tied to Europe or any other region is needed for affectivity. The BSEC can take the lead in helping to define this marketplace of strategic forces through analytical filters that belong to the region alone. That is our value to Europe...and beyond.

Another factor shaping EU perceptions of the wider Black Sea/Caspian area is the US geo-political running in the region. It aggressively pursues its own, mainly security- and energy-related agenda, expecting Europe to pick up the problematic pieces in its wake. At least, that is the perception, and in geopolitics, as in life, as conferred above, perceptions are reality. One should never under-estimate the resentment and frustration among some in Brussels that the US has not only blithely assumed that Turkey should breeze into the EU on a fast track, but that so too should Ukraine (and some other countries. Maybe, it is high time for some strategists in the Wider Black Sea area to sit down with American experts and talk about the US interests in the Black Sea/Caspian. The United States, whether one likes it or not, has already become a Black Sea actor, with its strategic vectors reaching far beyond our region.

The next strategic question: How does or should BSEC connect to other structures and organizations with similar, related or parallel objectives or agendas?

The short answer is that the Wider Black Sea area and BSEC specifically, should connect to those other structures and organizations, but to do so in ways that do not simply duplicate efforts, but in ways which are distinctive and help those other actors leverage their efforts.

The Davos-style format is an ideal approach to pull together related structures and organizations allowing issues that may otherwise be dealt with in a piece-meal, uncoordinated manner. The format could facilitate a view which is more defined and “holistic” in context. It may sounds like jargon, but within it lays a hard kernel of truth.

What role can BSEC and its related bodies play in harnessing the forces of globalization that States seeking to build capacity must understand and accommodate?

In spite of its economic, cultural and political dislocations, globalization will continue to grow in the coming years and decades. The challenge is to exploit it and simultaneously preserve and promote the unique characteristics of individual economies and societies in the face of its seemingly overwhelming forces. In the WBSA there may be several distinctive roles to be played for BSEC, its related bodies and the International Center of Black Sea Studies (ICBESS) in particular.

First, the aforementioned bodies could be used to help Member States identify and understand the underlying technological, economic, commercial strands and trends that intertwine to produce “globalization,” as well as how such developments may impact on their economies and cultures. This would be a relatively high-level exercise which would fit well within the Davos-style meeting format. The objective is not airy, academic debate on the rights and wrongs of globalization, but a debating level in which its consequences, and thus any consequent opportunities, are identified in a strictly Black Sea context.

Second, development within the Black Sea/Caspian area is often left in the hands of “experts.” However, most of those “experts” have never built a business or had to meet a payroll. Investment bankers are often seen as the storm troopers of globalization. Should EU-based investment bankers be seconded for three to six month periods to particular regions of BSEC members, they could examine the opportunities of creating businesses with the potential to serve niche markets in Europe. Clearly not all of their suggestions would work; this does not matter. What matters is the process of harnessing globalization to produce tangible benefits that count. The Harvard Business School could not teach a course like that.

Another example could be direct BSEC participation in BP’s nascent plan for long-term engagement with civil society and other influential, non-government actors in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey after the completion of BTC and SCP. This BP strategy (though currently not well-defined) is directly related to globalization. Acting as a neutral facilitator of such a process may seem a natural role for BSEC. It would be well placed to disseminate more widely the impact (positive and negative), problems and strengths of such strategies in the region, the EU and beyond. Needless to say, BP and its partners preferred to pass up BSEC’s institutional engagement choosing more direct relations with individual regional countries. Why? Some BP executives admitted some time ago, “BSEC happens to be entrapped by the “experts” plus too many cumbersome bureaucratic decision-making procedures!”

In short, BSEC’s regional outlook must be utilized to foster something not-unlike a high-level globalization early warning system. Through it views could be communicated as widely as possible. At the lower level, it needs to promote and participate in practical projects that creatively seek to harness the more positive benefits of globalization, and to communicate the results as widely as possible.

How to move closer to Europe and remain a positive factor for managing the strategic vectors that are shooting in from many other parts of the world?

The process of fashioning closer ties with Europe is, perhaps, inevitable and inescapable for the entire region. Managing and understanding this process will be a priority for all BSEC Member States, irrespective of their eventual individual political relationships that emerge over time.

One possible weakness of the EU approach to the region is, simply, focusing too strictly on individual countries. In other words, it may not see the forest through the trees. BSEC can (and should) provide the perspective of a regional approach. A mindset needs to be developed that first considers other strategic vectors, albeit from the Middle East, Central Asia or elsewhere, and then produces an analysis that says: "This is the likely impact on Black Sea states (individually and collectively), and this is the likely impact or implication for our EU neighbors and other strategic partners, the US or Japan". The views need to be presented and promoted in ways that do not isolate or irritate any Party.

In summary, the WBSCA and specifically BSEC may hold a unique perspective and position. Perhaps in the past the relevance or importance of that perspective and position was not realized. Political, economic and security related developments, both positive and negative, have turned this into necessary elements of the broader strategic picture. However, the ability to bring about the necessary changes lies with regional actors and BSEC itself. In turn, their confidence is required to build upon its existing structures. Furthermore, the region's resources must be used to put forward views, forums, projects and relationships that will fill in what remains a "grey zone."

This is a unique time in modern history and the wider Black Sea/Caspian area is a unique strategic space. This uniqueness can be used to create a distinctive Wider Black Sea/BSEC approach using understanding, leverage, management and, at times even manipulation to promote the interests of its members and perhaps, in turn, those of other strategic actors beyond.

A Message For Europe

The Europeans as well as the region's member states are watching developments in the WBSCA area and both groups can read a map. The avalanche of debate about the future of Europe caused by the referendums of 2005 in France and the Netherlands has been acknowledged by both. However, whereas that debate must necessarily be centred within the European Union, the actions and policies that will eventually emerge from it will have a profound and fundamental impact on the future of the WBSCA.

In recent years, Europe has made some brave, bold and controversial moves. It appears that none were as brave, bold or controversial, as the incorporation of 10 Central and Eastern European states. That enlargement, and the prospect of future enlargement into the Balkans, is said to have been an important factor behind the French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitution in 2005.

Popular fear of East-West waves of immigration, so-called “social dumping”, may certainly have also played a part. The perception of the supposed threat posed by low-wage “Polish plumbers”, “Turkish kebabci”, “Georgian nannies” or “Moldovan mechanics” seems to have struck a sensitive public chord; every politician knows, “perceptions are reality.”

If recent events suggest certain Western European states perceive economic and social threats as emanating from the east, what then is the perception of developments in Europe from that very region? Many commentators have emphasised that enlargement may have been the most successful European policy since the 1950s, when the first moves to create a European entity cemented the reconciliation of France and Germany. This may simply be a perspective of Europe’s political and media elites, but it has certainly worked in the accession States. There the prospect of EU membership has clearly underpinned the peaceful transformation of former communist economies, and helped introduce and entrench democratic values.

Of the 12 BSEC Members, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria are the EU members. Accession talks with Turkey began last October. Serbia is covered by a broader EU commitment to the Western Balkans. Neither Ukraine nor Georgia has hidden its intention to be a part of the European Union in the future. All BSEC States that are not on a direct accession path are subject to the still-evolving European Neighbourhood Plan. The plan seeks to reward - in what remains an ill-defined manner - countries that embrace “European norms and values.” The only exception is Russia. However, one could argue that it already has a “special” strategic relationship with Europe.

It is perhaps ironic that at a time when many in “established Europe” are disenchanted with the European project, its allure and attraction continue to exert such power and influence in its “near abroad.” For example, Georgia has never appeared on any list for accession. This notwithstanding, in front of the Georgian Parliament and other public buildings the EU flag flies alongside Georgia’s national flag. The EU flag is also the official flag of the Council of Europe, of which Georgia is a member. Therefore it is possible to fly the flags

side by side. That flag does not fly there to impress visiting European officials and politicians to support Georgia's hopes. Its flight is not a publicity or public relations stunt. It flies there because it serves as a psychological anchor for a country wracked by civil war and economic collapse.

The WBSA is rapidly becoming a strategic energy corridor to Europe. The inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline later this year will not so much serve the United States, one of its main backers, but rather, European refineries and drivers. It was built by a largely Black Sea work force with the assistance of mainly European engineers and experts. European technical, environmental and social standards were adhered to. New projects will link natural gas pipelines from the region with the main European gas grid. They will provide additional sources of supply from the Caspian (and perhaps beyond) into European homes and factories; diversifying and helping to secure vital sources of supply.

Some may look at the WBSA and see a political and economic "black hole". Instead, it can also be viewed as a potentially vibrant market with more than 150m people. It can be seen as a producer, consumer and exporter of much needed resources, a source of a new generation of entrepreneurs, inspired by the European model. But this positive vision depends on partnership and cooperation

At a time when established Europe engages in an inevitably introspective debate on future enlargement, we must not lose sight of the very real and tangible benefits that can flow now from stronger engagement between Europe and the Wider Black Sea region, especially in the economic area.

As stated above, the European Neighbourhood Program is the main vehicle for direct engagement between the EU and Black Sea States without a direct commitment to eventual accession. That policy is still evolving. Even before the French and Dutch referendums cast such uncertainty over future relations, disquiet could be detected regarding the policy from within the Black Sea region.

Some view the action plans as too prescriptive, too presumptive, too "top-down" and far too detailed. Some cynics from the region even suspect it is just another bureaucratic ploy to keep countries from lobbying more vociferously for membership.

The ENP is necessarily a bilateral affair between Brussels and individual Black Sea countries. It should also have a regional dimension, if only to placate fears of it containing a “divide and rule” element. It must also be much more inter-active, involving a cross-section of the societies concerned. The participation of the business community, both from within the region and more widely in Europe is also critical. If the referendums in France and the Netherlands of 2005 have taught us anything, it is that the policies and programmes that are the exclusive preserve of political elites are always at risk of a popular backlash.

Today, no one can predict the outcome of the present political debate. Some commentators have suggested the pushing of the “political pause button” on future enlargement will become permanent. Perhaps it is only a temporary and tactical pause to allow the political fall-out of the French and Dutch referendums to settle. Only future events will tell, as Europe continues what is likely to be a prolonged period of reflection. Importantly, a pause for political reflection should not become an excuse for a lack of engagement, particularly in the economic sphere. In effect, a political pause may make increased engagement between Europe and the WBSA an even greater imperative. Economic interests are inextricably intertwined, irrespective of political future, the WBSA is a prisoner of geography.

There is both, clear and long-term strategic interest in economic cooperation. Perhaps a broad business coalition between WBSA and European companies interested or active in the region should be created. This would help individual countries better understand and influence the European Neighbourhood Program, as well as tackle common regional issues. Whereas the majority of states in the WBSA are allured by engagement towards the EU, it appears to irritate some big regional actors. Although understandable, the question begs to be asked: What is the substance of Russia’s, Turkey’s, Greek’s “Good Neighborhood Policy,” in the WBSA if that policy exists at all?!

It is patently obvious that both, those in Europe and the WBSA, are facing uncertain and perhaps even irrational times. The outcome is clearly not in sight. Perhaps too much time should not be spent speculating on end-games or future political structures and relationships. Already more than enough pundits, analysts and commentators happily and freely do so. It is important to stress however that as some experts admit, “the wish to belong to the democratic community of Europe has been a powerful factor for both change

and stability in Europe. Membership of the EU played an important part in the consolidation of democracy, first in southern Europe and then in central Europe. Not many revolutions are entirely peaceful and few result in stable democratic outcomes.”

There is a common vision. At this stage, its building blocks are primarily economic. This fact is certainly in the interests of both the EU and the WBSCA. At this time, it is the process of engagement, not necessarily the product which is so crucial. BSEC states are willing to work together on tangible, practical and pragmatic projects that are in the interests of both EU and the WBSCA.

It is a sincere hope that the commitments made by the EU towards several member states will remain in force and be fully implemented by both sides. Now more than ever, those falling outside this category need to accelerate it the momentum of engagement. The old “Iron Curtain” never quite killed the hopes of millions of people in Eastern Europe. However, if a Euro-Curtain dividing haves and have-nots were ever to descend over the wider Black Sea/Caspian area, it is healthy to fear that it could.

The people of the WBSCA understand perfectly well why current circumstances may have compelled Europe to have pushed the pause button.; but pause, at least according to the Oxford Dictionary, does not mean “stop.” There is no pause button for the desire for peaceful reform, democracy, stability and security of millions of people in the WBSCA. These are the very things the EU so eloquently stands for, and has so successfully cultivated across other parts of the continent. So pause if it must, but while pausing it should bear in mind that in a potentially volatile region such as this, with unresolved conflicts and emotionally raw ancient rivalries, there is always a force at play whose only desire is to push the re-wind button of history.

It would be tragic, not ironic if in the future a common European defence and military policy were to emerge not in response to crisis and disasters in faraway places in Africa or Asia, but from an urgent need to patrol Europe’s “frozen frontiers” to contain chaos and instability in its “Near Abroad”.

The specificities of structures, outcomes or end games should not encumber progress. It is necessary to simply “get on with the job”. It is time to embark on the journey. Perhaps a pleasant surprise awaits at the final destination. Somebody at the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) where I currently work once said the ancient Greek used to call

the Black Sea and the adjacent area not friendly to outsiders. From today's vantage point it is still rough from time to time. It is worthwhile to muse together about the fascinating and dynamic perspectives on how to make that vast area "friendlier" that is mutually beneficial to "regionals" and "outsiders" alike.