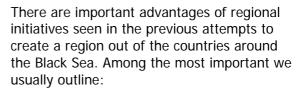On the occasion of the Black Sea Forum, opening this week in Bucharest, Romania, **Alina Mungiu Pippidi** ponders the chances of such regional initiatives

BLACK SEA DILEMMAS

Can the creation of a Black Sea 'Region' help push democracy, development and europeanization to the East? The Black Sea Forum, held this week in Bucharest, invites reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the attempt to gather the countries surrounding the Black Sea in one region, encouraging them to speak with one political voice. This brief reviews the dilemmas raised by this approach.

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There are important advantages of regional initiatives seen in the previous attempts to create a region out of the countries around the Black Sea. Among the most important we usually outline:

- The ability to focus more Western attention if a group of countries of low interest are packed into one region whose profile is raised by an awareness campaign.

- The simplification of resource mobilization if one framework is offered instead of many. This was the logic behind the Balkan Stability Pact.

- The easier spread of best practices from the most developed part of the region to the less developed.

However, not every group of countries come together to form regions with equal ease. Also, not every region constructed on policy grounds has met with success in recent years. The Baltic countries were greatly helped by a regional approach because they could cluster together, sharing a similar political vision of their future, and they could rely on their very developed fellow countries in the Scandinavian Peninsula. The Balkans would have evolved similarly with or without the Stability Pact. The Pact's fundamental mission, to bring the region closer to Europe, remains largely unfulfilled to this day. Regional approaches can stumble over important difficulties, such as:

- The risk of selling one product with multiple copyright owners. Regions tend to have promoters, within the expert and donor community, as well as among policymakers. They tend to 'sell' a thing that they do not control, and worse, which does not exist as a coherent whole. If a virtual buyer is found, the 'copyright' problem immediately becomes apparent in the lack of cohesiveness and coordination within the 'region', especially when specific projects are put forward.

- Regions risk reducing action to the lowest possible denominator, as the promoters struggle for consensus, necessary for the single voice.

- Regions risk demobilizing the more advanced without mobilizing the laggards if no clear carrots exist for them.

In the cases of the Balkans and the Black Sea, the incentive for the countries lured into the region was an eventual accession to the European Union. If we review the process to date, however, the only countries well on the way to join are Romania and Bulgaria, and chances are they would have joined anyway. In other words, the carrot is perceived as largely an illusion, a chimera without real transformative potential. There are no guarantees that behaving cooperatively a country will advance faster than if it takes the old bilateral approach. If anything, the Balkan experience seems to validate the latter route, not the former.

Comparing the Black Sea with the Balkans or the Baltics, one realizes the immense challenge that this region poses. The Black Sea countries are less developed than the Balkans, despite economic growth surfacing recently in some of the countries. There are large disparities, from population to democracy among countries (Fig. 1). Although we have witnessed recently encouraging 'electoral revolutions' in Ukraine and Georgia, other countries in the region stagnate. State capture remains high. The trend of the Freedom House's Nations in Transit score is negative; in the Balkans the same indicator has a positive dynamics (Fig. 2). Even with the recent developments included, the region itself is still not performing at the level of the Balkans. Its most democratic member has an inferior score to the least democratic country in the Balkans.

Fig. 1. The population of the Black Sea countries.

Country	Population
Bulgaria	7,450,349
Romania	22,329,977
Moldova	4,455,421
Ukraine	47,425,336
Russia	143,420,309
Georgia	4,677,401
Azerbaijan	7,911,974
Armenia	2,982,904
Turkey	69,660,559

The challenges are therefore important, qualitatively similar to those in the Balkans, but even more difficult, due to the proximity of important political actors, such as Russia, with an occasional discourse on the legitimacy of its domination of its near abroad. These challenges can be summarized as:

- Nation building: frozen conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia-Azerbaijan, as well as minority problems in Ukraine and North Caucasus.

- State building. These states rank high on World Bank's state capture survey, and their politics, despite the recent revolutions, have yet to produce a balanced political system as a first step towards a permanent solution to the state capture problem.

- Society building. Black Sea countries have small democratic and European constituencies, far smaller than the Eastern Balkans. What they have in common with Eastern Balkan countries are large proportions of dependent populations. Due to the lack of economic reform many people rely on state aid to survive.

Fig. 2. Black Sea and Balkans Democracy Compared

Country	NIT 2005	Trend	Country	NIT 2005	Trend
Armenia	5.18	-0.39	Albania	4.04	0.71
Azerbaijan	5.86	-0.24	Bosnia	4.18	1.24
Belarus	6.64	-0.39	Bulgaria	3.18	0.40
Georgia	4.96	-0.79	Croatia	3.75	0.71
Moldova	5.07	-0.82	Macedonia	3.89	-0.06
Ukraine	4.50	0.13	Romania	3.39	0.15
Black Sea Average		-0.41	Balkans average		0.52

The first solution to the regional problems is regional cooperation with a view to a future integration of the region. This is easier said than done, however, as various logics conflict on ground. We shall phrase this as the 'Security Dilemma': the regional cooperation logic would mean to multiply contacts, open new border crossings, facilitate exchanges and trade. However, the European security logic implies securing borders and hindering circulation. One must be exceptionally naïve to imagine that these two logics can coexist, or some miraculous solution exists to do both in the same time.

The Balkan experience shows that the logic of sealing the borders is far stronger for EU's vital interests than the logic of regional cooperation. The small economies of Macedonia or Albania, crippled with unemployment, would have received a substantial boost had EU lifted the Schengen visas as it did for Romania and Bulgaria a few years ago. However, EU refuses even visa facilitation, while criticizing these countries for their high unemployment, a factor which in turns becomes a reason to delay the process of accession.

The second solution in the regional approach, which has been often tried, is redistribution. The richer part of the region helps the poorer one, by either aid or by investing in it, as the Scandinavians did for the Baltics. This leads to the second possible trap, the 'Development Dilemma': there are no obvious development leaders in the Black Sea region to support this exercise. Some of these economies do grow currently, but growth in countries with high state capture and low infrastructural power risk being squandered. Rather, we see it in the flourishing of dachas at the seaside for various entrepreneurs than in the necessary highways or oil terminals.

Of course, there is some hope that the developed European Union will invest in the area. However, the EU finds it hard currently to finance properly even the Western Balkans' accession – it is unlikely to invest heavily in the Black Sea. The Europeanization dilemma of the Black Sea is that the strongest countries in the region are not the most Europeanized, while the most Europeanized (Romania and Bulgaria) barely have resources for their own Europeanization.

The orange and rose Revolutions created a positive trend in the Black Sea area, stalled by the elections in Azerbaijan and Belarus. This mix of experiences show how difficult the task is and how refined a plan for the region should be.

A minimal plan would try to secure local cooperation for some alternate routes for energy to Europe. Such a plan means avoiding waking the sensitivities of less than democratic local regimes, buying off the perpetual rent seekers in breakaway regions by offering them rents elsewhere and building a security environment where democrats and non-democrats would meet on equal foot to deal with security only. Europeanization would remain a distant prospect, not to the dislike of Europe. Even with such reduced ambitions, the plan needs the vital cooperation of Russia, which stands to gain nothing from the whole arrangement.

A more ambitious plan should address, rather than avoid, the dilemmas outlined above. It should also build on the only certainty the region has: the existence in each and every of these countries of pro-European and democratically minded reformers. The basic idea of a regional plan which considers the future of these countries, besides the routes of oil pipelines, should be to help build in the broader area around the Black Sea *pro-reform and pro-European constituencies* that can trigger real internal change, on the Central European or Baltic model.

The constant help and conditionality of European Union and United States prevented Romania from taking the path of Belarus, which was as likely in 1990 as the path of Europeanization. In the fifteen years after 1989, a balanced political system and a civil society developed in Romania, able to ground the country firmly on a European path. This is the kind of work to be done in the region for those who want to help it, and this requires indeed considerable cooperation, but more between the benevolent outside helpers than the countries itself.

In this design, the Eastern Balkans and the Central Europeans are important for best practice transfer. An investment in the elites of the region, rather than in infrastructure, may seem an uncertain investment, but it is the only one that can generate a sustainable return in the long term.

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