

A special bulletin of the Russian Institute dedicated to 'The Yaroslavl Initiative' of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev initiated a debate around the warming in 'Black Sea political relations' brought about by the signing of agreements between Russia and Ukraine concerning Russia's Black Sea Fleet bases in Sevastopol. From this angle, Russian Journal interviews Adrian Severin, the former Foreign Minister of Romania and currently a member of the European Parliament as a representative of the Social-Democratic party.

IS A BLACK SEA UNION REALLY ON THE CARDS?

Adrian Severin

The strategic situation in the Black Sea region follows the move of the main security front from the line linking the Adriatic Sea to the Caspian Sea to the one linking the Persian Gulf to Central Asia, Afghanistan included. Therefore, today the area is less strategically important for the non-riparian global actors than a few years ago.

Actually the Black Sea is not a region in itself. The Black Sea is a meeting point of different regions: the Balkans, Asia Minor, the Southern Caucasus, and Malorussia.

The EU became a riparian participant and political player in the Black Sea region once Romania and Bulgaria became members. In this context, we must see the Black Sea area and some of the countries such as Ukraine or the ones in the South Caucasus as being part of the common neighbourhood of the European Union and Russia. From this point of view, the challenge for both Russia and the EU is to avoid this region becoming an area of conflict. If any of these players were to consider this area as one of their exclusive domains and consider unilateral intervention, this would create a real threat of conflict and unrest.

In a way, the origin of some of the frozen conflict in the area lies in the fact that the **EU and Euro-Atlantic powers never came to terms with Russia as far as the**



post-Soviet status of these areas is concerned.

Nevertheless, the EU has all the classic leverages of a soft power. It should use them in order to 'reset' its relations with Russia in the Black Sea region. This is possibly easier to achieve than the US-Russia reset, and perhaps also more urgent.

The new EU policy should be focused along two main lines: on one hand, the EU should work in a multilateral format with Russia and their shared neighbors on energy and security issues – and the military neutrality of the common neighborhood could be a part of those multilateral agreements. On the other hand, the EU should develop economic and political cooperation with the countries in the common neighborhood on bilateral bases, each of them being able to make its choice freely following an assessment of its geo-economic interests,

namely the opportunity to associate with a potential partner representing its customers as opposed to associating with a potential partner representing its competitors.

Together with some of my colleagues I have already proposed a **Union for the Black Sea**. That Union should be built on the basis of already existing formats of cooperation, the most important one being the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization. Of course, this organization was founded when the EU was not yet a political player in the region. Therefore it must be adapted to the present geo-economic and geo-political context. This context allows and requires the broadening of the **common security mechanisms around the Black Sea**. Secondly, the Union for the Black Sea should combine the institutionalization of the regional partnerships with a political integrative superstructure. Its format is to be discussed. It should be simple and flexible.

The strategic aim of such a Union is to transform an area of conflict and rivalry into one of cooperation and peace. This Union should belong to those who directly converge at the Black Sea and not to the global powers that are neither riparian countries nor have any direct vital interest in the area. ■

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