

# Potential and challenges for the Black Sea regional cooperation

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## Abstract

*Since the early nineties, the Black Sea region has witnessed fundamental geopolitical changes and significant shifts in its regional context and dynamics. In an attempt to react to the altered circumstances after the collapse of the Soviet Union and to address an increasing number of common challenges, the Black Sea states have jointed efforts in various regional cooperation activities. Throughout the years, the Black Sea cooperation has evolved with different speed and success, reflecting the difficult regional circumstances and attracting increasing external involvement. Today, more than twenty years after the first cooperation activities have been launched, the Black Sea cooperation is still shadowed by persisting historical rivalries, unrecognized territorial entities, 'frozen conflicts' and security threats. As a result, despite the many pressing problems of regional character, the cooperation efforts are currently showing rather limited outcomes. Seen against this background, the current paper presents a study of the main challenges and the existing potential for further development of the Black Sea regional cooperation.*

**Keywords:** regional cooperation, Black Sea area, sector-based approach, variable geometries

## 1. Introduction

The strong tendencies of globalization and European integration and the transnational character of many pressing issues such as climate change and organized crime have altered the framework conditions in Europe and have necessitated the birth of new forms of action at the international level. It is in

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this context that the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of new types of cooperation across national borders – from cooperation between geographically contiguous border regions to transnational cooperation across large multinational spaces. Seen as an effective means to face common challenges and to deal with shared problems and concerns, the transnational cooperation has found its expression in fields as various as environment, transport, security, etc. It has proved to be of particular relevance in areas with functional interdependencies such as river catchment areas and sea basins. Embedded in different territorial, political, socio-economic and cultural contexts, the cooperation processes have shown varying outcomes, limitations and potential.

The range of developments and regional dynamics in the Black Sea area over the last years provides us with an illustrative example of a cooperation process, which is crucial for the stability and sustainability of the region and its territory, but which is at the same time largely dependent on local particularities, historical legacies, external interests and co-existence of various policies. After facing the dismissal of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the formation of new independent states, the war conflicts in Georgia and the emergence of still existing breakaway regions in the country, the Black Sea region is now to deal with the serious impacts of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, with the present political instability in Ukraine and with the consequences of the recent Russian annexation of Crimea. Along with the growing concerns about regional instability, economic isolation and maritime safety, the Black Sea region faces an increasing number of environmental and social challenges. The attempts to address these challenges and concerns have resulted in the initiation of diverse cooperation formats both by the Black Sea regional states and the EU and US as external actors. Yet, an overview of the Black Sea regional dynamics and cooperation landscape shows that despite the variety of collaborative actions and cooperation initiatives in the area, these, to a large extent, lack efficiency, coordination and concrete outcomes. This calls for the need for rethinking the Black Sea cooperation process, its organisation and its significance for the region, its territory and societies.

In line with the above discussion, the current paper intends to study the challenges and potential for further development of the Black Sea regional cooperation. In particular, it aims at attaining an in-depth and comprehensible picture of the state of play of the Black Sea cooperation process and its dynamics and at identifying its developmental potential and perspectives. The study starts with a theoretical overview of the process of transnational cooperation, its underlying incentives, benefits and application. The overview intends to provide useful insights and to build better understanding of the process of cooperation. The gained insights serve then as a basis for the analysis of the Black Sea regional dynamics, the underlying factors and fields of

cooperation, the institutional framework, the regional actors, policies and patterns of interaction. The findings from the conducted analysis enable the authors to identify the issues of real regional interest, to discuss on the existing potential and main challenges for the Black Sea cooperation process and to draw recommendations for its future development. The article ends with a closing discussion and conclusions on the perspectives and the further steps towards reassessed Black Sea regional cooperation.

For the purposes of this article, qualitative research methods have been used. Among these are: documentation review, focused on policy documents and discussions by scientists and representatives of national, international and EU institutions, case studies, and expert interviews with representatives of regional initiatives, international organisations and regional policy-makers.

## **2. Understanding transnational cooperation**

Transnational cooperation lies on the understanding that the combination of efforts, resources and strengths could lead to the achievement of outcomes, which could not be reached by the independent actions of the nation-states (Manoli, 2010). In line with this perception, Colomb (2007) hints that transnational cooperation “tackles specific strategic spatial development issues at a new scale and in a better way than without cooperation and solves problems which were previously addressed in an inefficient way” (Colomb, 2007, p. 347). Cooperative efforts prove to bring benefits especially for countries which share common resources such as river basins and seas. This is explained by the fact that natural and human disasters know no borders. On the other hand, in the presence of economies of scale, the costs of failed cooperation between countries could be high (Schiff and Winters, 2002). This statement is particularly true for countries which have strong economic interdependencies, small internal markets, peripheral location, etc.

There are different driving forces and incentives for transnational cooperation. These vary from the need for positioning in Europe, for re-finding regional identity in the context of European integration and for increased security, to reasons related to policy priorities of individual countries such as the protection of specific sectors in a globalizing economy and the preservation of the political status quo (Bar-El, Menipaz and Benhayoun, 2000). Analysis often points to economic interests as the main impetus for transnational cooperation; thus, in line with functionalism, cooperation on economy-related issues impacts on other fields such as the educational and legal systems of the individual countries. Keeping with this discussion, Manoli adds that it is the will of nation-states to rescue their sovereignty in a constantly globalizing world, the private interest of industries as well as the ‘internal functional spill-over’ of successful cooperation agreements that are essential stimuli for cooperation (Manoli, 2012). Concerning this issue, Abruzzini argues that it is the spirit of competition that

stimulates cooperation and notes that “prospects for cooperation are not necessarily related to commitments to improve certain aspects of the social and economic situation of an area, but often also arise from the will to compete with other regions or areas” (Abruzzini in Arnaud, 2002, p.18).

Throughout the years, transnational cooperation has evolved in terms of its scope, content, actor constellation and motivation of the participating parties. In the post-World War II times, inter-state cooperation focused mainly on security and trade issues as expressed in the signing of a number of security and international trading agreements. Gradually, new common challenges and joint interests such as economic growth and environmental protection were placed on the transnational agenda (Nordregio, 2010). Increased global interdependence, however, reduced the states’ capacities of self-governance (McGrew, 1997, in Behr and Jokela, 2011) and these often lacked the means to manage the new issues at the national level. As a result, transnational collaboration became a necessity, and the demand for multilateral institutions and new types of regional frameworks grew (Hettne, 1996; Behr and Jokela, 2011). Besides, along with the state actors, non-state public and private actors got actively involved in the cooperation process – at different levels within the framework of numerous institutions, organizations and movements (Hettne, 1996).

Transnational cooperation in the post-Cold War period has become a multi-level and multi-actor process, which varies along issues and over time and is dynamic and open-ended. Insightful information about the nature of this process could be provided by the concept of multi-level governance. Drawing on the theoretical works of multiple authors, Piattoni (2009) studies the main characteristics of this concept and summarizes that it describes “a diverse set of arrangements, a panoply of systems of coordination and negotiation among formally independent but functionally interdependent entities that stand in complex relations to one another and that, through coordination and negotiation, keep redefining these relations” (Piattoni, 2009, p.12). The cited definition clearly addresses the connection of - and moving between different levels - territorial levels (international, national, sub-national, local) having authority over a certain territory, on the one hand, and jurisdictional levels (policy-making, executive, coordinating, etc.), representing a certain function, on the other hand. Moreover, it is indicative of the overcoming of several boundaries. Firstly, the boundary between the centred and the periphery (a movement away from the unitary state towards federal organization). Secondly, the one between the state and the society (a movement away from the clear distinction between the private and the public and the growing “involvement of public groups in authoritative decision-making, policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation” (Ruzza, 2004, in Piattoni, 2009, p.13). And thirdly, the boundary between the domestic and the international (a movement away from the

sovereign state towards more international cooperation and regulation structures) (Piattoni, 2009).

The new scales of intervention and the new combination of responsibility have resulted in the establishment of a variety of cooperation schemes and networks of collaboration between multiple levels and actors. Applied to the level of big transnational regions, this means a network of relations, stretching across horizontal, vertical and sectoral borders, a patchwork of interaction structures (formal and informal regional organizations and institutions, conferences, networks, etc.) and strategies (regional development concepts, marketing, etc.) (Scott, n.d.). In this context, institutional and organizational multiplicity is not an exception.

The process of transnational cooperation is multifaceted and long-term in scope. At the same time, it is challenged to bring short-term visible results through implementation of concrete projects (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010). The projects at transnational level are characterized by interdisciplinarity and the coming together of various stakeholders with different experiences, resources, language and cultural background. They could be initiated by the national level or by sub-national state and non-state actors as a result of perceived common interests (Brekinridge, 1995). In this sense, the need for adjustment of the different stakeholders' behaviour through coordination of their policies comes to the fore (Manoli, 2010). As experience shows, this is an ongoing process. Regional cooperation efforts often face various limitations or drawbacks, which influence their outcomes. These could vary from lack of political support, changing national agendas to allocation of decision making power to a limited range of actors or lack of sufficient financing. In this regard, it should be considered that the cooperative attempts operate in established institutional frameworks and thus reflect the opportunities and limitations presented by these (Scott, n.d.). Seen from another perspective, cooperation could, in some cases, result in spatial polarization and increased disparities at the national and regional level and thus lead to negative social effects (stronger regions will attract more investments, which hides the risk of new regional gaps for instance) (Bar-El et al., 2000).

There are various factors that influence and shape the process of transnational cooperation. Here count both exogenous and endogenous factors (Manoli, 2010), which in different contexts could serve as driving forces, as facilitators or hindrances for cooperation. In this regard, the end of the Cold War, the EU and NATO enlargement, and the globalization, being main exogenous factors, are widely considered as key motors of cooperative activities. The world economic crisis and the sometimes diverging geostrategic interests of global powers, however, which are also exogenous factors, are influencing these activities in a rather negative way and could be thus seen as obstacles for cooperation. The same observation could be made for the endogenous factors as

well. The economic complementarities, for instance, might be a major motive for joint actions between the countries. However, in case of significant differences in the economic development of the involved countries, the joint actions could be of benefit to the stronger one and could lead to increased dependence of the weaker one (Bar-El *et al.*, 2000).

Furthermore, cases exist, in which a factor could be a driving force and at the same time an obstacle for cooperation. An example in this regard comes from the field of security. The existing security concerns could be perceived as a driving force for cooperation; meanwhile, the fear of instability in the political relations could impose serious constraints on cooperation (Bar-El *et al.*, 2000). Taking the above stated into consideration it could be noted that the success of regional cooperation is to a large extent dependent on the prevailing local and regional conditions. These could be favourable for the cooperation process (similar economic and legal structures, sufficient institutional capacities, etc.). Others, however, could impose limits on the potential benefits of cooperation (cultural differences, historical relations and tensions, differences in political and economic regimes, etc.) (Bar-El *et al.*, 2000). The above stated comes to show that, in order to understand the cooperation process in a certain area, it is of particular importance to study in depth the prevailing regional conditions that define the specific context of the area.

### **3. Overview of the Black Sea regional dynamics**

The Black Sea region, strategically situated on the margins between Europe and Asia and at the intersection of different civilizations, cultures and interests, has for centuries witnessed a struggle for dominance by major powers. Providing the main connection between the Danube area and Eastern Europe, the Caspian and the Aegean Seas, it serves as a crossroads of important oil, gas, energy and trade routes. In its current composition, the region, consisting of the littoral states Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine as well as Moldova, proves to be highly diversified and heterogeneous due to the different size and power of its states, their systems of governance (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010) and the discrepancies among them in economic, social and cultural terms (Aydin, 2005). Presently, there are significant differences in the political agendas and development priorities of the Black Sea states. Some of them are facing long-standing structural, political and socio-economic problems and concentrate efforts on dealing with the legacy from their Soviet history and to successfully transform into functioning market economies. Others are challenged by serious security dilemmas or fear for their territorial integrity, the break-away regions in Georgia and Moldova and the Russian annexation of Crimea being only some of the examples. Thirds, such as Bulgaria and Romania are still looking for a balance between their socialist past and their European

present and face the need for a better performance both on the regional and the European scene.

Throughout history, the Black Sea has been a sphere of influence of the regional power Russia, whose policy still has an enormous impact on the domestic and foreign policies of the ex-Soviet states in the region (IRIS, n.d.). Russia's presence in the Black Sea bears also an impact on the other large littoral state, namely Turkey. Looking throughout the range of developments and regional dynamics in the Black Sea area over the last years, however, clear signs of a changing regional context could be identified. Following the end of the Cold War, after being closed from the outer world for decades, the Black Sea region gradually evolved into one of geopolitical significance. Its strategic position, linking the North to South and East to West, the intensified interests of outsiders and the diverse relations with the rest of the world provided for placing the region on the international policy agenda (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010). It was especially after the NATO enlargement in 2004 and the EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 that the Black Sea witnessed growing external interest and involvement. On the one hand, this could be explained by the geo-strategic importance of the Black Sea as a crossroads of important oil, gas, transport and trade routes, which has turned the region into a key area of competition between the major powers: Russia, the US and the EU (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010). On the other hand, the instability and the insecurity problems in the region (energy security issues, domestic and inter-state conflicts, non-recognized entities and weak state systems as well as organized crime) played a major role in attracting external attention to the region, which is now a direct neighbour of the EU (Balcer, 2011). As a result, today, along with the persisting historical rivalries and sense of fragmentation, the area faces the co-existence of different interests, policies and patterns of interaction. This has proved especially true after the recent developments in Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula, which have shown in an ambiguous way the complexity of the regional context in the Black Sea area and the prevalence of national interests over regional ones.

Despite the Black Sea complex environment, however, the Black Sea recent past has witnessed various efforts and attempts by the regional states to jointly handle common problems. An increasing interest in regional cooperation initiatives as well as willingness to work together became particularly evident after the end of the Cold War (Aydin, 2005), when new sovereign states emerged and the economic and political conditions in the area drastically changed. The significant challenges and opportunities faced by the Black Sea states in key sectors such as environment, transport, energy and security (EC, 2007) required coordinated actions at the regional level and resulted in the establishment of various cooperation schemes and initiatives. Nowadays, the Black Sea regional cooperation finds its expression in a number of locally conceived organizations,

intergovernmental agreements, multilateral, often sectoral projects and programmes (Manoli, 2010), NGO networks and associations.

Studying the Black Sea regional cooperation process, scholars have identified different incentives for the participation of the Black Sea states in cooperation activities as well as differences in their motivation for involvement in regional schemes and projects. As per Manoli, in the early nineties, most of the Black Sea states have referred to regional cooperation in the area in an attempt to revive their own identity after long years of imposed Soviet identity (Manoli, 2010). The newly independent states needed partners and geopolitical space to develop, and therefore reacted positively to the first regional cooperation initiatives (IRIS, n.d.). According to Manoli, the regional initiatives were seen by the former Soviet states as a means to enhance their international standing and the newly acquired statehood and by the main powers in the region as a new opportunity to assert regional leadership and to maintain their influence (Manoli, 2012). Furthermore, the engagement in regional cooperation schemes has been seen as a means of avoiding economic fragmentation and political conflicts (Manoli, 2010). In this perspective, Bakos recognizes two main motives for the foundation of new regional organizations in the Black Sea - the attempt of the countries to stabilize their sovereignty and security after the collapse of the Soviet Union on the one hand, and the intention of the states to create a common market after the collapse of the Soviet market (and the not fully open EU market) on the other hand (Bakos, 1993, in Canli, 2006). Thus, the participation in regional cooperation schemes was considered by these countries as a way to overcome the economic and security vacuum in the region in the early 1990s and to integrate into a broader economic and political system (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010).

A noticeable change in the motivation of the Black Sea states to participate in the process of regional cooperation became obvious in the early 2000s, when the focus of the cooperation process moved from the search for international recognition to the emphasis on concrete sectoral issues. This change could be explained by two main reasons – the NATO and EU enlargement on the one hand, and the growing regional impact of global issues such as climate change and organized crime, on the other. It was at this point that the Black Sea regional cooperation enjoyed increasing attention from and the active involvement of the EU and US (Manoli, 2010). These have launched their own policies and initiatives for the region.

The EU has mainly targeted the Black Sea region within its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Officially launched in 2004, the ENP aimed at the improvement of cross-border cooperation with countries along the EU's external land and maritime borders in order to avoid new dividing lines and to strengthen the prosperity, stability and security of all (EC (a) 2012). The ENP was based on bilateral agreements between the EU and each of the states and did not target the



Black Sea region as a whole, but included initially only Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus (Eralp and Üstün, 2009) and was later on extended to cover also the South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Rusu, 2011). Since Russia refused to be covered by the Neighbourhood Policy, the EU adopted a Strategic Partnership with it, which was based on cooperation within four common spaces - economy; freedom, security and justice; external security; research and education. Turkey, on its turn, has been a subject of the EU Pre-Accession Policy, though the prospects for its admission in the Union are currently rather vague.

Since 2007, the EU has emphasized the necessity of a more synergetic approach for promotion of regional cooperation in the Black Sea area (Manoli, 2010) and has launched two new regional initiatives – the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership. The Black Sea Synergy was launched in 2008 as a part of the EU Neighbourhood Policy and aims at reinvigorating the cooperation between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Ukraine and Turkey and between these states and the EU. The Synergy is based on the idea of sectoral partnership – the main sectors with one EU member state responsible for each one: transport (Greece), environment (Romania) and energy (Bulgaria) and on a project oriented approach. The Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009 as a EU foreign policy instrument, targets the post-Soviet republics: Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and aims to bring them closer to the EU through intense bilateral cooperation. It focuses on a smaller number of priorities and promotes differentiation as its main notion, which is to provide enhanced efficiency (Rusu, 2011; Manoli, 2010; Eralp and Üstün, 2009; Tsantoulis, 2009; Commission of the European Communities, 2007; EC, 2012).

Both the EU and the United States have applied different means to “strategically position themselves in the area, to expand their influence and secure economic and political dominance” (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010, p.23). As a result, the current regional cooperation context in the Black Sea area is defined by the interaction of regional and external actors, the interplay of their interests, the ideological changes and the changes in the political agenda, which took place in the last two decades and by external factors such as the recent financial crisis and its various economic, social and spatial impacts. In the following section a closer look will be cast on the process and main features of the Black Sea regional cooperation, which will allow us to draw recommendations for its potential future development.

#### **4. Main fields and challenges for the Black Sea regional cooperation**

Tracing the history of Black Sea cooperation, we find out that the main impetus for cooperation in the area is the economic one. The entrepreneurial activities and the economic relations between the states in the region were for years affected by the fact that the majority of the states (Ukraine, Moldova and

Georgia) were in the Soviet Union while Bulgaria and Romania were Soviet satellites. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the change of the geopolitical circumstances in the region, it became clear that the Black Sea economies, most of them new in the global economy, with small domestic markets and international dependencies, need to position themselves as parts of a larger regional market (Manoli, 2010). It was at this time that the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which included all Black Sea states<sup>1</sup>, was established as a Turkish initiative. The BSEC defined the Black Sea as a political entity (Manoli, 2012) and promoted trade related issues as the main field of cooperation in the area. Apart from their participation in the BSEC, the Black Sea states have been involved in a variety of other organisations and cooperation formats, such as

- the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), established as an international organization in 1991 by the former Soviet states,
- the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development GUAM, established as an international organization between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 2001 and
- the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) from 2006.

All these activities and initiatives clearly show that there is an existing widespread understanding of the importance of economic cooperation in the area (Gavras, 2010) and an established network of various bilateral and multilateral agreements. These, however, often have overlapping agendas and questionable contribution to the process of economic cooperation in the area. In this regard, it could be argued that there are important economic links, import and export relations and economic cooperation initiatives between the Black Sea states, which need a more efficient coordination for the achievement of the desired results. Yet, it should be noted that the existence of individual free trade agreements between the EU and Turkey and the EU and Russia as well as the strong national interests of both countries may significantly challenge the process of economic cooperation in the area. In this regard, it should be pointed out that the current situation in Ukraine and the still unclear relations between Russia and the EU will lead to changes in the economic relationships in the region and may well affect the small and weak Black Sea economies, which largely depend on the regional trade exchange with Russia. This could turn into an important obstacle for the Black Sea cooperation. Moreover, other factors such as complicated visa regimes, closed borders and trade embargoes and weak state institutions seriously hamper the cooperation activities in the area.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the BSEC's definition of the Black Sea region, the region consists of Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine (BSEC, 2014).

Unlike economic cooperation, where much depends on national priorities and state policies, other fields such as the environmental one, have witnessed quite positive development and successful cooperation activities. The need to protect the Black Sea from pollution and the common challenges posed by environmental deterioration became obvious already in the Cold War period. This turned especially relevant in the second half of the twentieth century, when the rapid growth of agriculture and urban centres in the area, the use of new energy technologies and the increase in ship trafficking caused a serious environmental change and started transforming the sea itself (King, 2008). Regional action in the environmental field proved to be much more consequent in comparison to the ones in the economic sector and took expression in the signing of several multilateral agreements – the Varna Fisheries Agreement from 1959 between USSR, Bulgaria and Romania, the MARPOL Convention from 1973, the Black Sea convention from 1992 and the Odessa Declaration from 1993. The Odessa Declaration set environmental goals and defined concrete timeframes and investments, needed for achievement of the goals. It was the first document based on consensus, promoted a new approach to environmental policy-making with greater public participation and endorsed the precautionary principle. Along with the multilateral agreements, a number of regional formats have been established in the area such as the Commission for the Protection of the Black Sea, the Black Sea NGO network and other environmental non-governmental organisations (Mee, 2002). The several NGOs, which are presently active in the region, show the engagement of the civil society in dealing with environmental issues and could serve as a good example of successful regional cooperation.

Cooperation efforts of the Black Sea countries in the environmental field were largely facilitated by a number of initiatives and programmes, launched by the EU: the Danube and Black Sea Task Force (DABLAS), established in 2002 to “provide a platform for cooperation of water and water related ecosystems of the Wider Black Sea region” and International Conference on the Sustainable Development of the Mediterranean and Black Sea Environment (IASON), launched in 2003, to set up “a transnational and multidisciplinary cooperation network” for protection of both seas (Aydin, 2004, p.14).

The various regional and EU initiatives for dealing with environmental problems in the Black Sea Basin represent to a large extent forms of cooperation and platforms for dialogue in the region. In this regard, it could be argued that these platforms in a way prepared the regional actors to work together also in other fields of common interest and concern. Moreover, through the years, the scope of cooperation widened towards other areas showing clearly the existing interdependence of the Black Sea Basin with other regions such as the Danube region. While this understanding has already found its place in the newest documents concerning the Black Sea environment, in practice, most of the

efforts continue to concentrate mainly on the Black Sea itself. Taking into consideration the great influence which the pollution of the Sea could have on other spheres such as the economy for instance, it is important to place the environmental protection among the most urgent issues for the region.

Besides the economic and environmental incentives, which existed already in the Soviet times, other areas of cooperation came to the spotlight just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as the security and the security of energy supply, for instance. The dismissal of the Soviet Union in the early nineties turned the stability in post-Cold War Europe and in the Black Sea area, in particular, into a hot topic on the political agendas. During the Cold War, the Black Sea was functioning as a buffer between the Western and the Soviet Blocks (Bocutoğlu and Koçer, n.d.). The political and military presence of the superpowers provided stability in the area (Aydin, 2005). The situation changed drastically in the post-Cold War years, when the region, except for the NATO Black Sea states, lacked a security umbrella. The dismissal of the Soviet Union liberated ancient sources of tension (Aydin, 2005) and the Black Sea area faced a rising number of separatist movements and ‘frozen conflicts’ - Chechnya in Russia, Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia in Georgia, Trans-Dniester in the Republic of Moldova, and Crimea in Ukraine. In addition, it had to deal with problems with illegal trafficking of weapons and drugs and to secure the energy supply. All this turned the Black Sea region into a scene of instability and was considered by the EU and NATO as a facilitator for terrorist activities and a threat to their own interests (Bocutoğlu and Koçer, n.d.)

The concerns about securing peace and stability in the Black Sea area forged both regional countries and global forces (US, EU, NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) to interplay in the region in order to stabilize it. The different actors, however, while officially following the same aim, had diverse approaches to security and often supported competing security agendas. The EU, for example, tried to promote democracy and the rule of law serving mainly as a conflict mediator. The US on its turn directly supported new programmes in many of the countries in the region (through the German Marshall Fund of the United States<sup>2</sup> for instance) focusing on the promotion of democracy and market economy and prioritizing energy issues and free trade expansion. In the post-Cold War years, NATO’s involvement in the

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<sup>2</sup> The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) supports institutions and individuals working on transatlantic policy issues and awards grants through grantmaking programmes. One of these programmes is the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, which promotes regional cooperation and good governance in the Wider Black Sea region. It provides grants to local and national NGOs, to governmental entities, community groups and policy institutes to implement projects in the three priority areas of the programme: Civic Participation, Cross-border Initiatives and Eastern Links. (GMF, 2014).

Black Sea region aimed at tackling many of Europe's major concerns such as drug, arms, and human trafficking, illegal immigration, terrorism, and possible nuclear proliferation and at supporting the regional states in solving the existing 'frozen conflicts'. Expanding eastwards, NATO intended to get closer to the wider Middle East and to more effectively address threats and problems there. NATO's efforts to expand to the Black Sea region resulted in acceptance of Bulgaria and Romania in 2004. The discussions for the possible membership of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are still open and hide risks of counter reactions from Russia. The annexation of Crimea and the military troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border have sharpened NATO's relations with Russia, have marked the beginning of a prolonged and difficult period for the Black Sea states and have called for re-thinking NATO's defence policy.

The involvement of external actors and the different approaches of the regional ones to security issues caused serious concerns for the regional powers, Russia and Turkey, and led to tension in the region (Celikpala, 2010). A recent example in this respect is the Russian-Georgian War from 2008 which demonstrated that "the initiatives designed to pacify the region had not produced a security system capable of preventing or containing internal and interstate conflicts" (Celikpala, 2010, p.7). As a result, today we still observe a low level of trust between the regional states when it comes to security matters. Their relations are predominantly determined by national interests, policies and competition which let us conclude that a cooperative security environment in the Black Sea is currently still missing.

Contrary to the field of security cooperation, the Black Sea states have shown mutual trust, increasing engagement and understanding for the common challenges in the field of maritime safety, which has resulted in a consistency of collaborative actions in the field. Turkey proved to be among the main initiators of collaborative actions and thus established its position as a regional leader in the field. It comes as no surprise that exactly Turkey plays a central role in the maritime security in the Black Sea considering the country's strategic location and control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which provide the only connection between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. It was already in 1936, with the signing of the Montreux Convention, when Turkey was given the right to remilitarize the straits, to take control over them and to impose limitation on the entrance of war ships in the Black Sea (Global Security, 2014). The Convention was ratified also by the USSR, which at that time, possessed a strong Black Sea navy fleet and controlled the whole northern, north-western and north-eastern Black Sea coast. Both Turkey and Russia have seen and still perceive the maritime safety in the Black Sea as a task of the littoral states.

Sharing the understanding that only the littoral states should be responsible for the maritime security and aiming at strengthening its position in the region, Turkey initiated the establishment of a multinational navy force for

the Black Sea in 2001 - Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR). The agreement for establishment of the navy force was signed by all six littoral states (Aydin, 2005). In 2004, the BLACKSEAFOR member states decided to establish a permanent operation control centre and to prepare a multilateral memorandum of understanding for information exchanges among them. The same year, Turkey launched the Black Sea Harmony Operation (BSHO), which was to prevent, deter and disrupt terrorist threats, terrorist supporting activities and traffic of weapons for mass destruction (Custura and Danila, 2009). In 2005, a “Maritime Risk Assessment in the Black Sea” document was adopted in response to the increased threats of terrorism. Up to date, the national navies of the member states often work together carrying out unscheduled activations for trailing suspicious ships and helping the fight against terrorism and illegal trafficking of weapons (Rumer and Simon, 2006).

Due to the strategic location of the Black Sea on the way of important energy and transport routes between Europe, Caucasus, Middle East and Asia, the energy and transport sectors have gained increasing significance for the Black Sea states as well. This applies especially to Russia and Turkey which, because of their huge size and resources, have kept leading positions in the area for years and have initiated important regional projects such as the Blue Stream pipeline project and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. In the meantime, two further projects – the Nabucco gas pipeline that should transfer gas through the territory of Turkey and the Balkans to Austria and the Russian South Stream project aimed to cut through Bulgaria, Greece and Italy (Minchev, n.d.) – are presently under discussion.

Not surprisingly, the energy field proves to be of great interest also for external actors. In this regard, in addition to the regionally initiated projects, a multilateral programme - the Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) programme - was designed by the EU and other international organizations to cover the energy sector in the wider Black Sea region (Manoli, 2010). This was launched in 1995 to provide technical assistance and financial support for the hydrocarbon infrastructure in the area (Aydin, 2005). A similar multilateral sector-based infrastructure programme was designed for the transport sector as well - the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA). This was launched in 1993 with the aim to link the eight post-Soviet countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus with Europe by means of different transport routes across and around the Black Sea region. Moreover, in 1997, the Black Sea was defined as one of the four Pan-European Transport Areas – Black Sea Pan-European Transport Area (Aydin, 2005).

Both programmes TRACECA and INOGATE as well as the DABLAS programme for the water sector have served as main tools for the implementation of EU projects in the Black Sea and have shown good results in improving the state of the technical infrastructure in the region. In addition, the

allocation of resources within the programmes has attracted the involvement of both public and private regional stakeholders in projects of mutual interest. In this regard, although technical in nature, “these programmes have played a significant role in fostering tailor-made multilateral cooperation” (Manoli, 2010, p.11) in the Black Sea area and have thus fostered a type of sectoral multilateralism (Manoli, 2012). It could be, however, argued that the programmes were partly undermining the relevance of some regional formats such as the BSEC sectoral Working Groups on environment and transport (Manoli, 2010). A concrete example in this respect is the planning of a Black Sea Ring Highway, independently both by the BSEC and the EU. In this regard, it should be noted that a harmonization between the projects and initiatives of the BSEC and the EU could contribute to avoiding the overlapping of efforts and achieving better results. A significant advance in this direction was made in 2007, when the European Commission became an official observer in the BSEC (BSEC, 2014).

As illustrated in the above overview of collaborative activities in the Black Sea region, there is already a high level of multifunctionality in the area. The fact that, throughout the last twenty years, the cooperation between the Black Sea states has significantly increased in scope and in degree shows in an ambiguous way that there is mutual understanding on the need for joint actions in dealing with common problems. Yet, while the cooperation in some sectors such as environment and maritime safety enjoys the support and equal participation of all states, the cooperation in others, the fields of energy and security, for instance, is much dominated by the regional players Russia and Turkey and by their national policies and interests. Considering the Black Sea as an own sphere of influence, Russia and Turkey have often preferred bilateral to multilateral arrangements due to historical and political reasons. In this regard, the lack of trust between the states and the difficulties in the achievement of consensus to issues of regional importance have proved to be the main challenges for the further development of the Black Sea cooperation process. It could be expected that the cooperation activities in the region will be largely affected by the current Ukrainian crisis. The political instability in the country, the ongoing conflicts in its eastern parts, the fear for ethnic conflicts, and Russia’s still unclear further steps might significantly weaken the trust between the Black Sea states.

In addition, contrary to the Baltic Sea region, where the cooperation process is widely characterized by the active involvement of the sub-national level, the Black Sea cooperation runs mainly at the national level, which is shown in the big number of intergovernmental agreements and initiatives in the Black Sea and the obvious lack of cooperation formats and unions between the local cities, municipalities or regions. This fact could be explained by the high level of centralization of many of the Black Sea states, their lack of traditions in

regional development and the insufficient administrative power and resources of the sub-national level. The sub-national level is particularly challenged when it comes to the definition of cooperation priorities and the implementation of regional cooperation projects - a fact that emphasizes the need for building institutional and human capacity as a main factor for better cooperation performance in the area. Due to the different administrative structures and levels of decentralization in the Black Sea states, the process of capacity building is expected to take place at different speed and with different rates of success.

Along with the sufficient institutional and human capacity, it is the engagement of the private sector and the civil society which influence the success of the cooperation process. As Manoli has argued, cooperation might be initiated at a high political level, but its implementation requires the active participation of the private sector and the civil society as its main vehicles (Manoli, 2010). In the Black Sea region, however, this participation has proved to be shallow, and serious efforts need to be done to utilize more effectively the capacity of the civil society in partnership initiatives. Up to date, the understanding of the fact that the expansion of the actors' participation could fasten project implementation and could facilitate more informed regional policy and promote the idea that "regional cooperation has a direct impact on everyday life and individual citizens' welfare" (Manoli, 2010, p.25) is still missing.

Last but not least, it should be noted that the Black Sea region is still fraught with "frozen conflicts", separatist movements and interstate and inter-ethnic disputes. The existing historical rivalries among the regional countries, the competition for regional leadership between Russia and Turkey and the continuing process of transformation of the new independent states in the region are all important challenges for the Black Sea cooperation process. In addition, the Black Sea is a border to the Middle East, an area related to dangers such as terrorism and extremism. It currently faces high levels of organized crime, illegal trafficking of all kinds and illegal immigration and has deserved the image of an unstable region. The instability in the Black Sea is a major threat and challenge for the development of the region and for the prospects of its regional cooperation.

## **5. Prospects and recommendations for regional cooperation**

The Black Sea cooperation process is embedded and operates in a complex regional context and its evolution is marked by ongoing political and economic changes. Currently, twenty years after the first regional organizations and cooperative initiatives were launched in the area the Black Sea states follow a multi-faceted cooperation track. Seen against the background of the variety of existing common challenges and pressing problems of regional character, the performance of the Black Sea regional cooperation shows rather limited outcomes. Based on this observation, the need for rethinking the cooperation



process is coming to the front, directed to fostering regional cooperation as a means for enhancement of the Black Sea region's stability, sustainability and welfare.

Considering the current cooperation landscape and the existing heterogeneity in the area, it could be assumed that a regionally tailored coordinated sectoral approach would add a real value to the further development of the Black Sea regional cooperation and the region as a whole. The approach should recognize the need for the achievement of balance between broader political commitment and guidance by the member states. It should be led by all Black Sea states and should not be delegated only to the Black Sea EU members, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, as in the case of the sectoral partnerships proposed within the Black Sea Synergy. The involvement of Russia and Turkey as main regional powers should be guaranteed. The participation of both states in the existing regional formats and in the BSEC could be a facilitating factor for improving their commitment to regional cooperation. Yet, it should be considered that the current Russian policy towards its neighbour, Ukraine, and the instability this could cause in the region in the long-term may turn into a serious obstacle for future cooperation efforts and may redirect the dialogue within some of the sectors of regional interest such as the energy and the economic ones. However, the turbulent times the region experiences now could also be seen as a chance for reassessment of the sectors of truly regional character and real regional interest for the Black Sea states.

A well-targeted approach focused on development of sectors of truly regional character holds various potential. The concentration on specific sectors could generate political support, could facilitate the participation of the states in international efforts and could contribute to the reaching of more appropriately tailored agreements between them. In addition, it could enhance commitment in regional cooperation due to its potential to foster achievement of consensus on concrete projects and the generation of visible results as a consequence of their implementation. Yet, sectoral cooperation faces several challenges as well. It could entail complexity, could face difficulties in streamlining financial resources and hides the risk of potential lack of coordination between the individual sectors.

The analysis of the Black Sea regional and socioeconomic context, the regional dynamics, challenges and needs, the available strategic papers targeting the area (Vision for the Black Sea, Black Sea Synergy), the cooperation agendas of the interested stakeholders and the existing regional potential helps us identify four main sectors of regional interest namely, environmental protection, transport and energy corridors, economic development and trade, security dialogue. From the authors' point of view, these sectors should be in the focus of the policies targeting the Black Sea and the cooperation within them should be reassessed. In fact, all of the proposed sectors are already part of the cooperation

agenda of both the EU and the BSEC. It is believed that improved coordination between and within the sectors could facilitate the achievement of results. The BSEC, as a main regional organisation, could serve as an umbrella for coordination, providing a framework for cooperation between the regional organisations and facilitating thus the creation of sectoral cooperation networks.

The proposed sector-specific cooperation approach is based on the understanding that, along with the focus on sectors that offer joint incentives and bring benefits to all parties involved, different levels of interaction (cross-border, intergovernmental, etc.) should be considered. In this regard, the multi-levelness is believed to be a key milestone of the Black Sea cooperation. By the same token, it should be added that the involvement of and the balance between regional and external actors will vary for the different levels and within the individual sectors. In this line, the conviction is shared that sectors, such as security, for instance, will need intensified external assistance, while others will be predominantly managed by the regional stakeholders. Logically, differences between the pillars regarding speed and efficacy of cooperation could be expected.

Furthermore, the individual sectors will have variable geometries - different geographical coverage in accordance to the existing geographical interdependences and functional interrelations. As pointed out by Tassinari, “variable geometries are crucial to make cooperation effective and to tailor activities to the most suitable geographical scope” (Tassinari, 2006, p.11). Applied to the Black Sea regional context means that the geographical coverage of the different sectoral initiatives will be defined on the basis of functional needs and relations. It will include the Black Sea littoral states as a group of core states as well as a number of neighbour countries, which will act as strategic partners and will be integrated in the cooperation process when appropriate.

Based on the concept of variable geometries, the environmental cooperation area in the Black Sea will be defined according to the catchment areas of the Black Sea main tributaries, in particular of the Danube river. Due to a number of industrial sites, located near its banks, the Danube is a main source of land-based pollution for the Black Sea and has thus a significant impact on the Sea’s ecosystem. Furthermore, many of the environmental challenges (coast erosion, etc.) faced by the Black Sea and the Danube are similar. The existing interdependencies and the need to tackle common problems call for a closer dialogue and cooperation between the Black Sea and the Danube region. Such cooperation is also necessary when it comes to transport issues. The Danube river is a main water way and connection between the Black Sea and Central and Western Europe and its development hides enormous potentials for the whole region and its integration with Europe. When talking about the transport sector, however, it needs to be considered that its cooperation area should be expanded further to Greece so as to provide a partial connection with the Mediterranean as

well as eastwards, to the Caucasus, to guarantee the integration of the Black Sea region's East and West coasts. The states from the Caucasus region (Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc.), in their position as transit or importing states of gas, oil and energy resources from the Caspian and Central Asia to Europe, should also be involved in the cooperation within the energy sector. The geographical coverage of this sector should therefore take account of the geopolitical significance of the Black Sea as an East-West and North-South energy corridor and should consider the existing national policies and interest of the core states as well as of their Eastern neighbours. In contrast, the definition of the cooperation area of the economic sector should be predominantly oriented westwards reflecting the existing economic and trade relation of the Black Sea states and their increasing interaction with the Central and Southeastern European economies. Last but not least, the Black Sea cooperation in the security sector should provide for stability on the whole Black Sea shore and beyond it, indicating thus the existence of two different levels of cooperation - cooperation on maritime safety including only the littoral states, and cooperation for resolution of 'frozen conflicts', for fighting illegal trafficking of weapons, drugs, etc. covering a broader geographical scope (a wider Black Sea region) including the former Soviet countries, Caucasus and Central Asian states.

After having identified the main pillars of Black Sea cooperation and having discussed on the necessity to apply various geometries, to consider different levels of interaction and to involve external actors in accordance with the issues concerned, we arrive at the point to see which prospects for development of these main pillars of cooperation could be identified. Based on the understanding that the Black Sea cooperation still suffers from insufficient trust between the regional stakeholders and lacks in adequate political support and commitment, the proposal is made that incentives for joint actions of common interest should be found and concrete flagship projects on issues of regional character should be identified. These projects are believed to produce early visible results and to be main facilitators for fostering commitment and building up trust and networks between the stakeholders. Taking into consideration the main challenges faced by the Black Sea region, the following paragraphs intend to present an overview of possible flagship projects, which could serve as a starting point for cooperation within each of the four individual pillars.

As the studies on the Black Sea cooperation's evolution and state have shown, there are many pressing problems in the environmental field, such as natural and human disasters, which require joint efforts at the regional level. Presently, the environmental is one of the fields of Black Sea cooperation which enjoys a high level of commitment. It could thus serve as an excellent platform for the promotion of concrete projects of mutual interest, which could enhance confidence among the involved parties. Here count, for instance, the projects on

environmental risk assessment and monitoring, including the development of an early warning system about potential environmental hazards and accidents with trans-boundary impact. Also, projects for cooperation between port cities on issues such as wastewater and pollution management, fisheries and biodiversity preservation.

A good framework for future cooperation in the environmental field has been set by the European Strategy for the Danube region. Currently, the four Black Sea states, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Moldova are participating in this strategy and have agreed on common priorities and flagship projects within it. Considering the important functional interdependencies between the two water basins, there are several possibilities for extension of some of the Danube river projects to cover the Black Sea as well. Examples of such projects are the modernization of the water monitoring system to maintain the quality of waters (Danube River Strategy, 2012) as well as the potential project for the establishment of a Danube - Danube Delta - Black Sea International Centre for Advanced Studies, which is to perform integrated research and projects on management of wetlands (Ionescu, n.d.). In addition, projects for the promotion of integrated coastal zone management as a step towards the achievement of sustainability of the coastal zones could be initiated. Cooperative actions around new issues, such as climate change adaptation, should be supported and lessons from the more experienced Baltic Sea region should be learned. In this regard, the involvement of Black Sea countries in international environmental discussions should be promoted.

Besides the environmental sector, the transport one also provides excellent possibilities for the initiation of concrete projects between the Black Sea states. Among these could be the promotion of the water transport through projects directed to the development of ferry links between the Black Sea ports, to the improvement of the interconnection of the Black Sea with the Danube, the Dnieper and the Dniester rivers and their ports, as well as with the Mediterranean Sea through the Bosphorus strait. In this regard, the need for greater inter- and multimodality comes to the front. It is for this reason that the Black Sea ports and their related infrastructure should be modernized and connected with the rail and road transport and with existing transport nodes. In particular, the connection with the TENs corridors, running through Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine should be improved, which will provide better connectivity of the region with the adjacent networks and will be a step towards its further territorial integration in Europe. It is important to note that the coordination of the activities in the transport sector requires cooperation with relevant international organizations in the field. In addition, expertise on transport issues is needed, which could be targeted through the initiation of training programs of various kinds.

Contrary to the environmental and transport sectors, where tangible results are expected to be achieved in the short-term, the energy one is much more dependent on national interests and policies and the cooperation within it is more likely to bring results in the medium and long term. It is for this reason that the future focus of Black Sea cooperation in the energy field should not be limited to the development of traditional oil, gas and energy projects. It should rather be extended to cover a wider range of issues such as the use of alternative and renewable sources as well as of advanced technologies towards a clean environment. In this respect, projects promoting energy efficiency, extended use of wind power and solar energy and the creation of a network for the exchange of experience, best practices and know-how could be jointly initiated by partners from the Black Sea. Of essential importance in this context is the exchange of experience with the Baltic Sea region, which is more advanced in this field.

When it comes to cooperation activities in the field of economic development and trade, it should be reminded that there currently are a number of factors (closed borders, visa regimes, different economic systems of the countries, etc.) which significantly hamper this cooperation and limits its outcomes. However, the ongoing harmonization of the economic and legal systems of the Black Sea states for their possible admission in the EU may have a positive effect on the regional economic cooperation. The cooperation and the relations between the Black Sea states could be additionally improved by the initiation of projects of regional importance. For instance, the setting up of a mechanism for the exchange of data on the regional trade and investment possibilities or the promotion of e-governance and services in order to improve the efficiency of the public services across the region. Also, a focus needs to be set on the development of cross-border infrastructure, the development of the strengths of the cultural and tourism industries, the promotion of innovation, new ideas and products and the transfer of knowledge in the region. Of particular success might be joint educational and training programmes as well as qualification projects of various kinds.

Last but not least, joint projects are needed in the security sector as well. Here counts, for example, the improvement of the information flow between the EU member and non-member Black Sea states as well as between their border services or the establishment of a regional centre for combating trans-border organized crime. Furthermore, projects could be initiated in the field of maritime and public safety in its different expressions such as the modernization of the centres for coordination of search and rescue activities at sea or the improvement of disaster and crisis management. The current instability in the region calls for intensified cooperation between the regional states and the international security structures. There is a clear need for a new policy that could prevent tensions in conflict zones in the area from turning into arm conflicts. A regional balance could not be achieved without the involvement of all Black Sea states and the

preparation of a security policy covering and directed towards all of them. Keeping in mind the current Russian military presence in Ukraine and the Russian-Georgian war from the late 2000s, it could be assumed that new international preventive mechanisms will be needed. The active involvement of OSCE, also with its role as a coordinating body of cooperation efforts related to military actions, should be promoted.

Discussing on the possibilities for development of cooperation projects in the Black Sea, it is important to note that a situation occurs in which various, sometimes diverging, environmental, economic, social, etc. interests for use of the maritime and coastal space coexist and compete. Therefore, a balance between these and the establishment of a more strategic cooperation in the Basin is needed. In this regard, the development of a Maritime Spatial Planning System could provide a good solution. Such a system could serve as a tool for integrated sea use management and improved decision-making, coordination and distribution of human activities. It could facilitate the achievement of balance between the existing different sectoral interests - ports development, fisheries, transport, off-shore wind parks, etc. Thus, it could contribute to the more reasonable use of the marine areas, which will be of benefit to the economic development and the environment as well (CEC, 2009). Based on the example of the Helsinki Commission HELCOM<sup>3</sup>, such a system could be initiated by the Black Sea Commission, which presently focuses on the protection of the marine environment of the Sea. Considering the fact that the maritime spatial planning is a responsibility of the individual countries, the Black Sea Commission could adopt a roadmap for maritime spatial planning and could promote the active involvement of the national, regional, local and cross-border levels in the implementation of its principles. This roadmap should be developed in a joint cross-sectoral dialogue and coordination between the littoral states, with the involvement of relevant regional organizations and stakeholders, and under consideration of international legislation and agreements.

For the reassessment of the Black Sea cooperation process in the proposed four main sectors, further thought should be given to some institutional issues as well. It should be taken into account that the variable geometries and the involvement of partners from outside the region hide the risk of organizational proliferation, overlapping agendas, occurring gaps and weak inter-sectoral coordination. Based on the understanding that complex problems of regional character require complex institutional solutions, it is believed that the

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<sup>3</sup> The Helsinki Commission works towards improvement of the Baltic maritime environment through intergovernmental cooperation between the Baltic Sea states. It is a governing body of the “Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area”, an environmental policy-maker and developer of recommendations and a supervisory body. One of the Commission’s main groups, co-chaired by VASAB, is the group on Maritime Spatial Planning (HELCOM, 2014).

multiplicity of cooperative activities is a more promising alternative than centralization. Drawing on this perspective, it could be argued that the organizational and institutional multiplicity in the Black Sea could be of benefit for the cooperation process. However, an interplay and interaction between the regional institutions should be promoted so that they reinforce each other and create together a functional system. In order to do this, a rationalization of their activities and better coordination between them is needed.

Further progress to more coordinated regional cooperation could be brought by the establishment of a new coordinating structure, which could facilitate the interaction between regional and external stakeholders and provide for exchange of information. In this regard, a possible suggestion could be the creation of a new Black Sea Forum, open to all interested parties from within and outside the region. The Black Sea Forum could fulfil consultative tasks, could launch dialogue between regional organizations, the governments, the business and the academia and could contribute to attracting political attention at the regional level. In this way, it would enhance confidence building and would foster synergies. Working in close cooperation with other organizations from the Black Sea region and with relevant international institutions, the Forum will raise awareness on Black Sea issues within the international community in a mid-term perspective.

## **6. Conclusions**

The developments and changes which have taken place on the European and global scene in the last two decades, such as the end of the Cold War and the EU enlargement have resulted in structural transformations, increased functional interdependencies between places, in growing concerns about economic competitiveness and new security, environmental and social challenges. As a consequence, many partners with different power, abilities and environment - national, sub-national and local authorities, transnational organizations, sector-based regional institutions, etc. - have faced the need to jointly tackle common problems of transnational character, which has led to a surge in the process of cooperation along the continent.

Trying to respond to the new challenging circumstances and to better deal with common environmental, economic and security problems, the Black Sea states have started shaping a regional cooperation agenda and politics, initiating a number of cooperation activities and thus setting the basis of the Black Sea regional cooperation process. The evolution of the Black Sea cooperation reflects the existing difficult security and socio-economic circumstances in the area and is largely limited by the persisting historical rivalries, a number of security threats and 'frozen conflicts', the ongoing sense of fragmentation in the region and the political realities. Currently, the regional dimension is weakly represented in the national policies, the regional approach is often

underestimated in the policy-making process and the regional issues are not stressed in the bilateral relations between the Black Sea states. A change in this direction is inevitably related to a change in the mindset of regional policy-makers, which is a time consuming process, related to the generation of trust and political commitment among leaders.

The evaluation of the current state and dynamics of the Black Sea regional cooperation and the search for potentials for its improvement has led the authors to the identification of sectors of regional interest and to proposals for their further development. The paper argues in favour of a regionally tailored coordinated sectoral approach based on the idea of variable geometries, multi-levelness and interplay between regional and external actors. A strong emphasis is placed on the need for identification of flagship projects on issues of regional character, which are seen as a means of producing visible results, fostering commitment and building up trust and networks between the stakeholders. These could help the actors in the Black Sea to gather experience in cooperation and gradually break the old habits of competition. In this regard, it could also be expected that the involvement of the four Black Sea states, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Moldova, in the recently elaborated EU Strategy for the Danube region would prepare these to better cooperate in large-scale areas and gather experience that they could use in the Black Sea cooperation process.

In addition, the reassessment of the Black Sea cooperation should be seen in line with the need for rethinking the present institutional fabric in the region. The existing organisational and institutional multiplicity in the area creates the impression of lack of coherence between the regional cooperation formats and overlapping of agendas, but could also be seen as a benefit for the cooperation process. However, an interplay and interaction between the regional institutions should be promoted so that they reinforce each other and create together a functional system. In order to do this, a rationalization of their activities and better coordination between them is needed.

Presently, the Black Sea cooperation predominantly runs at the national level with a rather limited involvement of the sub-national level, the public sector and the civil society and it could be characterized as a top-down process rather than being deeply rooted in the civil society. In this regard, the need for a study on the existing and potential functional relations in the region – between municipalities, metropolitan and cross-border areas – as well as on the potential for active involvement of further stakeholders in the cooperation process comes to the front. An intensified dialogue between local, sub-national and national stakeholders on the benefits, challenges and perspectives for Black Sea cooperation is thus seen as an effective source of insightful information for the future course of the Black Sea region and its sustainable future development.



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