

Connectivity, the Black Sea Region, and Hungarian Priorities

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The Black Sea and the basin itself have for millennia been a transit route and provided connectivity - for military campaigns or migration among others - among Eastern - and Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, both on land and on sea. Yet, it has mostly remained peripheral to mainstream European history, a field of regional power competition (Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Türkiye), and even to global power interests (Great Britain). Despite the fact that, the Black Sea constituted the border between the two worlds, during the Cold War, it was the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union and to NATO that seemed to offer renewed importance to the region.

In the consequently elaborated EU strategy, the Black Sea Synergy reflects the EU's traditional regional approach to its closer and wider neighbourhood. Regionalism has been a distinctive feature of EU thinking and terminology since the beginning of the European integration process, leading to several opportunities and at least as many challenges. The Black Sea region, on the one hand, includes/brings



together countries with different statuses in their relationship with the EU (member states, candidate states, ENP partners, strategic partners), and, on the other hand, is closely connected (without any real geographical, historical, or cultural border) and open to several other regions of Europe, Asia, and even Africa.

Nevertheless, besides this regional understanding, there has been a different, linear kind of approach. First, in the Russian strategy, historically, the Black Sea had the strategic importance of connecting Russia to the Mediterranean - with the annexation of Crimea, and growing activity around the region, this traditional element clearly re-emerged. The U.S. perspective seems to reflect this linear approach, too, by viewing the Black Sea as a kind of blockage to the spread of the Soviet/Russian influence. However, by forming an alliance in the region against Russian interests, and making the region “the doorstep of NATO”, the interest of the U.S. in the process of regional block-forming is also manifest.

The large-scale connectivity programs launched by China (the BRI) and more recently, by India (NSTC) have definitely come to reflect a challenge to the regional approach of both the EU and the U.S. But while the EU, despite its security concerns, still has strong economic interests in the enhanced connectivity throughout the region, for the U.S., it is the stop to/deterrence of not only Russian, but also Chinese intrusion into the region which is the top priority.

Among the regional actors, Türkiye is in a complex position. The country is placed at the cross-section of several smaller and greater regions, making connectivity one of its main assets. Still, the dilemma of handling the regional and the linear approach of connectivity persists. With the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Türkiye initiated a regional cooperation in 1992 that tried to promote economic cooperation, infrastructural connections, and cultural exchange among its member states. Its efforts to mediate between Ukraine and Russia in the recent conflict reflect well its interests. The question of whom to connect still exists, however.

The current Hungarian foreign policy was first based on the “Eastern opening” policy launched in 2012. It emphasizes, but also “naturalizes” the importance of maintaining global (eastern) connectivity - energy ties to Russia, and to Central Asia, trade and investment connections to China and the Far East - all among the high-priority interests of Hungarian foreign policy, even if they challenge the EU and U.S. approaches. While in the early 2010s the developing of synergies between the Danube Region Strategy and the Black Sea region (in alignment with the EU regional approach), and the Three Seas Initiative were among the priorities of the Hungarian foreign policy, its current low-profile activity in both the EU BS Synergy and the BSEC contradict these intentions.