

The Shifting Geopolitics of the Black Sea Region: Actors, Drivers and Challenges

Application to the Ministry of Defence 2010

By Geir Flikke (project coordinator), Einar Wigen, Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø

Introduction:

The Black Sea region stands out as a region where realpolitik once more has come to the fore.¹ This inland sea is situated at the crossroads of two aspiring regional powers, Turkey and Russia, with Ukraine in the North and EU and NATO members Romania and Bulgaria in the West. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Black Sea region was inscribed in 'Wider Europe' as one of several circles of regional cooperation stretching from the North to the South East. Currently, diverse pressures have exposed new vulnerabilities and also the challenged multilateral and institutionalised cooperation in the region. Whereas energy transit routes, frozen conflicts and diverse foreign policy orientation earlier were inscribed in various cooperative frameworks, geostrategic competition now seems to be on the rise.

Recognising these shifting patterns is important, not least since, in the words of James Sherr, 'changes in the pattern of East–West or North–South relations are immediately felt and it is critically important that local actors recognize these shifts when they occur.'² This project maps drivers that currently affect the shifting geopolitics of the Black Sea region: Turkey and Ukraine as competing transit routes for Eurasian gas export, Ukraine's attempts to sustain a foreign policy for European integration versus the increasing Russian 'pull', and the partial melting of the 'frozen conflicts' and renewed great power engagement in South Caucasus. Each of these factors will – together or separately – determine how the regional dynamics of the Black Sea unfolds.

The study thus combines analyses of dominant perceptions of foreign policy challenges and opportunities of two core Black Sea nation-states (Ukraine and Turkey) with a case-study of the challenges posed by de facto states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh) to the regional order along the Black Sea's Eastern shore. This accurately reflects the complex relationship between state sovereignty and political sovereignty in this region.³ Arguably, state interests now play a more dominant part partly due to the fact that structures of international cooperation and monitoring have been eroding. The war in Georgia has entailed an emasculation and termination of the OSCE/UN regional observer missions, and reignited mutual animosities in frozen conflicts. Moreover, the promise of energy interdependence in the region has been impeded by the deadlock over the EU Energy Charter and competing projects for transit of gas from Eurasia (different EU and Russia-sponsored projects to bypass Ukraine through Turkish territory). While Turkey has ratified the Energy Charter, and is less affected by the direct transit of energy through Ukraine, Turkey seeks to enhance its role as a transit country. Finally, the introduction of a more militarised approach to the Black Sea from part of Russia seems if not in competition, then at least in challenge with other regional patterns of multilateral exercises and military cooperation.

True, each of these developments could also be dampened by the promises of interdependence in energy transports through the Black Sea, a return to pre-Georgia conditions between NATO and Russia and the US and Russia, and a more dynamic relationship between the EU and Russia over energy and transit questions. Yet, the effect of EU's internal policies in Bulgaria and Romania and the ENP (European Neighbourhood Project) in the border regions is still uncertain. Moreover, the EU's energy dependency on Russia is not resolved, and may prompt continuous balancing from states. Whether the institutional prerequisites are sufficient to withstand renewed geopolitical pressure on the region remains to be seen.

¹ James Sherr (2008) Security in the Black Sea Region: back to Realpolitik? *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 8 (2): 141–153.

² Ibid.

³ The de facto states represent new forms of political sovereignty in the region. See below.

The project does not fully map the regional developments, nor does it consider the institutional frameworks in detail. It seeks rather to identify drivers that play against cooperation and mutual interdependence. This entails identifying how energy issues and frozen conflicts affect the region, and subsequently the interests that states flag in the games of balance and counterbalance. The fact that energy transit issues and frozen conflicts have had an impact on state policies evokes the return of geopolitics as a set of policies that are designed to secure state interests,⁴ and secure regional dominance. This is not, however, to be seen as a permanent factor to secure the territorial division of the Black Sea, let alone any re-write of territorial state borders in the region (with the exception of Georgia).

Project Design:

The project involves three researchers at NUPI and one professor at the University of Oslo. Each contributor will focus on a specific case study, with a regional focus. *Geir Flikeke* (NUPI) will be project coordinator and will also be responsible for analysing the energy transit issues in Ukraine and the complex interplay between multilateral security cooperation between Ukraine and Western institutions (EU/NATO). Ukraine's Western foreign policy dimension will be analysed as an expression of new sovereignty, contrasted against the residual challenges of Ukraine's 'borderland' position. *Einar Wigen* (NUPI) will focus on Turkey's emerging role in the South Caucasus and the ambition to turn Turkey into a transit hub. The case explores how security and energy are interlinked in Turkey's comprehension of its regional role and in the larger energy conduits of the Black Sea region. *Helge Blakkisrud* (NUPI) and *Pål Kolstø* (UiO) will focus on the role of so-called de facto states, states with no or only partial recognition: How do these states cope with their continued non-recognition? What challenge do they pose to regional stability? And on a more fundamental level, how do they challenge the existing world order based on mutual and universal recognition of state actors.

Case 1: Ukraine's Dilemma: Energy and Foreign Political Identity

Ukraine is of vital importance to the EU through its gas deliveries, and is increasingly aware of this importance. Currently 80 percent of all gas that Russia exports to EU markets passes through Ukraine.⁵ The two gas cut-offs in 2006 and 2009, partly motivated by controversies over prices, partly by submitting Ukraine to what Robert Legvold and Celeste Wallander have called 'influence effects',⁶ have made Ukraine both more aware of its significance and also the lacking sustainability of a Western foreign policy orientation. In the Annual Strategic Review of Ukraine (2008), this is reflected in apprehensiveness that if integration/ closer cooperation with the EU and NATO is not possible, Ukraine will lack incentives to pursue a Western foreign policy line. At the same time, Ukraine is consciously aware of the fact that it forms a 'critical mass' for any post-Soviet integration, and that most Russian initiatives are not possible unless Ukraine concurs. Hence, Ukraine still considers both the opportunities and challenges of its geostrategic position between Russia and the EU.

While Ukraine since 2005 has pinned its aspirations to join the West on regional constellations like the Visegrad group, and bilateral cooperation with Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, these

⁴ Geopolitics is in this report seen as a set of discursive practices (rhetorical claims) and self-perceptions (identity as explaining action) that generate realist-driven policies.

⁵ There are various estimates on Russia's total share of export to the EU. In 2006, Russia's share was estimated to be 33 per cent of crude oil and 42 percent of natural gas. Bendic Solum Whist (2008) Nord Stream: not Just a Pipeline. *FNI Report* 1. Of Russia's natural gas export to the EU, an estimated 80 per cent goes through the Ukrainian pipeline system. See Jefferey Mankoff (2009) *Eurasian Energy Security*. Council on Foreign Relations Special Report no. 43.

⁶ Influence effects are the political effect of a gas cut-off based on asymmetric interdependence. Wallander and Legvold suggest that the fact that Russia can sustain the costs of a cut-off longer than Ukraine accounts for a political influence that is notable. See Robert Legvold and Celeste Wallander (2004) *Swords and Sustenance: The Economics of Security in Belarus and Ukraine*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

constellations have not been sufficient to dampen apprehensions that Russia is effectively trying to restrict Ukrainian sovereignty.⁷ This adds to a specific dearth of alternatives for Ukraine: it cannot effectively change the current transit paths for energy across its territory, nor does the country command sufficient resources to modernise the transit grid by itself. The decision of the EU to invest in modernisation of the transit grid, and the grants given by the EBRD to modernise Ukrainian infrastructure will alleviate these needs, but at the same time enhance the dilemmas Ukraine are facing in-between a reluctant EU and a resurgent Russia. This said, Ukraine has continued, in spite of pressure from Russia, to adopt legislation that empowers the Ukrainian state to adapt to the European Union's incentives. Like Turkey's foreign policy, also Ukraine's has been 'Europeanised' in the sense that it responds to EU initiatives such as the 'Eastern partnership'.

This case study will explore the Ukrainian dilemma with two specific focal points. First, it will explore the essence of Ukraine's foreign policy dilemma as linked to the nation's split identity and the economic relations to Russia. Concerning the former, Ukraine has had over fifteen years of state-building, and has buttressed its sovereignty among other things by asserting an identity that is more than simply post-Soviet, but indeed also anti-Soviet. Ukraine's highlighting of the great famine of the 1930s (Holodomor) and also the specificities of the post-Orange revolution political rationale will be taken into account here. Secondly, the study will explore to which extent the Soviet residuals hamper the development of a distinct 'Black Sea' policy of Ukraine. Geographically, Ukraine belongs to this region, and Ukraine's transit role as an energy hub could potentially be enhanced by a more visible Black Sea policy and presence. On the other hand, Ukraine is reluctantly playing this role, for reasons pertaining to sovereignty. While it has sorted out the demarcation line with Romania in the Black Sea, Ukraine seems reluctant to identify itself as a Black Sea player, partly due to the issue of Crimea, partly due to the fact that the strategic relationship with Georgia from 1999 has been set back by the Georgian-Russian conflict in 2008. Moreover, if Turkey should rise as a transit hub for energy to the EU, this would further reduce Ukraine's role as a transit country. In this perspective, Ukraine could even make the most out of the balancing role between the EU and Russia, and refrain from playing a more direct and visible role in the Black Sea region.

Case 2: Turkey's Place in the Energy Conduits of the Black Sea Region

Since the mid-1990s, Turkey has increasingly focused on its immediate neighbourhood, and initiated cooperation with countries that it previously considered irrelevant to its foreign policy. This has made Turkey more integrated in the regional dynamics of the Caucasus and the Black Sea, and it is pursuing an increasingly pro-active foreign policy in the region. Turkey's long term strategy for Caucasus has been to connect the states around the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. That way it can act as an outlet for these energy producing but landlocked countries. The backbone of this strategy has been the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, and the parallel pipeline carrying natural gas to Erzurum for domestic Turkish consumption. The new pipelines have given Turkey added clout within regional politics, and decreased its dependency on US policy towards the region. The BTC pipeline has been a huge success which has given the country political and economic advantages. Turkey has tried to replicate this success by entering into no less than four similar pipeline projects since the start of the BTC.⁸ In this way Turkish politicians hope to make the country into a more powerful and independent regional player.⁹ However, as it is unlikely that all of these pipelines are economically viable, Turkey will have to

⁷ Grigoriï Perepelitsya (2008) Ukrainian-Russian Relations in the format of a 'Big Treaty'. Foreign Policy of Ukraine, Annual Strategic Review, p. 221.

⁸ These are South Stream, Blue Stream II, Nabucco and Arab Gas Pipeline.

⁹ For a prime example of such an argument see the former Turkish Minister of Energy Hikmet Uluğbay (2003) *İmparatorluktan Cumhuriyete Petrolpolitik*. Ankara: Ayraç Yayınevi.

choose between the EU- and US-backed *Nabucco* initiative and the Russian-backed *South Stream* and *Blue Stream II*. Whatever Turkey chooses, this is likely to bring the country into conflict with Ukraine, which both South Stream and Nabucco are trying to by-pass.

Since Turkey's AKP party came into government in 2002 there has been a remarkable change in the country's foreign policy.¹⁰ Rather than emphasising its old reliance on a strong military to deter invasion and intervention into its own territory, it is now using economic integration and diplomatic efforts for increased external contact. Trade and diplomacy have are the object of heightened attention, not least through Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's activist foreign policy. Not only do the long conflicts with Syria and Armenia appear to have been overcome, Turkey is investing heavily in energy projects that take the country into cooperation with Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan and the EU. Turkey is seeking, in the words of Ahmet Davutoğlu, to go from being an 'appendix country' to becoming a 'centre country'.¹¹ Energy policy is one crucial area where Turkey has a potential for becoming a major player, without getting at odds with the EU.

Choosing energy policy as a prioritised field may not seem logical for a country that has no major deposits of fossil fuels itself. It is Turkey's geographic position, occupying one of the more attractive routes for transporting energy from producers to markets that Turkish politicians want to exploit. As a transit country, Turkey is important for both sides of the east-west corridor. The Turkish Premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed Turkish policy in the following way: "Turkey strives to strengthen its position as an energy centre, energy distributor and transit country based on its geo-strategic location and stated that steps are taken to become the fourth main artery for the supply of natural gas to the EU."¹²

The new approach to foreign policy, which includes 'soft power' in the arsenal of Turkish foreign policy, contrasts markedly to the approach of the old military elite in the country.¹³ The old elite has repeatedly criticised the AKP's activist foreign policy of defusing old conflicts for sacrificing Turkish security for EU rapprochement. This has not been so in the energy field. Rather, there has been little opposition to such projects, at least from actors centrally placed within policy making circles. There is widespread consensus between people favouring a hard power approach to foreign policy and those who favour soft power and cooperation as regards Turkey's central role in the gas pipeline projects of the Black Sea region. What is not clear from this consensus is how Turkey will choose, if forced to back only *one* of the competing pipeline projects. Nor is it clear how Turkish politicians see these pipeline projects as compatible with a friendly relationship with Ukraine, as all the options on the table imply cutting Ukraine out of its lucrative role as a transit country for gas.

This case study will explore how the connection between security and energy is made in Turkish politics. The analysis will rely heavily on primary sources. The data will be collected during a field work in Ankara, where extensive interviews with Turkish politicians and energy officials will be conducted. These interviews will then be contextualised by reference to parliamentary and public debates.

¹⁰ See Ionnis N. Grigoriadis (2009) *Trials of Europeanization: Turkish Political Culture and the European Union*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Mesut Özcan (2008) *Harmonizing Foreign Policy: Turkey, the EU and the Middle East*. Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate.

¹¹ Davutoğlu proposed this while still working as a professor of political science at the University of Marmara. For the main gist of this theory/manifesto, see Ahmet Davutoğlu (2001) *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*. Istanbul: Küre Yayınları. Another book in which he proposes a similar programme is Ahmet Davutoğlu (2005) *Osmanlı Medeniyeti: Siyaset İktisat Sanat*. Ankara: Klasik Yayınları.

¹² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in his keynote speech at Turkish-Spanish Business Council, Madrid, 12th February 2008.

¹³ Özcan (2008), *Harmonizing Foreign Policy*, pp. 150-157.

Case 3: Sovereignty issues and de facto states in South Caucasus

The August 2008 war in Georgia showed that clashes between regional geopolitical ambitions and state sovereignty can escalate into open warfare. At centre of the conflicts in 2008 were the existence of so called de facto states; states with no or just partial international recognition. The emergence of these de facto existing, but de jure non-existent states challenges the existing world order based on reciprocal and universal recognition of state actors. At the same time, it appears that the de facto states cannot be brushed off as simply a transitory phenomenon connected to the disintegration of the Soviet Empire. The Eurasian de facto states have now existed close to two decades, and some other de facto states can refer to an even longer history (e.g. the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus).

So far, the de facto states remain an understudied phenomenon.¹⁴ Initially research on the Eurasian de facto states was focused either on the roots of the secessionist conflict (were these based primarily on ethnic antagonism, political differences or manipulation by external actors?)¹⁵ or on its possible solution (designs for re-absorption, federal or confederal arrangements, or recognition).¹⁶ As regards internal, post-conflict development, this has frequently been disregarded, simply referring to the de facto states as ‘black holes’ harbouring terrorists and engaging in smuggling of weapons, drugs and human trafficking. Only recently has focus turned to a more nuanced approach to the inner dynamics of these non-recognized entities in an attempt to better understand the nature of the regimes and how these would-be states cope with non-recognition.¹⁷ The aim of this case study is to contribute to this latter research agenda and to provide a comprehensive examination of some of the challenges emanating from the separatist conflicts in the South Caucasus, that is, from the state aspirations of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, looking at internal drivers as well as the wider regional dynamics in the Eastern Black Sea region.

The conflicts around the Eurasian de facto states have often been described as ‘frozen conflicts’.¹⁸ In a certain sense, this is an accurate depiction: With the exception of the 2008 war in Georgia, there has been no open warfare along the demarcation lines, whereas at the same time, there seems to be no genuine willingness to solve the conflict through negotiations. Such a description nevertheless runs the risk of ignoring the dynamics on the ground. As the years pass by, the vestiges of a feeling of communality across the de facto borders gradually fade and the new, post-conflict institutional and economic arrangements get more and more entrenched.¹⁹

The de facto states of today are clearly very different entities from those which declared sovereignty around 1990. This is not just a matter of generational change, but the result of conscious policies of the de facto authorities. Behind the ‘frozen’ demarcation line, they have

¹⁴ Scott Pegg (1998) *International Society and the De Facto State*. Aldershot: Ashgate; Pål Kolstø (2006) The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States. *Journal of Peace Research* 43 (6): 723-740.

¹⁵ See e.g. Stuart Kaufman (1996) Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses and Moscow in Moldova’s Civil War. *International Security* 21 (2): 108-138; Pål Kolstø & Andrei Malgin (1998) The Transnistrian Republic: A Case of Politicized Regionalism. *Nationalities Papers* 26 (1): 103-128.

¹⁶ Dov Lynch (2004) *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States. Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

¹⁷ Oleh Protzyk (2009) Representation and Democracy in Eurasia’s Unrecognized States. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25 (3): 257-81; Pål Kolstø & Helge Blakkisrud (2008) Living with Non-recognition: State- and Nation-building in South Caucasian Quasi-states. *Europe-Asia Studies* 60 (3): 483-509

¹⁸ See e.g. Stephen Blank (2008) Russia and the Black Sea’s Frozen Conflicts in Strategic Perspective. *Mediterranean Quarterly* 19 (3): 23-54; W. Alejandro Sanchez (2009) The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 22 (2): 153-76.

¹⁹ Cf. Stefani Weiss (2008) Frozen conflicts – Kant reloaded. *Spotlight Europe* (10). Available at www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-0A000F0A-41AE1F02/bst/xcms_bst_dms_25656_25657_2.pdf. Accessed 22 September 2008.

actively fostered a sense of common identity among the local population and a loyalty towards the would-be state. According to Charles King, the territorial separatists of the 1990s have become the state-builders of the early 2000s.²⁰ Our aim here is to break through the ‘icecap’ and examine the dynamic processes of state- and nation-building taking place within the de facto states (both to get a better understanding of dynamics and drivers, but also to explore the relationship between domestic legitimacy and international recognition).

At the same time, the de facto states do not exist in a vacuum. In all our cases there exist a ‘parent state’ and a ‘patron state’.²¹ Moreover, most de facto states emerged as a result of incomplete and contested state formation in the intermediate zones of great power rivalry. Although the de facto states secured a (not necessarily final) victory at the battlefield in the war of secession, their continued non-recognition – which further aggravates problems associated with wartime damage, the lack of state institutions and infrastructure, and also frequently a weak resource base – means that their continued survival is heavily dependent on a patron state. The state- and nation-building efforts of the de facto states cannot be properly understood except within the dynamic context of its relationship with their parent states and patron states.

In our comparative study of de facto states we want to highlight the diversity among our cases. More importantly, however, we want to see if we can identify common factors at play in state- and nation building in unrecognized states, the dynamics of the de facto state–parent state–patron state-nexus, and the challenges these pose to regional stability.

Participants

Geir Flikke, project coordinator, is Assistant Director and Senior Researcher at NUPI and has for several years coordinated a project on assisting Ukraine’s Mohyla Academy in teaching Master students. He has published on Ukraine’s political transition after the Orange revolution and also on the EU-Ukraine relationship.

Helge Blakkisrud is currently a Visiting Scholar at ISEEEES, UC Berkeley (2009–10). He is the Head of the Department of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the Editor in Chief of the Nordic academic journal for East European Studies (*Nordisk Østforum*). He has carried out fieldwork in all the de facto states in the region and published on state- and nation-building in the Eurasian de facto states.

Pål Kolstø is a Professor of Russian and East European Area Studies at the University of Oslo and has published extensively on state- and nation-building in the post-Soviet space and the Balkans. He has carried out fieldwork in all the de facto states in Eurasia and also published more theoretical work on the role and nature of de facto states.

Einar Wigen is Master’s student at NUPI and is writing an MA thesis on Turkey and Europe. He speaks fluent Turkish, and has previously had an internship at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI).

Institutional network

²⁰ Charles King (2001) The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia’s Unrecognized States. *World Politics* 53 (4): 524-52.

²¹ By ‘parent state’ we imply the internationally recognized state entity the de facto state is trying to break away from, while ‘the patron state’ is the state that provides security guarantees, political, and/or economic support that allows the de facto state to maintain status quo. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia serves the role as patron, while for Nagorno-Karabakh, this role is taken by Armenia. See also Nina Caspersen (2008) Between Puppets and Independent Actors: Kin-State Involvement in the Conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia and Nagorno-Karabakh. *Ethnopolitics* 7 (4): 357-372.

The MoD this year encourages cooperation with relevant international institutions. While we do not budget with this, all the case studies will involve exchanges with international partners. Geir Flikke has a vast network in Ukraine after several years of project work there, and has also attended a workshop on Black Sea security in Bucharest (May 2009) arranged by the Carol I Defence Academy. Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø are currently involved in a Transatlantic network of researchers working on de facto states (coordinated by Dr Nina Caspersen, University of Lancaster). Einar Wigen has had several research periods in Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran, and is well-connected with academics at Bosphorus, Koç and Bilkent Universities in Turkey and with officials in Istanbul and Ankara.

Report and time frame

The project work will be conducted in the second half of 2010 and result in a co-written report to be handed in to the Ministry of Defence by end 2010. The case studies will form a framework for comparing the diverse dynamics of the Eastern part of the Black Sea region. A policy paper will accompany the report. Each case study will also form the backbone for articles/follow-ups initiated by each author.