



BLACK SEA VISION*

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There are many sceptics in the West and even more those in the East who do not see the Black Sea Region fit in the European architecture. However, all agree that chances for achieving this have greatly improved during the last few years.

First of all, this is because of the volcanic evolution and the on-going consolidation of the so-called New Democracies. For the very first time in the post-Soviet area we see determined and collective action on the part of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova to go ahead with serious political and legal reforms that have one purpose only – to build foundations for European integration.

This coincides with another very important event in the European integration – the beginning of accession negotiations with Turkey and Croatia. This could be seen as a breaking point introducing new political dynamics on the path of bringing the EU and its southern and eastern neighbours closer together. Those decisions could open the door to pan-European integration, the final vision of which is a new Europe, unified by virtue of its values, free trade, single market and coordinated political action.

Secondly, there is a growing perception that the enlargement of NATO and the European Union by definition does not guarantee democracy in the European neighbourhood and beyond. Internal pressures in emerging democracies, their mutual dependence on the possible roll-back of Russia's democratic institutions might be too great to withstand the negative impact.

All this in turn puts additional responsibilities and obligations to help fragile governments in the Black Sea Region to go through the process of reforms and democratization. We do not have either moral or historical right to shun this responsibility. Actions and accord of the EU leaders will be

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critical not only to the future of the EU foreign and enlargement policies, but also to the role of Europe in the world, and to its relationship with Russia in particular.

However, every choice comes at a cost. The question is if there is enough political will to engage in a costly project of building democracies and advancing European perspective for the region that stretches from the Adriatic to the Caspian Sea.

And what instruments and ideas could break the strategic isolation of the Black Sea Region and facilitate its transition from a conflict-ridden place toward stable democracies? How can EU members work together to build Europe which is open to all European democracies?

It is certain that there is a need to take a close look at the European Union's policy towards the Black Sea Region. Up to now, this region has not been on the "radar screens" of the European Union and everything what we have done in this region that is locked between Russia, the fast-changing Turkey and the Central Asia, fell far short of the "VISION" and ended up in minor details. European foreign and security policy was passive and reactive, and attempts to de-freeze the solution of the so-called "frozen conflicts" were perhaps too cautious.

Even today, few pay attention to the fact that the Black Sea Region is the only region remaining in the world which, being so close to the Western civilization, is yet so excluded from its further development. We have largely failed to use the moment and grasp the opportunities which this region provides not only in terms of our political and economic security, including energy security, but also in terms of people-to-people contacts which would undoubtedly enrich our European and transatlantic identity.

One might look for reasons why it is underestimated. However, this is not the time for looking back – this is the time for moving on. It is critical today that these countries look at the Balts the same way the Balts looked at the West a decade ago – expecting encouragement, direction and, finally – a clear European and transatlantic perspective, where they would fit as full members of democratic communities.

It is a matter of hard work to reconnect the East and the West of Europe; it is a matter of time to bring countries of the Black Sea Region into the NATO and the European Union family.

Today it is impossible to set any specific dates when and whether at all the European Union and the Black Sea Region countries will be prepared to start membership talks.

What is possible today is to work hard and bring such a day closer, so that NATO and the European Union could build prosperity and safety of the continent in a company of its neighbours rather than alone.

Practical steps deserve more effort, attention and financial resources. Harmonization of the legislation of the EU and its neighbours, liberalization and enhancement of bilateral trade, connecting the East and the West of Europe through energy and transport hubs – all of these are priorities that must be backed by strong and unanimous EU Neighbourhood and coherent NATO policies.

The new EU member states should take the lead and create new links between the Balkans, the Black Sea Region and the EU. This is not so say that Lithuania or Poland possess magic formulas on how to start and complete democratic transition. On the other hand, we are the ones who have unique experience in successful completion of democratic institution building and free market reform processes.

Lithuania knows the region and the mindset of people; it has gone through similar reforms. Thus we know the pitfalls and the steps that must be given priority. A little, but visible help from outside is of the utmost importance for building confidence and political consensus in young democracies. We should not hesitate and offer this help to those who today need it most.

Yet we cannot and we should not do this all alone. We need support and cooperation from our European and transatlantic allies.

But what should be done first?

First, to start from a small, yet very important and visible thing – sharing regional experience and building regional identity in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus Regions. It is a proven fact that regional partnerships create synergies that push the boundaries of the possible, thus opening new venues for cooperation and modernization. Together these countries could be more effective in pursuing common regional interests, especially in areas of economic and social development.

A wide network of multidimensional partnerships linking regional State actors, businesses and NGOs has been created in the Baltics. This is a must

in order to listen to each other's interests and agree on a common political regional agenda. A similar model could also be successful in our neighbourhood, and we are eager to promote it.

The Lithuanian and Georgian Foreign Ministers have issued a joint letter inviting other Baltic and South Caucasus nations to develop cross-regional ties in the '3+3' format. This is a good starting point to engage countries from the South Caucasus into broader strategic discussions.

The New Democracies Summit will be held in Lithuania in May 2006. This conference should help creating instruments of trust and co-operation in the South Caucasus and develop solutions for settlement of the "frozen conflicts" in the Black Sea Region. To have the European Union and NATO allies closely engaged in this project is a major challenge today.

Secondly, we have to focus our efforts and contribute to building civil societies in these emerging democracies, develop people-to-people contacts and assist the rising generation of experts and leaders.

Thirdly, Russia's role in the region is a fact that cannot be ignored. Thus, we should encourage Russia to be a constructive partner rather than tolerate her misdemeanours in Russia's self-acclaimed backyard. It would be a strategic mistake to allow resentment and hate emerge on the borders with Russia. The goal in the region is just the opposite. From the Baltic experience, the European and transatlantic integration helps to enhance cooperation with Russia – not only bilaterally, but also on the European and transatlantic levels.

Enhancement of coordination and cooperation between the EU and the USA on the Black Sea Agenda is crucial. The EU and the USA are not competitors, but partners in their effort to widen the area of stability and security. The sooner Europeans and Americans will pool expertise and efforts, the better for the Black Sea Region and for real, democratic changes in Russia.

Hard work is ahead. It is an obligation to help Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova to build internal political consensus on the strategic economic and foreign policies that these countries want to pursue; to help them to restore their confidence in public institutions and upgrade ways in which public policies are shaped. Finally, to unfreeze the "frozen conflicts" – or rather "frozen resolution" of their territorial conflicts – that still inhibit their economic development and divide their societies.

Europe and America must develop a 'contract' on how to contribute to democracy building processes in the Black Sea Region. Such contracts - EU Action Plans and NATO Partnership Action Plans - have been concluded with the governments in the region. What we also need is a Roadmap for ourselves, and a broad European and transatlantic consensus on the strategic goals and policy actions in the Black Sea area.

To conclude, our new engagement in the Black Sea Region effort will not be a one-day-free-ride or a sweet foreign affair. But it is worth every euro and every minute of time as the Rose and Orange revolutions showed that ideas of freedom, prosperity and the rule of law have a universal appeal. Therefore, there is no other choice but to continue on the road of freedom.