

TURKEY AND A BLACK SEA STRATEGY FOR EU ENLARGEMENT

This article examines the case for the development of a post-Balkan strategy for European Union enlargement specifically focused on the Black Sea. It argues that in light of recent events in Georgia, and concerns over political stability in the Ukraine, such a move would represent a clear statement in support of their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. However, such a move would also have an extremely beneficial effect on Turkey's accession process. By virtue of its pivotal role in such a strategy, many of the concerns that currently exist within the EU over Turkish membership would be mitigated.

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While now might not be the best moment to consider the next stage of the European project, especially given the questions over the Lisbon Treaty, over the past year a number of events have occurred that have suggested that European policy makers do need to start thinking about the future expansion of the Union. The recent conflict in Georgia, coupled with concerns over Ukraine's security and political stability, has led many to suggest that both countries should be more firmly integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures. Notwithstanding immediate worries about the implications of this for relations with Russia, there are in fact good reasons to start thinking seriously about the possibilities of developing a formal road map for European integration for both countries.¹

However, as this article argues, the European Union should in fact be thinking along more radical lines. Rather than think about expansion in atomistic terms, the EU should use this as an opportunity to articulate a grand strategy for a future expansion centered on the Black Sea. While this may seem a radical step, laden with pitfalls, it represents a logical extension of the Union's most recent enlargement. Moreover, it need not be as troublesome as might first appear. As will be shown, Russian concerns can be managed, if handled carefully. However, and importantly, such a move could in fact have an important spin off inasmuch as it could provide a powerful new impetus for Turkish membership of the European Union.

Balkan Completion

One of the first casualties of the Irish decision to vote against the Lisbon Treaty was further enlargement of the European Union. Speaking just days after the vote Nicolas Sarkozy, the French President, warned that there could be no further expansion until such time as the institutional framework for the Union's further growth was put in place.² But for all the current institutional difficulties facing the European Union, few believe that enlargement is at an end. It may now be a more complicated and politically fraught process than it was in the past, but there is little reason to believe that the apparent moratorium on expansion put in place by France and Germany in the aftermath of the Irish vote is anything more than a temporary measure introduced in part to emphasize the gravity of the situation, and in part to try to exert greater leverage on the Irish Government, Irish voters and the European Union as a whole. Few seriously believe that the current situation will be permanent. When the process of enlargement restarts, as it inevitably will, the main focus of attention will be on the Balkans, where there

¹ See, for example, Thomas Valasek, 'What Does the War in Georgia Mean for EU Foreign Policy?' *Centre for European Reform*, Briefing Note, August 2008; and, 'Near Abroad Blues', *The Economist*, 13 September 2008.

² 'Sarkozy Warning on EU Expansion', *BBC News*, 20 June 2008.

are still seven countries that are in line for eventual membership of the European Union. Two of these, Croatia and Macedonia, have already achieved formal candidacy status. A further four are in line for membership, but have not yet been formally recognized as such: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Indeed, at the start of September, the European Commission noted that Serbia could be accepted as a formal candidate in 2009,³ thus indicating that expansion was certainly still on the agenda. And then there is Kosovo. Notwithstanding its currently contested status, few believe that its destiny lies beyond the European Union. Like the countries of the region it is seen as being unquestionably European. How its accession process will eventually evolve is unclear given both its lack of general international recognition and the fact that there are still six EU members that refuse to recognize the declaration of independence.⁴ Thus, in a wider sense, the Balkans, for all their specific problems, remain relatively unproblematic at an existential level. While there may still be significant issues relating to the economic situation in the region, as well as concerns relating to governance and the threat of further conflict, although at a lower scale than we saw in the 1990s, few if any observers believe that these countries do not have a rightful place in Europe.⁵ Indeed, as Romano Prodi, the President of the European Commission, once put it, “the unification of Europe will not be complete until our friends in the Balkans are part of the family”.⁶

The Question of Turkey

In contrast, the same cannot be said for what is currently considered to be the final piece of the current enlargement puzzle: Turkey. Of all the countries of South East Europe, Turkey has the longest standing relationship with the European Union. In addition to an association agreement dating back to 1963, its candidacy for membership, granted in 1999, precedes any of the other countries currently in line for membership. However, at the same moment, it has the most fraught and complicated relationship with the Union, and faces the most hostile reception. A poll taken in June 2007 showed that popular opinion is ambivalent, at best, about Turkish membership of the European Union.⁷ This is significant insofar as both the Austrian and French Governments have insisted that they

³ ‘Serbia Could be EU Candidate Next Year’, *International Herald Tribune*, 3 September 2008.

⁴ As of 1 September 2008, 46 countries had recognized Kosovo’s declaration of independence, including the United States, Australia, Japan, Canada and 21 of the 27 members of the European Union. The members that did not were: Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

⁵ ‘Enlarging the European Union: Chicken or Kiev?’, *The Economist*, 29 May 2008.

⁶ ‘Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, Presenting the Thessaloniki European Council (Brussels)’, *European Commission*, 18 June 2003.

⁷ ‘Financial Times/Harris Poll: EU Citizens Want Referendum on Treaty’, 18 June 2007. The poll, which was conducted across six countries (Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United States), showed that even with reforms, only half of respondents wanted Turkey to join. France scored the lowest, at 34 percent, and Spain and Italy the highest, at 53 percent.

will hold a referendum on the issue.⁸ Unlike the Western Balkan states, which, for all their problems, tend to be small, and thus relatively digestible, Turkey presents the EU with a far more significant challenge. For a start, it is large, both geographically and demographically. If Turkey were to join the European Union today it would not only be the largest country in terms of territory – 781,000 square kilometers to France’s 643,000 – it would also be the second largest state in terms of population – 72,000,000 to Germany’s 82,000,000.⁹ Looking ahead, and according to current growth estimates, it would become the largest state within the European Union by 2050.¹⁰ Naturally, this would almost certainly bring about a major pull eastwards in the centre of gravity in the European Union. Under current scenarios, the European Union’s largest single member would also be its most easterly.

On top of this, there are concerns about its economic and political suitability for membership.¹¹ Of the two, the economic concerns are perhaps the less troubling. Turkish growth rates are good, although slowing in line with worldwide economic trends.¹² However, deep concerns linger about the country’s political system, with questions about corruption, human rights issues, the role of the military in politics and political Islam all featuring heavily in discussions. Lastly, there is the geographic argument. Is Turkey really and truly European, and does the EU want to take in a member that would stretch the borders of the European Union to the Middle East? Many countries fear the implications of having a member that would take the Union’s borders to Syria, Iraq and Iran. For all these reasons, and despite the long-standing relationship between Turkey and the EU, Ankara faces a far more difficult task in persuading Europe of its suitability for membership than any of the more recent applicants from elsewhere in South East Europe. And yet, any move to break Turkey’s link with Europe could have serious implications, both in terms of Turkey’s internal stability as well as its long term commitment to the West. There is certainly a concern that if the country was to be deprived of its EU accession prospects the main barrier preventing the emergence of a far more religiously minded government, or a more active military, would be removed.¹³ In this regard, many believe that something now

⁸ ‘Austria Signals Referendum on Turkey’s EU Accession’, *Euractiv*, 25 August 2008.

⁹ Rounded figures produced from CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html> (last accessed, 5 September 2008).

¹⁰ According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Turkey’s population will be 101 million in 2050, as opposed to Germany, which will have 78 million inhabitants. ‘State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth’, *UNFPA*, 2007.

¹¹ For an overview of the latest report on Turkey’s EU accession progress see, European Commission, ‘Turkey 2007 Progress Report’, SEC(2007) 1436, Brussels, 6 November 2007.

¹² Economic growth for 2008 is expected to be approximately 3.5 percent, the slowest rate of growth since 2001. ‘Turkish 2Q GDP Growth Probably Slowed: Week Ahead’, *Bloomberg*, 8 September 2008.

¹³ Katinka Barysch and Charles Grant, ‘If Turkey and the EU Break up...’, Centre for European Reform, *CER Bulletin*, Issue 5, December 2006 / January 2007.

needs to be done to reinvigorate Turkey's membership process. How this might occur is now becoming clearer.

Ukraine and Georgia

Over the course of 2008 several developments have served to transform the entire debate about the future EU prospects in and around Turkey. The first major event was the NATO summit in Bucharest, where both Ukraine and Georgia were proclaimed as potential members of the alliance.¹⁴ While the organization eventually shied away from offering either a membership action plan (MAP), which signifies the start of the process, the fact that both were accepted as future members was highly significant. More to the point, it signified the extent to which both states had now moved closer to the West, at least in the perception of European and North American decision makers. However, it was the conflict between Russia and Georgia, just four months later that really transformed the debate. In face of widespread Western indignation at Moscow's behavior, and growing fears of a resurgent Russia, there appeared to be a surge of support amongst certain countries, most notable Britain and the United States, for integrating both Georgia and Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic structures.¹⁵

Whether this is a wise course of action is certainly open to question. However, what is clear is that the events of the past year have affected the debate within the European Union over Georgia and Ukraine. The fact that both were actively considered for NATO membership is an indication that, in one way or another, the two countries must now also be seen as potential members of the European Union. This was seen most clearly at a summit of European and Ukrainian leaders, in early September 2008, where the EU proclaimed Ukraine to be a 'European nation'.¹⁶ Of course, this should not come as a surprise in the case of Ukraine. Since 2007, it has had contiguous borders with no less than four EU members – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. Although this feel short of the demands made by Britain and a number of the new members of Central and Eastern Europe that Ukraine be offered formal support for its eventual EU membership, an idea rejected by a number of EU members fearful of Russia's reaction to such a move, it is nevertheless clear that this idea is now firmly on the agenda;¹⁷ even if, as one prominent observer noted, expanding the EU to include Ukraine would represent a major challenge for the European Union given its size and societal splits.¹⁸

¹⁴ 'Bucharest Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008', *NATO*, Press Release (2008) 049, 3 April 2008, paragraph 23.

¹⁵ 'Georgia's NATO Membership on Track, says David Miliband', *The Guardian*, 20 August 2008; 'Georgia Will Be in Our Nato Alliance, Cheney Warns Moscow', *The Times*, 5 September 2008.

¹⁶ 'EU Declares that Ukraine is a European Nation', *Associated Press*, 9 September 2008.

¹⁷ 'Nervous EU Offers Ukraine Hope for the Future but No Seat at the Table', *The Times*, 10 September 2008.

¹⁸ Bronwen Maddox, 'European Union Right to Avoid Gamble on Risky Ukraine Accession', *The Times*, 10 September 2008.

In contrast, Georgia's future relationship with the European Union is undoubtedly more ambiguous at this stage than that of Ukraine. Despite the fact that many observers have long recognized the European identity of the country, and its strategic value, European leaders have traditionally shied away from promising anything to Tbilisi.¹⁹ For a start it would represent a very real shift by the EU into new territory. It is also problematic inasmuch as the EU currently has no land link to the country. But most importantly, especially in the current context, there is also the Russian factor to be considered. For this reason, EU leaders are treading very carefully on the issue for the moment and are keen not to be seen to be offering any indications that eventual EU accession is on the cards at this stage.²⁰ However, this need not prevent European policy makers from starting to think more seriously about the possibility that both Ukraine and Georgia might well be on course for eventual membership of the European Union. In this context, now would appear to be a good moment for the European Union to start thinking seriously about developing a formal strategy to this end.²¹

Formulating a Black Sea Strategy

The end of the process of Balkan enlargement, the transformation of the discussion over the West's relationship with Georgia and Ukraine, and the need to address the lingering concerns over Turkey, create an ideal opportunity to think imaginatively about the future of the entire European project. It is clear that Europe is not going to be constrained within its current borders. There is still room for further expansion eastwards. To this end, now would seem an entirely obvious moment for the European Union to start to pull all these divergent factors together and develop an entirely new, and integrated, enlargement strategy centered on the Black Sea region. Of course, at first, this idea might sound oddly unrealistic. Many still regard the region in the context of the Cold War, or subconsciously view it as a Russian space. However, it in fact represents a logical next step in Europe's evolution. For a start it should not be forgotten that the European Union already has a significant presence on the Black Sea as a result of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in January 2007. This has brought most of the Western shore within the Union. At the same time, Turkey's candidacy has ensured that the southern shore is within the European space. In this sense, and has already

¹⁹ Mark Leonard and Charles Grant, 'Georgia and the EU: Can Europe's Neighbourhood Policy Deliver?', *Centre for European Reform*, Policy Brief, September 2005.

²⁰ 'EU Reaches Out to Georgia but Membership Not on the Cards', *AFP*, 2 September 2008.

²¹ It should be noted that some movement has been made towards this idea. An 'Eastern Partnership', was presented by Sweden and Poland, in May 2008, which proposed including Ukraine and Georgia alongside Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova – and Russia and Belarus in some degree. However, while this was undoubtedly an important development, and supported by a number of states, such as Britain, Germany, Denmark and the Czech Republic, it met with a rather cool reaction from other members. For more on this, see, Agnieszka K. Cianciara, 'Eastern Partnership' – opening a new Chapter of Polish Eastern Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy?', *Institute of Public Affairs*, Analyses and Opinion, Number 4, June 2008.

been argued, the EU is in effect already a Black Sea power.²² To include Georgia and Ukraine, alongside Moldova would add a northern and eastern dimension to this already strong presence. In this regard, while the Black Sea may seem very distant when viewed from North West Europe, in reality the Union already has a major role there.

Needless to say, such a strategy would present a number of challenges. However, these are neither as intrinsically problematic nor as insurmountable as many might suspect. In terms of problems, the single most important factor to consider at this stage is the Russian reaction. The recent conflict in Georgia has raised fears that Russia might now seek to obstruct any attempt to integrate Georgia and the Ukraine into the European Union. While this is certainly possible, if not more likely since August 2008, it is important not to overestimate Russia's reaction in the light of the recent tensions between Moscow and the West following the conflict in Georgia. There is little evidence to suggest that Russia is intrinsically opposed to European Union enlargement, even up to its borders. It certainly does not see it as a threat in the same way as it views NATO expansion.

Indeed, under the right conditions, and where the EU is perceived as a 'friendly' partner, and not as a strategic threat, Moscow can see the benefits of having countries within the Union that are positively disposed to its positions. This can be seen in a number of cases. For example, one can look to Cyprus, which is currently considered to be the most pro-Russian member of the Union, especially since the election of a pro-Russian president, in February 2008. Although it is one of the smallest states within the European Union, Cyprus nevertheless has a voice when it comes to European decision making.²³ On a similar note, it was also telling that earlier this year, Moscow appeared to side with pro-European forces in Serbia, and has fostered relations with other governments in South East Europe. As one observer wrote, "Russia is more interested in having Serbia as an ally inside than outside the EU. Russia's improving relations with Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary illustrate this notion. Russia's most important markets for energy exports, trade, and technology acquisitions are in the EU."²⁴ In this sense, there are still grounds for hope that, if handled well, Ukraine, albeit under a different administration, as well as even Armenia and Azerbaijan might one day be members of an enlarged European Union. In the case of Georgia, and following the conflict and Russia's subsequent decision to formally recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

²² Mustafa Aydın, 'Europe's Next Shore: the Black Sea Region After EU Enlargement', *EU-ISS Occasional Paper* 53, June 2004.

²³ This point has been made to the author by a number of diplomats working on Cyprus.

²⁴ Dušan Reljić, 'Serbia, Russia, and the Pax Americana in South Eastern Europe', *Harvard International Review*, 14 September 2008.

it seems extremely unlikely that Tbilisi will now take a pro-Russian view, even with a change of administration. Nevertheless, there is little reason to suppose that Russia would hold a visceral opposition to the country's EU accession.

Of course, a key issue that is likely to be faced by European leaders in developing such a strategy is whether or not to attempt to formally separate EU enlargement from NATO expansion, or whether to allow the tacit link to remain and risk encouraging Russian ire. It would seem important to separate the two, closing off NATO membership for the two countries. If the two are not divorced, and Georgia and Ukraine join NATO, it seems likely that any move towards the Black Sea would almost certainly mean that this is an issue that will need to be tackled, especially if Russia felt that the addition of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO would effectively turn the Black Sea in a militarized NATO lake. Nevertheless, EU enlargement right up to the borders of the Russian Federation, if handled intelligently and sensitively, need not antagonize Moscow, let alone lead to an aggressive Russian response. It would also ensure political stability in both countries, and through the European Union's soft power, would deter any Russian threat more effectively than membership of an alliance that has proven to be reticent about taking on Moscow anyway. This was a point recently well made by Lord Owen, a former British foreign Secretary and peace envoy for the former Yugoslavia, who argued that, 'For some years it has been clear that the wise course has been to put EU membership for Georgia and Ukraine ahead of their membership in NATO. The first lesson from the fighting in Georgia is to speed up EU membership for both, and not to advance NATO membership so long as boundary disputes remain.'²⁵

Revitalizing the Debate over Turkey

Notwithstanding the difficulties in terms of the European Union's relations with Russia that such a concept will need to overcome, especially in the current environment, the formulation of a Black Sea strategy would certainly have a profound effect on Turkey's relationship with the Union. By establishing a formal Black Sea strategy for enlargement, the discussions over Turkey would immediately be radically transformed, in a variety of ways.

While many of the fundamental concerns about Turkey, such as worries over human rights and governance, would certainly not be solved by such a move, it would almost certainly lead to a major rethink in terms of the way in which many EU members states perceive Turkey. For instance, Turkey's size would immediately become less obviously troubling. While it would still be the largest state in the Union if it were to accede, the addition of Ukraine –604,000 square

²⁵ David Owen, 'Kosovo 1999 to Georgia 2008', *International Herald Tribune*, 5 September 2008.

kilometers and 46,000,000 people– would certainly help to balance out its presence somewhat.²⁶ Just as Turkey would be the behemoth on the southern shore of the Black Sea, so Ukraine would add weight to the northern coast. Certainly, while the Union’s centre of gravity would still be shifted eastwards, a move to add Turkey to the south of the Black Sea and Ukraine to the North would ensure that a far better balance would be maintained than if Turkey joined on its own – or if Ukraine did on its own, for that matter. On a map of the new Europe, the two countries would balance each other out. Likewise, the issue of population would become less obviously concerning. While few in Europe wish to admit it openly, it must be accepted that there is a deep concern about the implications of admitting such a large Muslim country into Europe. This is borne out in poll after poll. Again, the addition of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova would help to counterbalance these fears.

Similarly, the geopolitical arguments would also be tackled. While the question of having borders with the Middle East would not be alleviated, although Ankara is clearly trying to improve its relations with all its neighbors,²⁷ Turkey would benefit from the fact that it would also come to be the bridge to the Caspian, which is widely regarded as the key to reducing Europe’s reliance on Russian energy. This is a major issue that is now facing European leaders, and Turkey represents an ideal alternative route for oil and gas from the Caucasus, Iran and Central Asia.²⁸ One need only consider the importance of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. This relationship between the need to diversify the sources of energy supply and Turkey’s EU accession was another important point made by Lord Owen in his piece.²⁹

However, he is not alone in this thinking. It is an argument that is now gaining traction in the corridors of power throughout the European Union, even in countries that have up until recently seen as being opposed to Turkish membership of the European Union.³⁰ Thus, under such a strategy, Turkey would cease to be viewed as the awkward leftover of the expansion of South East Europe. Instead, it would be transformed into the vanguard state for a new phase of EU expansion.

²⁶ However, it should be noted that the population argument will become less applicable as Ukraine is projected to see a significant population decrease by 2050, falling to 26 million inhabitants. ‘State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth’, *UNFPA*, 2007.

²⁷ Hugh Pope, ‘Turkey and Armenia Inch Forward’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 September 2008.

²⁸ Katinka Barysch, ‘Turkey’s Role in European Energy Security’, Centre for European Reform, December 2007. For an overview of the subject, see, Yusuf Yazar and Hüseyin Erkaya, ‘Turkey: Energy Status and Expectations’, *SETA Policy Brief*, Number 6, January 2008.

²⁹ David Owen, ‘Kosovo 1999 to Georgia 2008’, *International Herald Tribune*, 5 September 2008.

³⁰ Indeed, this already appears to be happening anyway as a result of the Russian-Georgian conflict. With growing concern over dependence on Russia for energy, many EU members now believe that Turkey’s strategic value to the Union is growing. Even in France, which is currently regarded as being the most hostile large state to Turkey’s EU accession, a change of view seems to be occurring. Senior international political figure, comments to the author, September 2008.

Conclusion

The current institutional problems facing the European Union should not be seen to be permanent impediments to the further growth and expansion of the European Union. Instead, they represent an unfortunate stalling of a process that must continue. In the first phase of any renewed effort to expand the Union, attention will be paid to completing the current map of Europe by stabilizing and integrating the countries of the Western Balkans. However, it seems likely that the problems relating to Turkish accession will continue. At the same time, the European Union needs to start seriously considering its longer term vision for a united Europe. This necessarily requires the formulation of a grand theme in the form of a Black Sea strategy that would include Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Turkey. Of course, this will not be easy, and it cannot, and should not, be rushed. There are numerous problems that will need to be overcome – the most important of which relates to the Russian reaction to such a move. These are not, however, insurmountable. With diplomacy, tact and a willingness to stress the non-confrontational nature of the European project, Russia can be won over, if indeed it even needs to be persuaded of the benefits of non-militarized EU expansion.

But such an approach will not only provide the roadmap for membership for a number of states that have an acknowledged European identity, but not as yet a European vocation, this move will also provide a new impetus and rationale for Turkey's membership of the European Union. Instead of being seen as the final, vestigial element of Europe's expansion in South East Europe, the debate should be restructured in such a way as to frame Turkey as the foundation stone of a new Black Sea strategy with Turkey providing the vital link between Europe and the Caucasus. Indeed, there can be no expansion to the eastern shores of the Black Sea without including Turkey in the equation. In this regard, such a strategy will finally put Turkey front and centre of the enlargement debate, and permanently end the fractious debate over its place in the EU. Far from being an overly-large addition on the eastern edge of Europe, Turkey would gain a new significance as a core part of a new region for the EU. At the same time, its overall impact will be diluted. It will not be a massive new appendage to the Union reaching out into the Middle East. Instead, it will become a link in a wider new Europe.

Recent events have certainly provided European decision makers with an opportunity to start thinking about a bigger vision for Europe, one that will play out over the course of the next twenty to thirty years. Given recent events in Georgia, concern over Ukraine's political future and the lingering question of Turkey's membership of the Union, the formulation of an official Black Sea strategy for future enlargement could certainly provide the European Union with the coherent vision it needs for the future.
