

Andrei Denisov: The Black Sea unites

Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the European Union may implement a number of joint projects

Since the emergence of Russia's statehood in a distant parts, the Black Sea region has always been to us a land of vital interest. For various reasons, economic ties between the countries of the region, as well their political relations followed a long and complicated path.

This situation has been evolving lately as the Black Sea states are realizing their possibilities for resolving their problems through development of multilateral cooperation, first of all, in the economic field. A number of objective factors are contributing to this process. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)* has become an efficient framework for multilateral interaction, bringing together 12 member countries of the Black Sea region. At present, BSEC is in fact the only full-scale international regional economic organization that has developed efficient instruments facilitating cooperation among the countries of the Black Sea region.

The BSEC has been building its reputation both in the regional and international context. This was reaffirmed at the summit on the occasion of the fifteen anniversary of the Organization held on 25 June 2007, in which V. Putin, President of the Russian Federation, took part. All the BSEC Member States took note of his statement to the effect that the Black Sea countries were facing the most diverse challenges, from

* The BSEC member states include, apart from Russia, Albania, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine, whose territory form the "Black Sea region" under the BSEC Charter.

economic growth to the preservation of the Black Sea ecosystem and the unique cultural heritage. And we all are responsible for their resolution, stability and well-being in our common home.

Russia has been consistently making its contribution to the strengthening of the BSEC, development of feasible initiatives and ensuring their promotion.

At the same time it would be naive to believe that, with the outset of globalization, the Black Sea region which plays an important role as a bridge between Europe and Asia could be treated in isolation from the processes in other parts of the contemporary world. It should be emphasized that we do not separate the developments in the Black Sea region from the processes and trends at the global scale.

Therefore, in overcoming the emerging challenges and problems, it is only logical to take into account the world community's experience, with particular emphasis on a close coordination with the immediate neighbors. In our particular case, the European Union has been and continues to be such a neighbor, which the BSEC considered, from the very beginning, its important partner in resolving common tasks.

We believe that it would be easier for the BSEC countries to implement large-scale regional projects jointly with the European Union. With due account of the different profiles of these associations we must admit that only partnership cooperation can ensure enhancement of the BSEC as well as effectiveness of the policy of the European Union on the Black Sea track.

Development of bilateral relations between the European Union and the countries of the region as well as the growth of real interaction between the European Union and the BSEC represent two concurrent processes. We view such interaction as a mutually beneficial opportunity for the two equal partners to act effectively to ensure development of the countries of the region, increase the well-being of the population, and strengthen peace and stability in the Black Sea region.

We believe that the BSEC–EU dialogue has good prospects, for example, in the field of transport and energy, since the development of relevant infrastructure both in Western Europe and the BSEC region naturally calls for close cooperation between the

two parties. It is namely here that we see a major opportunity for developing on an equal basis of interaction between the two regional organizations in order to achieve synergy.

In the declaration on BSEC–EU partnership, adopted at a special Meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC Member States on 14 February this year, the participating countries called on Brussels to build up cooperation in such priority and promising areas as transport and energy infrastructure, scientific and technological exchanges, fight against organized crime and terrorism, mitigation of emergencies, protection of the environment, tourism and trade.

In our view, the preparation of the feasibility study of the Black Sea Ring Highway project deserves consideration as one of the first joint initiatives. This work could be carried out within the Black Sea Cross Border Cooperation Program of the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument. This idea, as far as we know, is being discussed within the framework of the above program at the initiative of our colleagues from Greece. Russia supports this initiative.

The concept of developing motorways of the sea proposed on the basis of a similar program of the European Union has started to be implemented within the BSEC. We see good prospects for implementing joint projects aimed at introducing effective mechanisms to improve the systems of transportation of hydrocarbons and interstate electric power transmission systems in the BSEC region, at using clean energy technologies.

Russia has prepared a package of specific proposals in one of the most promising areas of cooperation in the BSEC–EU format – the area of socially important matters, namely, ensuring the supplies of pharmaceuticals and medical products for the population.

It appears that the EU starts to realize the importance of a comprehensive approach to cooperation in the Black Sea region. Moreover, the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, BSEC Member States, to the EU on 1 January 2007 has not only brought

the EU borders right to the Black Sea shore, but also has made clear that it is not possible to ignore the Black Sea Economic Cooperation any longer.

For this reason, both Russia and the BSEC as a whole welcomed the idea, put forward last year in Brussels, of holding a meeting at the foreign ministers' level to discuss the prospects for further interaction between the two organizations. In the same vein, they appreciated the European Commission's request for observer status with the BSEC, which was approved unanimously by the participating countries in June 2007.

Striving to establish truly equal partnerships between the BSEC and the EU, Russia did not support the final document of the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Black Sea region and the European Union countries held on 14 February 2008 in Kiev in the framework of the EU Black Sea Synergy policy, which, in our view, did not reflect this principle.

We are convinced, however, that the BSEC and the EU may become meaningful partners in the implementation of projects that would have value added for the Black Sea region, and are ready to work in this direction. The Russian Federation stands ready to participate in the preparations for a ministerial meeting in the BSEC-EU format, which would eventually launch the process of cooperation between the two organizations. A special meeting of the BSEC Council of Foreign Ministers held in Kiev decided to start the development of a road map for the BSEC-EU cooperation. The first meeting of the corresponding expert group was held at the beginning of April. We hope that their work would bear fruit.

Russia has a rich and multifaceted experience of relations with the European Union. We are convinced that we will be able to enrich our mutual relations further through our cooperation in the Black Sea region.