

Revisiting the Importance of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in a Changing Regional and International Geopolitical Landscape

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Abstract: The Black Sea region, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has historical significance dating back centuries. However, it was during the dissolution of the USSR and the discovery of significant reserves of hydrocarbons in the Caspian Sea area regained international attention. This transformation has been continued by a complex interplay of international and regional events, including the Azerbaijan-Armenia and Russia-Ukraine conflicts. Conversely, the Black Sea's geopolitical significance for trade, logistics, and other purposes has been bolstered through international initiatives like the Global Gateway Project (GGP) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and regional projects such as Development Road (DR) and Zangezur Corridor having a potential to transform the Black Sea into a central hub for global trade and logistics. In this context, the Russia-Ukraine war, which commenced in 2022, has elevated the strategic significance of the Black Sea. This conflict has led to an internationally worrying process for the flow of energy and food supply. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, founded in 1992, demonstrates a distinctive and favorable model of multilateral political and economic collaboration, covering a vast geographical area and encompassing diverse member states. Despite criticisms regarding its efficiency, the BSEC's achievements in fostering economic cooperation among its member states are noteworthy. This article employs a descriptive methodology informed by geopolitical analysis, to comprehend the intricate dynamics of the Black Sea region. The article re-evaluates the importance of BSEC, as a regional organization.

Keywords: Black Sea Region, Geopolitics, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Russia-Ukraine Conflict, NATO's Enlargement

Introduction

Regional integration, defined by Simon Hix, a political economist, comprises institutions voluntarily created by nation-states for the purpose of collective management. This integration can manifest in various domains, including economic, military, and sports. Specifically, economic integration is primarily characterized by the establishment of "Preferential Trade Agreements" among independent states. Comprehending, explaining, predicting, and delineating the dynamics of regionalization still needs to be solved in global politics due to the absence of a well-developed theoretical framework. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand certain global shifts with the demise of the Soviet Union, which led to the foundation of such organizations (Şahin, 2011, p. 144). This was a transition from bipolarity to unipolarity (Krauthammer, 2002, pp. 5–6; Monteiro, 2011, p. 9). In 1999, Samuel Huntington argued that the current international system does not match any existing model of multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar. He further asserted that the current system is "a strange hybrid, a uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers (Huntington, 1999, p. 36)." It was clear that the unipolar international system led by the USA entered a new transition period at the dawn of the millennia. China's prominent major power profile in the international system is accepted as a sign that the global hegemony of the US has come to an end (Kagan, 2008, p. 86; Layne, 2018, p. 93). Against this background, the Black Sea region is affected by these changes and transformations in the international system, but at the same time, due to its geopolitical location and rich natural resources, it is an effective region in shaping the emerging new order. Recently, we see that all the major powers that stand out in the international system, such as the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia,

have projects and strategies that directly or indirectly involve the region. In such an environment, it is of serious importance to rethink the changing geopolitics of the region.

Regional country collaborations aim to cultivate relations and leverage the benefits of globalization to extend their global influence. Consequently, these regional cooperative structures are closely interconnected with the dynamics of both globalization and regionalization (Bakan & Güven, 2021, p. 530). The Black Sea area received worldwide prominence with the fall of the Soviet Union and the discovery of significant hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea basin. Since its inception in 1992, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) has represented a unique and promising form of global political and economic cooperation. Covering a vast geographical area and encompassing diverse member states Albania, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and Greece, the organization emphasizes project-based approaches, particularly in economic cooperation (Erhan, 2006, pp. 414–415). However, the region remained relatively overlooked in international politics, consequently affecting the BSEC's level of engagement for an extended period. However, the Russian-Ukrainian war significantly elevated the importance of BSEC in both geo-economic and geopolitical contexts.

Despite criticisms regarding its efficiency, the BSEC has achieved remarkable success in fostering economic cooperation among its twelve member countries (*BSEC - Black Sea Economic Cooperation*, n.d.). One of the objectives of international organizations formed through regional cooperation is to foster collaboration among nations within the region, thereby establishing a sphere of political, economic, and social synergy and building a robust entity capable of competing with other regional and global influences. Another objective is to enable cooperating countries to safeguard and advance their interests within the global framework by jointly creating new centers of power in partnership with regional cooperative organizations (Karagül, 2017, p. 13). This article attempts to address the problems posed by the diversity of member states considering size, economic development, security problems, and foreign policy agendas while emphasizing the organization's unique role in promoting cooperation and peace among littoral governments.

To assess the significance of the Black Sea region in general and regional organizations such as the BSEC in particular in terms of geopolitics and geo-economics, the article evaluates the approaches of international powers towards this region and makes predictions about how this region will be affected politically, economically, and sociologically in the future. It acknowledges that NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and Russia's perception of the region as a sphere of influence has heightened tension in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia region. Hence, the majority of conflicts in the region originate from the interplay of these factors. It can be argued that these two factors present significant challenges to the economic development and security of the region. The factors deemed to be opportunities are divided into global and regional projects.

This article employs a descriptive method guided by geopolitical analysis, with a particular emphasis on comprehending the complex dynamics of the Region. The descriptive method can be employed in Geopolitical Analysis through various approaches such as description, standardization, terminology definition, synthesis, and conclusion drawing (Mazis & Troulis, 2020; Naji & Jawan, 2011). The article's discussion and analysis focus on various international and regional projects initiated or proposed by international and regional actors. These include the European Union's GGP, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Türkiye's Development Road (Kamadan, 2024), and Türkiye and Azerbaijan's Zangezur Corridor (Zengezur Koridoru, 2023). In this context, the essay examines the significance of the Organization of the BSEC. The projects serve as significant focus areas for evaluating the current geopolitical context and understanding how they connect with the larger geopolitical interests and dynamics in the region. The research employs this method to analyze the influence of these projects on regional cooperation, security, economic development, and strategic positioning within the region. In essence, the article conducts an analysis, using geopolitical and geo-economics factors such as the

Russia-Ukraine conflict, the role of Türkiye, Russia, and NATO in the region, regional and international projects like the BRI, GGP, Development Road Project, Zangezur Corridor projects to examine the BSEC and its role within the broader geopolitical landscape of the region. On the other hand, it assesses the security risks such as NATO's expansion in the region and Russia's actions toward the region that gripped the region. The reason for choosing such a method is to explore how the security and economic implications of these factors have influenced the functioning of BSEC and assess the organization's effectiveness in addressing regional challenges and opportunities. All in all, the article sheds light on both the shadowing role and objectives of these factors on the overall security environment and economic development of the region.

To do this, the first section of the article assesses the geostrategic and geo-economics importance of the Region. The second section evaluates regional and international Projects that include the region as a passage or hub to make a proper assessment of the geopolitical importance of the region for regional and international powers such as NATO, the EU, Türkiye, and Russia. The third section gives a background description of the BSEC organization and its role in the overall impact on the interconnectedness of the region and economic development. The last section is the conclusion which presents a concise and insightful summary of the key findings and implications derived from the analysis.

1. The Geopolitical Importance of the Black Sea Region

The Black Sea region has emerged as a focal point in recent years, as major global powers, including Russia, the United States, and the European Union, engage in increasingly intense competition. In the past, the Black Sea region represented a barrier to communication, serving to separate the East and West. However, recent developments suggest that it may now become a conduit for trade and interaction with other regions, particularly the Middle East, Central Asia and potentially even beyond (Apakan, 2010). The area, situated at the nexus of EU and NATO expansion and the US-led "global war on terror," has acquired new prominence, particularly in the wake of 9/11. Its strategic location at the crossroads of energy transportation and a thriving economic hub has elevated its geopolitical significance. Consequently, the area has witnessed intensified competition among major countries, with each pursuing exclusive and divisive regional policies in order to expand their influence and secure their supremacy. This competition has also ensnared smaller Black Sea nations, compelling them to become unwitting participants in a geopolitical game (Aydin & Triantaphyllou, 2010, p. 23).

The Black Sea connects the energy resources of the Caspian region with the Central Asian countries as a critical energy gateway between Europe and Asia. In the last two decades, the importance of energy resources to be transported via the Black Sea has become more evident due to crises and security concerns in the Middle East (Ketenci, 2023). The region, which is situated at the nexus of regional and global projects, is believed to have a leading role in the global supply chain. A comprehensive assessment of regional and global risks and opportunities is of critical importance in terms of geopolitics and geo-economics.

COVID-19 has seriously affected production and logistics lines from Europe to Asia, and from Africa to America. However, with the development of the vaccine, 2022 was considered to be the year of recovery for the world economy. Nevertheless, Russian military operations in Ukraine and its border turned into a major international crisis on February 24, 2022 (*Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı küresel ekonomiyi nasıl etkiledi?*, 2023), especially in terms of both energy lines and food security. In short, this crisis was not only limited to regional effects but its effects were felt on a global scale. These developments are of significant consequence, as they demonstrate the region's capacity to exert influence on the global economy and politics.

1.1. Regional and International Projects Passing through the Black Sea Region

Recently, it has been envisaged that the European Union (EU) considers making significant investments to strengthen cooperation and interaction between Central Asian countries and Europe by

investing in areas such as energy, logistics, technology, digital infrastructure, R&D, education and health throughout the Europe-Black Sea basin and Central Asia. The Caspian Basin, which has historically been an important crossroads for East-West trade, has great economic potential with its energy and strategic natural resources. The EU plans to work in coordination with the countries of the region to ensure the continuity and security of economic ties and supply chains with Central Asia. However, the Ukraine-Russia war has shown that the Turkish side of the Black Sea region is more stable and secure, which has significantly increased Türkiye's geopolitical importance (*New EU Strategy on Central Asia / EEAS*, n.d.). In the context of the EU enlargement policy, the recruitment of Eastern European countries has led to the emergence of the EU as a significant actor in the Black Sea region. Similarly, the EU's Eastern Partnership project has resulted in the establishment of partnerships with both Georgia and Ukraine, which have positioned the EU as neighbors of the Black Sea. Moreover, the EU has formulated a comprehensive strategy that transcends regional boundaries, exemplified by the GGP. This endeavor aspires to link the European and Central Asian continents through a network of transportation and communication infrastructure centered on the Black Sea. The region's importance to the EU agenda is evident, yet its role in regional security and development is of critical importance.

The European Union's GGP focuses on goals such as revitalizing the global economy and strengthening supply chains. The project is expected to be completed by 2027 with a budget of €300 billion. In addition, a €10 billion investment package has been prepared to create a competitive, sustainable, and smart corridor that will connect the EU to Central Asia within 15 days. This project offers important opportunities for the Black Sea Basin countries, especially for Türkiye. It includes investments in infrastructure and digital technology such as highways, railways, ports, airports, logistics, and border crossings (Tomar, 2024). As Türkiye's trade relations with the EU are at a high level, this project can provide external financing and investment opportunities for Türkiye. In addition, with the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, Türkiye can have an uninterrupted land connection with Türkiye and Central Asia. This project could also enhance Türkiye's potential as a pivotal east-west transportation hub and contribute to EU-Türkiye relations. Concurrently, by reinforcing economic activities in the region, all regional countries might benefit from this economic activity. The coordination achieved within the organization will facilitate the activities of projects with an international perspective, such as the GGP in the region. Given the problematic relations between the EU and Russia and Türkiye's improving economic relations with the EU and its integration with the EU's economic regulations, it can be reasonably assumed that Türkiye's possible route in the region is part of the GGP. It is possible that not only Türkiye and Russia, but also other regional nations, may gain significantly from the GGP once it becomes operational.

At the same time, the entire Region is also the focal point of China's BRI, also called the New Silk Road, as trade routes to Europe, the Mediterranean, and North Africa pass through the region. In particular, the trade route to Europe extends to Eastern Europe either via the Black Sea or through the coastal states. The BRI trade routes and Russian gas and oil pipelines also pass through the region (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023). While these global projects will increase the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the region, they will also contribute to the economies of the countries in the region. However, it must be said that the fact that these two international projects are directed by two different international powers carries some risks. Should the political implications of these projects be deemed more significant than their economic considerations, the region may find itself in a position where the choice between the two projects may result in the region becoming subordinated to a particular global power. Therefore, this risk can be avoided if cooperation with both the EU's GGP and China's BRI projects is kept balanced by the regional countries. In this context, BSEC countries can collaborate with both the EU and China in order to facilitate the integration of two global initiatives in the Black Sea region. Consequently, by exemplifying its efficacy in the international arena, the BSEC, as a regional organization, can serve as a model for other regional organizations.

2. Regional and International Geopolitical Dynamics in the Region

2.1. NATO's shadowing role in the region

The Black Sea region, which has undergone a significant geopolitical transformation in the post-Cold War period, has evolved from a bipolar to a polyphonic and multilateral structure. This region has become a focal point for global powers due to both geographical and political considerations. The expansion of NATO into this region is a matter of debate, with some arguing that it will not increase security, but may in fact reduce it. It is therefore important to consider how successful the organization has been and will be in ensuring stability and peace in the region.(Akdemir, 2014, p. 7) As an actor, it is of great importance for NATO to undertake the task of resolving pre- and post-Soviet conflicts within the region.

The shadowing role of NATO and its impact on both the BSEC and the overall security environment in the Region has not only affected the stability of this region but also economic integration and cooperation among the regional countries. As NATO eastward expansion continued, a series of conflicts, including the Transnistria issue in Moldova, the Georgian-Abkhaz war, the Georgian civil war, the Russia-Georgia war, the first and second Chechen wars, the 2014 and 2022 Russia-Ukraine wars, and two separate Armenian conflicts, have occurred in the region in a relatively short period. Notably, the Azerbaijan-Armenia and the Russia-Ukraine wars have brought significant attention to the Black Sea over the last few years. Russia has a direct or indirect role in some of these conflicts. Against this background, the proposal of establishing a continuous NATO naval presence in the Black Sea, supported by naval infrastructure ensuring maximum US naval presence, is perceived by Russia as a provocative move, and this has a tremendous impact on global supply chains (Speranza & Hodges, 2022). Even if this proposal is introduced under the framework of the Montreux Convention, it could be viewed as a declaration of hostility by Russia, which prefers to have neutral states between itself and NATO, in other words, a buffer zone that would prevent the two sides in direct confrontation (Mearsheimer, 1990, 2001, 2019). This proposal essentially reflects the idea of transforming the Black Sea into a NATO-controlled body of water, a notion that directly challenges Russia's aim to maintain the region as a neutral space. Consequently, this could turn the Black Sea into a perpetual zone of conflict and result in a conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Kılıç Yaşın, 2022). NATO has made it very clear, as evidenced by the adoption of its new Strategic Concept at the Madrid Summit in June 2022, that the Euro-Atlantic region faces its most pronounced security risk from Russia (Clapp, 2022; NATO, n.d.-a). The strategic relevance of the Black Sea area is deeply intertwined with the security of NATO and its partners (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 3).

As a key regional power, Türkiye had established various military formations to ensure security in the region, including the participation of regional countries. The BSEC organization was operational, along with initiatives like "Blackseafor (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group)" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), Black Sea Harmony(*More on Operation Black Sea Harmony*, 2009), and Black Sea Littoral States Border/Coast Guard Agencies Cooperation Forum (BSCF) (*BSCF*, 2021). Russia was involved in these efforts, and joint regular exercises were conducted. Russia also actively participated in NATO's Active Endeavor and contributed to regional security, including reducing security threats such as smuggling, for all Black Sea coastal states before 2014. However, in 2014, when sanctions were imposed on Russia, these activities came to a halt, and countries ceased sending their ships to joint exercises. The economic, political, security, and military cooperation structures established by Türkiye, with substantial effort and initiative to involve Black Sea countries, had effectively addressed the reasons cited by the USA for its presence in the Black Sea.

Recently, discussions about the proposal to establish a continuous NATO naval presence throughout the year, supported by a naval infrastructure ensuring maximum US naval presence, raise concerns, particularly with the phrase "maximum US naval presence." While there are existing maritime cooperation arrangements involving all Black Sea coastal states and open to NATO participation, a shift

towards a military structure that seems to target one specific coastal state is likely to disrupt peace and stability in the region. This has the potential for a series of conflicts, which could ultimately result in a prolonged period of armed conflict in the region (Hodges, 2021).

Overall, NATO's initiatives to expand its influence and operational capability in the region may not resolve existing issues and could potentially incite new regional conflicts. The reservations of regional countries persist, and fragmenting NATO membership may weaken its effectiveness as a deterrent against other regional nations, jeopardizing regional stability. NATO might inadvertently become a source of problems rather than a solution, which is contrary to its mission. It could be more advantageous for the future of the region to support existing structures in the region, enhance their functionality, and collaborate with other organizations. In this regard, NATO may opt to engage in cooperation with regional organizations instead of expanding further into the region. NATO's initiatives in the region's security framework have led to a deterioration in relations between Russia, a significant regional power alongside Turkey, and NATO. Russia's military intervention in Ukraine following Georgia can, in part, be attributed to NATO's security-oriented approach to the region. (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 34) These conflicts and wars represent a significant obstacle to BSEC's ability to achieve regional harmony and coordination.

2.2. The EU's dual approach toward the region and BSEC

As an influential actor on the global stage, the EU's approach to the BSEC is of significant consequence for the organization's overall effectiveness. Consequently, it is essential to assess the EU's stance towards BSEC. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the EU accelerated its enlargement strategy and most of the post-Soviet countries became members of the EU (*The Enlargement of the Union*, 2023). The BSEC was established to foster economic development and integration among the countries that had emerged from the Soviet Union. As an organization dedicated to economic matters, its activities would undoubtedly be influenced by the actions of the EU, which encompasses a multitude of domains, including political, cultural, and economic.

A distinction must be made between the EU's regional role and its approach to BSEC. Despite the EU's recognition of the Black Sea region as a geostrategically important area, and its introduction of numerous projects designed to enhance the EU's effectiveness in the region, its engagement with BSEC has been largely peripheral. The EU has ignored BSEC for some reasons since its establishment. BSEC was seen as an organization that could not be effective due to institutional and resource constraints. However, the most important reason is that BSEC is seen by the EU as an organization under the control of Türkiye and Russia (Japaridze et al., 2010, pp. 12–13).

On the one hand, when examining the membership of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which is a joint initiative involving the EU, its member states, and six Eastern European partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine), one can observe a clear dichotomy between the EU and the Eastern Partnership (Eastern Partnership | EEAS, 2022). In contrast, the Three Seas Initiative, an initiative that brings together 12 EU member states situated between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas, presents a different set of circumstances (Three Seas Story, 2024). The two initiatives are led by the EU, with one comprising non-EU member Black Sea region states and the other including EU member states. Türkiye and Russia are not included in either of these two initiatives. One can therefore conclude that the Three Seas is an EU member organization, which precludes Türkiye and Russia from participating. Nevertheless, the EAP is a non-EU initiative that does not include Türkiye and Russia. Within this context, it is evident that the EU's approach to the BSEC is not constructive and that its objective is to discredit the BSEC. One might argue that the exclusion of Russia from these initiatives, which the EU leads outside of BSEC, is indicative of a Western-centered strategy. It is evident that this does not explain why Türkiye, a member of NATO and the leading power in the Black Sea region, is isolated from these initiatives created by the EU. It is clear that the EU not only refrains from supporting a regional platform led by Türkiye but also renders BSEC dysfunctional by creating alternative platforms.

One of the reasons why the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) has not been able to make significant progress since its inception is the lack of constructive bilateral relations between the countries of the region. At the international level, the EU and the United States have adopted an unconstructive approach, which has been effective in influencing the course of events.

Apart from this unconstructive attitude of the EU, we see that it is working in coordination with BSEC on the Black Sea Synergy initiative. The Black Sea Synergy was formally launched at a joint meeting of the European Union and Black Sea Foreign Ministers in Kyiv in February 2008. Although the EU addresses BSEC institutionally within the scope of the BSS, the initiative is EU-centered and BSEC within the scope of the initiative. The EU considers the BSEC as a secondary organization rather than an effective organization. We see that the EU's seemingly well-intentioned initiatives, such as the BSS, are not realized with a very constructive intention.

In conclusion, while the EU's eastward expansion may initially appear beneficial in terms of enhancing BSEC activity, it becomes evident that this is not actually the case. To effect meaningful change in the EU's approach, it is necessary to engage with BSEC and other relevant parties, including Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Greece, all of which are also EU member states. This will facilitate enhanced collaboration between the two entities. Furthermore, the EU's role as a mediator and constructive actor in regional crises, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, will facilitate the resolution of disputes between BSEC members, while enhancing the organization's regional and international effectiveness (Japaridze et al., 2010, pp. 14–18). EU initiatives can serve as a platform for the two organizations to coordinate their efforts. For instance, within the scope of the EU's global project, Global Gateway, rather than contacting individual regional countries, collaboration can be made with all members through BSEC. This will both save the EU's resources and time and ensure effective coordination. All in all, the EU and the member states of the BSEC focus their efforts on a select number of key projects and objectives that can be effectively implemented and achieved within the context of a regional framework (Japaridze et al., 2010, p. 25).

2.3. Russia's actions and Russia-Ukraine conflict

Russia's policy toward regional countries, particularly ex-Soviet Union countries and the Russia-Ukraine conflict had a considerable impact on BSEC and the broader geopolitical landscape of the region. As it has been examined in the previous section, the region also hosts the security and military-based mindset of the US, which sees the region as a region to contain and deter Russia, impacting regional security and stability negatively. On the other hand, Russia's view of the countries between itself and the European Union as a buffer zone, and its tendency to see the region as its backyard, have also caused the same negative concerns for the region (Al & Özdil, 2017, p. 152). The countries with the most important relations in the Black Sea region are Russia and Ukraine, and in this respect, these two countries, which are politically and economically intricate in the region, are extremely important for the energy, economic and geo-strategic policies of this region. Russia sees Ukraine as critical for its national security. Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU, NATO and the USA has further deepened the Russia-Ukraine crisis (Dinler, 2019).

During the 1990s and 2000s, several changes linked to the deterioration of the Black Sea's dominant order. The widespread assumption at the time was that the conflict between the two world superpowers, the United States and its most probable adversary, China, was gradually shifting the intensity of geopolitical struggle to the Asia-Pacific. First, Russia's growing dissatisfaction with the EU and NATO over their "mutual neighborhood" in the Caucasus and Ukraine, and second, the unexpected rise of Daesh in the Middle East, along with the safety and geopolitical factors that arose have transformed the geopolitical value of the region (Shlykov, 2018, p. 99). The ongoing conflict between the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the EU, which are inherently incompatible, has only served to accentuate the geo-economic divide in the region. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has served to illustrate this incompatibility.

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow has strengthened the peninsula's military capabilities, in line with the bastion doctrine. This upgrade intends to allow Russia to efficiently confront possible threats in regions far from its own borders. Russia has strengthened its land-based early warning and armament systems, as well as equipping its Black Sea Fleet with long-range land and sea missiles. Since 2014, Moscow's military expansion has strengthened its claim to regional supremacy while also placing pressure on neighboring states (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 2).

In reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO and certain Western partners increased the amount of military forces in the region. NATO's "Air Policing" campaign saw aircraft from partner troops begin air patrols over the Black Sea, Romania, and Bulgaria. Following the NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016, a "Tailored Forward Presence" (*NATO - Topic: NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance*, 2023; *PMC Romania*, n.d.) was formed in Romania and Bulgaria. The agreements reached at the Madrid Summit in 2022 served as the foundation for the establishment of the newly formed NATO battle groups in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (Atlamazoglou, n.d.; Macias, 2022; NATO, n.d.-b). These NATO troops are intended to bolster the Alliance's primary role of deterrence and defense. This deployment led to a doubling of the number of US troops in Romania, from roughly 1,000 in January 2022 to around 3,000 currently. Along with the dispatch of the 101st Airborne Division,¹ the US sent proficiently trained and combat-capable units to Romania, a strategically important territory. Furthermore, the US benefits from the presence of these units and their closeness to the region. There is a constant soldier presence in Ukraine to support ongoing reconnaissance and intelligence-collecting operations. Additionally, drones are often deployed in international airspace above the Black Sea. Romania began to play an increasingly important role in the Allied and American presence in the Black Sea area, where efforts were made to strengthen NATO's deterrent and defensive capability (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, pp. 3–4).

All in all, the war between Russia and Ukraine, which are members of the BSEC, has significantly affected the activities and effectiveness of the organization. According to a study examining the changes in the export and import rates of the countries in the region, most of the countries of the Black Sea region have experienced positive changes in the overall export and import of products. (Nate et al., 2024, pp. 264–265) Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has resulted in a surge in prices and significant disruptions to food security. The ongoing conflict has not only affected the availability and cost of food supplies but has also created widespread economic instability, affecting global markets and access to essential resources. (Nate et al., 2024, p. 258) Thus, it is important to note that the effectiveness of BSEC will diminish as the Russia-Ukraine war persists. This will facilitate the ability of global powers such as the EU and the US to influence the regional balance in their favor. While some BSEC member countries may not express concern, it is evident that Russia and Turkey will feel serious discomfort. It is crucial to highlight that the divergent interests and aspirations of regional countries represent a significant impediment to the efficacy of BSEC.

2.4. Türkiye as a key actor

The entrenched historical tensions between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the region continue to impact how the Western world views the relationship between Russia and Türkiye today. According to some analysts, the current partnership is perceived as an "unusual historical occurrence." This perspective overlooks the changing dynamics in Moscow-Ankara relations following the decline of both empires and underplays the enduring importance of the Montreux Convention for Türkiye.² The

¹ "101st Airborne Division (Air Assault): FORT CAMPBELL," U.S. Army, accessed October 28, 2023, <https://home.army.mil/campbell/101st>.

² "Implementation of the Montreux Convention / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs," accessed October 29, 2023, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa>; "Montreux Convention (1936) | Türkiye & Dardanelles | Britannica," accessed October 29, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Montreux-Convention>; Yücel Acer, "Russia's Attack on Ukraine: The Montreux Convention and Türkiye," *International Law Studies* 100, no. 1 (April 14, 2023), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol100/iss1/8>.

1936 Convention provided Türkiye control over the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles, restricting (*II. Convention Relating to the Régime of the Straits / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, n.d.) not only access via these straits but also the period of vessel deployment, affecting the Black Sea's military balance (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 1). As a regional state, Türkiye poses the most serious military and political challenge to Russia in the Black Sea area. The region has a history of political and military power struggles between Türkiye and Russia. Nevertheless, it is plausible to suggest that the recent positive and close relations between Türkiye and Russia indicate an emerging approach towards the region that envisages greater collaboration. Türkiye views Russia as an important economic partner and the most significant deterrent power in the region. It is important to note that the developing economic relations have a significant impact on the Turkish economy. For these reasons, Türkiye seeks to maintain cordial relations with Russia, despite the strained ties between the West and Russia. Despite being a NATO member, Türkiye has opted not to conform to the Western rhetoric and approach toward Russia. While Türkiye does not wish to engage in a direct military confrontation with its neighbor, it also seeks to protect the development of its commercial relations. Russia holds similar views towards Türkiye. Russia, which is keen to avoid any deterioration in its close relations with Türkiye, a NATO member, is also influencing its strategy of creating cracks in the Western alliance by deepening its relations with Türkiye. However, one of the most significant factors is that Russia views Türkiye as a gateway to the West, particularly in light of the economic and political sanctions imposed by the West, especially given the situation with Ukraine. Russia is therefore keen to avoid any damage to its bilateral relations. The relations between Türkiye and Russia, two of the most influential powers in the region, are of great significance for the security and economic development of the region. Nevertheless, it is challenging to ascertain the extent to which and for how long these two countries will be able to maintain close relations in the context of rapidly evolving global dynamics.

The global supply chains, which had already been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, were confronted with a new challenge with the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2021. It was evident that the conflict between two countries that collectively account for a significant portion of the world's grain production would have a profound impact on regions grappling with famine, particularly in Africa. The circumstances and the cordiality of Turkish-Russian relations proved instrumental in mitigating the effects of this crisis, although only briefly. Türkiye played a pivotal role in resolving the global grain crisis, assuming the role of mediator between Russia and Ukraine with the support of the United Nations. Türkiye played an instrumental role in facilitating the delivery of grain from Russia and Ukraine to other parts of the world through the Black Sea Grain Corridor project, which was established in Istanbul (Bayazıt & Gürbüz, 2023, p. 2221). The agreement was terminated in July 2023 with Russia's withdrawal, and the world is once again confronted with the aforementioned risk. It is of paramount importance that Türkiye and Russia continue to work in coordination with one another, not only for the security of the region but also for the stability of the wider international community (Bayazıt & Gürbüz, 2023, pp. 2217–2220). Overall, this tense and conflicting process between Russia and Ukraine not only had an impact on the economies of the countries in the region but also affected BSEC's ability to continue its activities more effectively (Yalçinkaya, 2017, p. 14).

Öçal and Öztürk conducted research on the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on Türkiye-Ukraine trade relations. Their findings revealed significant discrepancies in the changes in export and import product categories before and after the war. Notably, the research indicated a notable increase in Türkiye's exports to Ukraine of food products, aircraft, automobiles, and military-industrial equipment (Öçal & Öztürk, 2022, pp. 594–595). In contrast, Sezgin emphasizes in his analysis that the war between Ukraine and Russia may have a detrimental impact on the Turkish economy. It is not inaccurate to suggest that these negative effects, which are reflected in the economy of Türkiye, the region's dominant power, are also reflected in other nations in the region (Sezgin, 2022, pp. 550–557).

Another analysis estimates that Türkiye would lose at least \$10 billion in international commerce as a result of the ongoing conflict and the subsequent period of reduced trade (Alkanalka et al., 2022, p. 12).

Turkey has recently emerged as a key player in the region, spearheading several significant initiatives. The implementation of Turkey's Zangezur and Development Road corridors projects is poised to elevate the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea Region to new heights. These projects, which are designed to transform Turkey's role in the region and beyond, have the potential to expand the scope of cooperation with BSEC countries. Turkey has demonstrated a profound and unwavering commitment to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the principles it espouses. Turkey serves as the host country for the Organization's permanent international secretariat, as well as the secretariats of two related bodies: the BSEC Business Council, which represents the private sectors of the member countries, and the Parliamentary Assembly of BSEC, which represents the parliamentary dimension of Black Sea Cooperation (Apakan, 2010). Overall, Türkiye benefits from its participation in the BSEC, securing notable economic, political, and energy-related gains. However, beyond this, the organization functions as a forum for maintaining transparent communication between member states and facilitating mutual assistance. This is of particular value to Türkiye, particularly during periods of strained bilateral relations with certain member states (Bozkus, 2019, p. 189).

3. The BSEC as a Regional Organization

The establishment of regional cooperation organizations by countries, influenced by globalization and changes in communication and transportation, has led to an increase in countries' interdependence and, as a result, dependency relations. These organizations have had a significant impact on the shape of international relations. The intensified cross-border interactions have enabled countries to diversify and expand their mutual economic activities. This situation has had a positive effect on regional cooperation organizations, both regionally and globally, in terms of qualitative development and quantitative growth (Bakan & Güven, 2021, p. 531).

Reduced obstacles to global transactions and the widespread adoption of information technology have been driving the growing interconnectedness of global markets. While not a recent trend, the term 'globalization' has gained popularity since the 1990s to characterize the increasingly intertwined global economy, resulting in increased trade, outsourcing of production and services, and the movement of talented experts (Hummels, 2007). As these tendencies have proceeded, regional economic integration has strengthened as a result of deeper institutional ties and considerable market forces. Each country is currently involved in regional trade agreements and affiliated with at least one regional trade body. A significant portion of global trade, over a third, occurs within these agreements. The primary goal of these regional pacts is to lower trade barriers among member nations, which, in essence, results in a form of trade preference for member-to-member trade compared to trade with non-member countries (Dees et al., 2008, p. 5). The undeniable regulatory impact of regional cooperation on international issues is evident. While economic-focused regional cooperation enhances the trade relationships among member nations, it also influences their political, social, and security ties. Regional collaborations offer several advantages, including the creation of a peaceful and trustworthy environment that effectively reduces areas of conflict and potential tensions, minimizing potential risks. In this context, these partnerships yield significant benefits by establishing a sphere of influence that prevents potential political, economic, and social issues between member countries. They also present fresh opportunities for countries to address their existing challenges and make positive contributions to regional political and economic stability (Bakan & Güven, 2021, pp. 529–530).

The BSEC was initially conceived as a means of establishing a free trade zone between countries situated along the Black Sea coast. Nevertheless, subsequent summits and meetings will assess the organization in terms of its economic cooperation. (Bakan & Güven, 2021, p. 535) The inception of the BSEC can be attributed to retired ambassador Şükrü Elekdağ. In his 1989 writings, Elekdağ emphasized that Türkiye's geographical presence spans the Middle East, Europe, Asia, the Caucasus, the Black Sea,

and the Mediterranean, and he advocated that regional cooperation could open up new opportunities for Türkiye. The geopolitical landscape following the Cold War presented the conditions for fostering such cooperation in the Region (Altıntaş, 2006, pp. 640–641). It was the 8th President of Türkiye Turgut Özal, who translated Elekdag's proposal into the BSEC organization (Cağiran, 2000, p. 6). The dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted Turkey to recognize its role as a regional mediator and to assume an active role in maintaining peace and stability in the region (Kona, 2003, p. 42).

Recent events in the region and international politics have forced the "Wider Black Sea region" into the global limelight, transforming it from a periphery to a primary focus of world affairs. The phrase "Wider Black Sea region" refers to a large territory stretching from southeastern Europe to the western borders of the Caspian Sea and it has a political resonance rather than a purely geographic one (Gaber, 2018, p. 201). According to this concept, the region, which includes only six coastal republics, is inextricably tied to the larger areas of the Caucasus, Caspian, and Balkans owing to geological, economic, and sociopolitical considerations. This region's strategic location acts as a natural bridge connecting Europe, Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, making it a critical commerce route and a crucial channel for energy transportation (Kunt Akin, 2010).

Due to its instability and significance as an energy route, the broader Black Sea region has attracted multiple actors in what is referred to as the "New Great Game" (Kunt Akin, 2010). These actors include the Black Sea littoral states as "local players," influential "external players" like the USA, EU, China, and Iran, "regional intergovernmental players" such as BSEC, GUAM-Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, and the Black Sea Forum, as well as "global intergovernmental players" like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations (UN), NATO, and the Council of Europe (Kunt Akin, 2010). Numerous non-governmental organizations and multinational companies are also involved. (Celac & Manoli, 2006, p. 193) Each of these active participants in the "New Great Game" follows its particular strategic political and economic strategies and preferences. Shortly after the Cold War, regionalization trends grew in the Black Sea area as a response to the incompatible interests of the regional states. In today's globalized world, regional cooperation has been regarded as a critical instrument for guaranteeing stability, tackling economic transition issues, and strengthening linkages with existing European economic and security frameworks (Celac & Manoli, 2006, pp. 193–194).

According to the most recent statistics from 2022, the total population of the Organization of the BSEC countries is 340 million. The GDP (current prices) is estimated at 3.570 trillion USD, representing a GDP/World GDP ratio of 3.71%. Exports are valued at 1.097 billion USD, while imports are estimated at 992 billion USD. The share of world exports is 4.6%, while the share of world imports is 4% (BSEC - Black Sea Economic Cooperation, n.d.; Karadeniz Ekonomik İşbirliği Teşkilatı (KEİ), 2023).

To gain an in-depth understanding of the activities and initiatives pursued by the BSEC, it is necessary to examine the areas of focus and the projects that have been implemented. Mechanisms such as the "E-commerce, Single Window, and Information Exchange Mechanism," implemented within the BSEC, are designed to facilitate coordination and trade between member countries.

The "E-commerce" project encompasses the "BSEC Cooperation Framework in E-Commerce" document, prepared by Russia, which outlines the framework for cross-border e-commerce and cooperation in cross-border trade. It also addresses the need to enhance e-commerce capacity and strengthen public-private sector cooperation. The document includes action suggestions that will facilitate e-commerce among member countries, particularly in the areas of developing e-commerce infrastructure. The document, which was adopted at the working group meeting held on November 10, 2020, was presented to the BSEC Senior Officials Committee and approved at the 43rd Meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs on June 30, 2021 (Karadeniz Ekonomik İşbirliği Teşkilatı (KEİ), 2023). Russia once again proposed the "Single Window" system in the document titled "BSEC Cooperation Framework in Single Window Systems." The document outlines three main areas of focus

for member countries: "harmonization of single window systems in the multilateral platform," "development of national single window systems," and "increasing capacity in the field of single window." The document includes a series of action suggestions that aim to facilitate trade between countries. The document was finalized at the Working Group meeting on May 4, 2017, and presented to the BSEC Senior Officials Committee (*Karadeniz Ekonomik İşbirliği Teşkilatı (KEİ)*, 2023).

The "Information Exchange Mechanism" is a mechanism that envisages the sharing of information on various issues between BSEC member countries, including foreign trade regimes, standards, investment opportunities, export, import, and transit procedures. This information is then analyzed and suggestions for improvements in cooperation are produced. As of the end of 2023, the Working Group continues to evaluate the project. The implementation of this project will facilitate trade between member countries and result in the creation of a valuable database that will benefit regional companies operating in these countries. As can be seen, the BSEC focuses on accelerating and facilitating trade between member countries and ensuring a healthier exchange of information. The latest areas that the organization has been discussing to improve are Culture, Environmental Protection, Emergency Assistance/Seismic Risk, Exchange of Statistical Data and Economic Information, Transport, and the BSEC Project Development Fund (Permanent International Secretariat (PERMIS)BSEC, 2024, p. 5). These projects and practices contribute to the growth of the countries' trade volumes as well as the organization's economic and political integration by promoting commercial relations among member countries and prioritizing economically complementary relations and activities within the framework of the BSEC's objectives (Bakan & Güven, 2021, p. 543).

While assessing the political objectives of the BSEC, Sander states that it seeks to benefit from the new international environment created by the increasing influence of Europe, to strengthen political understanding and cooperation after the completion of the economic infrastructure, and to encourage the active participation of member countries in the European integration process. In this context, he states that the BSEC aims to be a European organization and an integral part of the developing European architecture (Sander, 1993, p. 396). Oktay, on the other hand, emphasizes that the BSEC strengthens regional solidarity and increases dialogue between countries despite the problems. He claims that it had a significant part in overcoming the region's uncertainties in the post-Cold War period. He emphasizes that, from the Turkish perspective, the ultimate goals of the BSEC have been achieved and an environment of economic cooperation and integration has been created (Oktay, 1989, p. 150). Within the framework of BSEC, studies on liberalizing trade in the region and removing obstacles to trade are carried out by the Trade and Economic Development Working Group. The working group's primary focus areas are sharing experience on national trade facilitation committees, cooperation on border crossing points, and e-commerce. This integration is not merely a means of enhancing productivity; it also serves to ensure the optimal utilization and distribution of existing resources, fosters competition across various sectors, and minimizes market risks. Furthermore, they are increasing their investments in research and development, which is essential for long-term growth (Permanent International Secretariat (PERMIS)BSEC, 2024, pp. 1-14).

It should be noted that one of the most important concrete steps taken among the member countries is the Black Sea Foreign Trade and Investment Bank. While the Bank supports projects in member countries, it takes care to ensure a balanced distribution among all members (Bakan & Güven, 2021, p. 543; Yalçinkaya, 2017, pp. 12-13).

Conclusion

The article revealed that regional organizations such as the BSEC were seriously affected by the agendas of global and regional powers. On the one hand, specific cases in the region, NATO's expansion, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, have caused security problems and instability which causes uncertainty and creates risks for long-term investments for sustainable development of regional countries. On the other hand, initiatives from the EU, China, and Türkiye can stimulate economic development in the region. The

European Union (EU) has adopted a dual approach to engaging with the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). On the one hand, the EU has initiated a series of initiatives to influence the activities and direction of the BSEC. Concurrently, the EU has established parallel organizations, which are designed to replicate the structure of the BSEC. This dual approach has the effect of limiting the capacity of the BSEC to play an active role in the regional and international arenas. It appears that the EU is more inclined to pursue projects under its own control than to entrust the direction of these projects to an organization that is under the active leadership of Russia and Turkey.

The Russia-Ukraine war serves as a case for assessing the BSEC and its role in the region's larger geopolitical context. It also allows for an assessment of the BSEC's efficacy in handling regional issues and opportunities, offering insight into its function in the context of a major geopolitical crisis. Despite the absence of any tangible activity or initiative on the part of the BSEC to address the crisis, the organization has nonetheless served as a platform for Russia and Ukraine, two countries engaged in armed conflict, to engage in reconciliation. This situation ensures that the previously obstructed diplomatic channels between the two countries are now somehow accessible, and that communication between them is occurring. The most illustrative example of this phenomenon was the fact that the two countries were able to convene for the first time at the BSEC meeting following the crisis involving Türkiye and Russia over the downing of a Russian plane. On July 1, 2016, during a meeting of foreign ministers from the BSEC member states in the Russian resort of Sochi, the Turkish Foreign Minister held a meeting with his Russian counterpart (Bozkus, 2019, p. 189). This encounter represented a significant advance in the reestablishment of cordial relations between the two nations, following a period of crisis. In this context, Türkiye or another member of the organization could facilitate a meeting between all BSEC countries to act as a mediator crisis in the region such as the Russian and Ukrainian and, the Armenia-Azerbaijan wars. The participation of NATO in the region appears to throw a pall over the BSEC and shape the security situation. Interactions between international entities in this strategically crucial area provide unique insights into the region's complicated dynamics and power struggles. The BSEC's position as a facilitator of regional stability, economic engagement, and a forum for harmonizing its member nations' different interests is critical to the shifting geopolitics of the region. While international actors' projects have the potential to contribute to regional peace and development, the interest of global and regional actors in the region may create an environment of more competition, which may lead to conflicts and tension in the region. As has been the case in NATO's eastward expansion, this could have a negative impact on regional stability. However, it must be noted that the EU's GGP and China's BRI projects are mostly focused on infrastructure, economic development, and connectedness.

Despite the regional, international, and internal challenges and shortcomings that the BSEC faces, there is an effort to develop a strategy to overcome these difficulties. In this way, we see that the BSEC is attempting to create harmony and coordination among its member countries with the projects it has implemented and plans to implement. These efforts of the organization may be successful in the long term by contributing to regional development and solving problems. As the region becomes increasingly contested by external powers, the non-political agenda of the BSEC will remain vulnerable to negative influence.

Overall, it is imperative for all stakeholders to strengthen cooperation within the region and expand it to other objectives. It is clear that, for the foreseeable future, the stability of the wider region will depend heavily on cooperation in several areas, including security and energy. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive cooperation in the region. To this end, it is clear that regional countries and international actors acting and cooperating within the framework of this common ideal will not only contribute to the security and development of the region but will also contribute to international peace. The BSEC countries can make progress in terms of mutual gain by acting in cooperation with China's BRI, EU's GGP, Türkiye's Development Road, and Zangezur Corridor projects.

The interconnectedness of the region with Central Asia and the Middle East will give opportunities for these countries to sustain their economic development. It is important to develop approaches based on the cooperation perspective mentioned above, instead of approaches that threaten the security of the region, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the expansion strategy followed by NATO in the region. These security-based perspectives cause instability and unrest in the region.

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