

Translation

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**Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea and Danube Regions:
Addressing Challenges and Providing Perspectives**

Keynote speech

I am delighted to be here in Sofia.

I am delighted that this conference will be examining a very topical issue.

And I am delighted to have this opportunity to welcome you twice over: firstly, on behalf of the German Government and the Federal Foreign Office; secondly, on behalf of the South-East Europe Association in Munich, the major German research and cultural organization which focuses on all 14 countries in South-East Europe and which lent a helping hand in the preparation of this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The American marine geologists Walter Pitman and William Ryan are firmly convinced that 8000 years ago a spectacular natural disaster took place near today's Istanbul. At that time, the two scientists believe, the Black Sea was situated 150 m lower than the Mediterranean, separated from it by a dam. When this dam broke, a flood wave 200 times more powerful than the Niagara Falls poured into the Black Sea, inundated 100,000 km² with lightning speed – that is to say, an area twice as large as Switzerland – killed countless people, destroyed their settlements, provoked panic and triggered off a mass exodus. Pitman and Ryan believe that this explains the Bible story about the Great Flood.

If they are right – something, however, we certainly won't be able to determine at this conference – then the Black Sea's dramatic history began quite a long time ago. In any case, there was no lack of excitement in the region's early history after written records had begun. The earliest work of reference for this are the Histories of Herodotus. What we do know for sure is that for many centuries there was a constant coming and going on the shores of the Black Sea: Sarmatians, Goths, Khazars, Mongols, Tartars, Greeks, Turks, Russians.

In the course of time the idea took hold that the shores of the Black Sea marked a geographical and cultural frontier: here Europe – there Asia, here Greek settlers – there nomadic Skyths. From Greek antiquity until recent times, a biased evaluation of the two worlds which collided at the Black Sea persisted: here civilization – there barbarism. It was not until recently that research and new discoveries, for example the remarkable Skyth gold, extended and corrected our knowledge of the supposed barbarians who inhabited the steppes on the northern coast of the Black Sea.

Nevertheless, I believe Neal Ascherson, the Black Sea's political biographer, made a fitting observation in his famous book "Black Sea" (1995) when he wrote:

"Peoples who live in communion with other peoples, for a hundred or a thousand years, do not always like them – may, in fact, have always disliked them. As individuals, 'the others' are not strangers but neighbours, often friends. But my sense of Black Sea life, a sad one, is that latent mistrust between different cultures is immortal."

The peoples of this region have provided evidence of this time and again to this very day. Between the Turks and Russians alone there have been 13 bloody wars around the Black Sea in the modern age. The Russian Federation today has very tense relations with two of its neighbours – Ukraine and Georgia. The international community is concerned with four "frozen conflicts" in the region: in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. And it is not only the Sea which is called black: there are many dark figures roaming its waters and shores, trafficking in drugs, weapons or human beings. It is estimated that 80% of illegal migrants heading for Western Europe pass through the Black Sea region.

And suddenly all of this has become an issue for the EU. Somehow it is now linked in some way to all six countries bordering on the Black Sea. Turkey has entered into accession negotiations with the EU; relations with Russia have been given the grand title "Strategic Partnership"; Ukraine and Georgia are linked to the EU via the European Neighbourhood Policy; and since 1 January 2007, when Bulgaria and Romania became the newest member states, the EU has regarded itself as the proud owner of an attractive stretch of Black Sea beach.

Brussels doesn't yet dare to speak of "Mare Nostrum". There is certainly still a long way to go until then. But how to travel down this road? That is the theme of our conference. There is only one possibility: the six countries mentioned as well as neighbours in the region such as Greece, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan will have to create a new identity for the Black

Sea region. A new sense of identity instead of the divides which prevailed down the centuries, instead of the antagonism between settled populations and nomads, civilization and barbarism.

The EU has the right capabilities and experience for such a project. It has already built systems of regional cooperation which helped overcome conflicts in other areas. Examples of this are the Northern Dimension around the Baltic Sea, the Barcelona Process around the Mediterranean or the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in the Western Balkans.

Much of this experience is reflected in the EU Commission Communication of 11 April on "Black Sea Synergy – A New Regional Cooperation Initiative". And on 21 June 2007, at the close of Germany's EU Presidency, the European Council endorsed a report on the further development of the European Neighbourhood Policy whose most concrete project is now Black Sea cooperation.

In this EU document, there is also a brief mention of Danube cooperation. Rivers can either divide or bring peoples together. Both have been the case in the chequered history of this great European river. However, economic, political, intellectual and cultural exchange have been frequently to the fore during the last 3000 years – proving that water is a uniting element. The various initiatives in this region in recent times follow on from those very exchanges.

The Danube cities recognize this uniting element and are building an ever denser network of cooperation. Only recently, from 6 to 8 September, the Third European Conference of Danube Cities and Regions took place in the Bulgarian city of Vidin. Great cities such as Budapest, Bratislava, Vienna, Ulm – and, of course, Vidin – took part. Vidin, which together with the Romanian city Calafat symbolized a European failure for many years – namely, the failure to build a second bridge over the Danube on the 500 km-long stretch between Romania and Bulgaria! It was not until the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe came into being that it was possible to reconcile the diverging interests on the two sides of the river, thus paving the way for a new bridge.

The Danube Commission is responsible for all questions relating to shipping on the Danube. Eleven states come together in this forum to make the necessary technical and political decisions to enable South-East Europe's most important waterway to fulfil its function of linking

nations. The Commission is currently focusing on the revision of the Belgrade Convention with a view to creating an even better regime governing the use of the river.

The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River is responsible for environmental issues. What is more, this institution has its merits in bringing EU members and non-members together to cooperate. The recent award of the Theiss River Prize testifies to the quality of its work. And during the recent Second Joint Danube Survey at the end of September, scientists from all the states along the Danube took water samples from the river together – from Regensburg to the estuary delta.

I would like to mention other institutions along this great river, for example the Danube Cooperation Process, which has been active since 2002, or the Working Community of the Danube Regions. It would also be wrong to leave out organizations dedicated to regional cooperation just because the name Danube is not part of their title. These include the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), which is now to play a leading role in the "smooth regional landing" of the Stability Pact and in its new steering organ, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), not to mention the Energy Community for South-East Europe, which officially came into being on 1 July 2006, or the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), which will be effective in all member states from September 2007 onwards following its enlargement to include several new South-East European states.

Colleagues,

You can see that we already have a tradition of cooperation along the Danube, as well as an entire network of organizations whose work is in some cases visible, in others less so. And we are beginning to realize that the future of a European Union with 27 or more member states will lie in the regions. For there is a correlation between size and anonymity which hinders the development of a sense of identity. However, the stronger globalization becomes, the quicker the need for an identity will grow. And the Danube, a river which has been the centrepiece of a cultural region for 3000 years now, offers an ideal starting point for fostering a shared identity. Recent research has often shown that a regional sense of identity and its expression promote an awareness of regional responsibility, a readiness to engage in dialogue and preventive conflict resolution.

In other words, if we consider projects on regional synergy or cooperation, whether it be around the Black Sea or along the Danube, then we are working on tomorrow's peace policy.

We have gathered here in Sofia today and that is very appropriate. For in common with its EU neighbour Romania, Bulgaria lies at the interface of the two regional cooperation zones. One of the reasons I have come here today is to explore a vision with you and to look at how it can be translated into reality, namely the vision of the new and still young EU member state Bulgaria taking on a leadership task.

Why shouldn't a country like Bulgaria, which has developed excellent relations with all its neighbours and, not least for that reason, enjoys recognition as an anchor of stability in a still volatile Balkan region, raise its hand and say: we are prepared to take on this task in and for the EU, namely to harness the concepts of Black Sea synergy and Danube cooperation, to develop creative ideas on how to put the EU's considerable experience in regional cooperation to use in the Greater Black Sea-South-East Europe-Danube Region, and to launch from here a process of network-building in all countries concerned so that such ideas can be put into practice!

If we are able at the end of this conference to define in greater detail just a few tasks and projects which will bring us closer to this aim then that would, in my view, be a rewarding success. And I wish our hosts, all participants and me personally such a success.

Thank you very much!