

The Black Sea region: Security includes environmental issues

*Volodymyr Nikitin,
ICPS Deputy Director for Development*

The Black Sea region, because of its geopolitical significance, has attracted considerable interest for many centuries. As a link connecting Europe and Asia in a common geographic and economic area, this region has often found itself the focus of confrontations among major nations and entire empires. Indeed, it continues to play this role today. With no one entirely responsible for the Black Sea, problems and conflicts in the region have a tendency to congeal. ICPS expert Volodymyr Nikitin says that only when the region is treated as a single whole will it be able to offer the conditions needed for sustainable development

Mr. Nikitin suggests that a set of specific programs is needed, including environmental ones. He spoke on “The principle of environmental preference as a regional policy instrument” at the international European Union and the Black Sea Region conference in Varna, Bulgaria, in October 2006.

In a broader sense, the Black Sea region covers countries of the Black Sea basin: its geographical borders are marked by the watersheds of rivers that flow into the Black Sea. This includes the Danube, the Dniester, the Dnipro, the Don, and the Kuban. In the narrower sense, the Black Sea region means those countries along the coast of the Black Sea: Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia, and Russia.

Regional integrity means stability

In the 21st century, the Black Sea region continues to be a conflict zone rather than a zone of stability. Although numerous regional projects and organizations are trying to cope with the problems in this region, there is no consolidated Black Sea regional policy. In bilateral relations among neighbors located in the Black Sea region, private problems are being resolved fairly successfully. But a “bigger picture” of the region is still missing.

In a situation where no one country is entirely responsible for the Black Sea, problems and conflicts in the Black Sea region have a tendency to remain unresolved. ICPS expert Volodymyr Nikitin says that only when the region is treated as a single whole will it be able to offer the conditions needed for sustainable wideranging multilateral relations. To establish this kind of unity, he suggests that a set of programs is needed, starting with environmental ones.

Ignoring the environment is dangerous for this region

The danger of environmental disasters is quite real in the Black Sea region. The environmental balance was breached long ago and the Azov Sea and the Black Sea grow more and

more polluted with every year. Over the last few decades, the sea shelf has been tainted with toxic substances, the coast has been eroding, biodiversity and fish stocks have disappeared, and major recreational resources have been lost. There is a real possibility that a major catastrophe is brewing as the hydrogen sulfide content of the sea continues to rise.

Mr. Nikitin says that the greatest source of environmental danger lies in environmentunfriendly policies on the part of the countries encircling the Black Sea. Projects to develop industry or power generation in this region are assessed, first of all, in terms of economic benefits. This is in contrast to EU countries, where environmental concerns generally take priority.

So far, there is a real contradiction between the declared values of environmental balance and actual steps taken to benefit business interests or the interests of corrupt functionaries and officials in terms of the Black Sea region. As long as this contradiction is not resolved in favor of environmental priorities in evaluating projects, private environmental initiatives will not bring tangible results.

Environmental preference is the first step towards integration

In the EU, environmental policy has formed over decades, starting with the Club of Rome and ending with a comprehensive set of laws and the inculcation of basic environmental rules in the minds of EU citizens, such as their attitude towards waste. For the Black Sea region, there isn't enough time to repeat this process the long way.

A decisive step must be taken now towards adopting the principle of environmental preference in the political and economic decisionmaking process. Instituting this principle can be started as a pilot project to establish the first conditions for political unity in the Black Sea region.

This political unity can take on various forms—as an EU Neighborhood region or even as an “Eastern European

Union” that uses EU practice in instituting European values without setting up regulatory obstacles. An orientation towards European principles rather than a large set of laws and regulations would make it possible for each country to work on making the preservation of the Black Sea part of its own policy.

Think-tanks can establish intellectual integration in the region

The region also needs to be intellectually integrated. According to Mr. Nikitin, think-tanks in this region must

take the initiative here. Specifically, the first step should be the development of Green and White Papers that present the problems of the Black Sea region—local conflicts, environmental contradictions and potential catastrophes—and possible solutions. A Green Paper on environmental policy in this region would be a good place to start.

For additional information, please, contact ICPS Deputy Director for Development Volodymyr Nikitin by telephone at (380-44) 484-4400 or via e-mail at vnikitin@icps.kiev.ua.