We will have a EU Black Sea strategy

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Next Commissioner for Enlargement pledges for a EU Black Sea strategy

As we prepare for the hearings of the future members of the Von der Leyen 2.0 Commission, we can already see how the public policy territories that will define the European Commission's work in the immediate future are taking shape. Whether we are referring to the stronger language towards Russia and China in the pledge of the future High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, the imperative of strengthening the single market in the context of the Letta report or the importance that the Commission President gives to the competitiveness theme, the new Commission von der Leyen seems to be becoming more entrepreneurial when it comes to the EU's position in a transactional geopolitics. The creation of a dedicated portfolio for Defense and Space, when the competencies of the Commission in that sphere remain fairly limited, although it still seems as a more politically-charged gesture than a coordinated function towards building the EU Defense Union, is another example of such ambitions.

As part of this entrepreneurial journey towards defining EU's place in the world, another policy instrument has been proposed, as part of the Enlargement portfolio: a Black Sea security strategy. The critical importance of this region was elevated in the context of the war in Ukraine, in which Russia has transformed the Black Sea into a war theatre. In the mission letter put forward by Ursula von der Leyen to the Commissioner-designated for Enlargement Marta Kos, the European Commission's President has tasked the Slovenian diplomat to "work with the High Representative/Vice-President on a Black Sea Strategy bringing all of our policies and actions in this area together in a coherent strategy". In her written response to the European Parliament's committees, Marta Kos has further strengthened this idea, by pledging to create a new overall strategic framework for the Black Sea, while coordinating a unitary approach for supporting the EU partners in the Southern Caucasus. Specifically, Kos affirms that she will work with Kaja Kallas to "develop a coherent Black Sea strategy" in which she will advance

the implementation of "key infrastructure projects to enhance the region's energy security and digital connectivity". The security challenges of the region, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, will also be addressed, according to the response of the Commissioner-designate.

The future EU Black Sea security strategy will likely be built on the heritage of the Black Sea Synergy, EU's current regional policy for this area, that encompasses multiple fields of cooperation, including civil society engagement, environmental protection, education and research, but also energy and transport. Some specific projects that have resulted as part of this cooperation framework include the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea with its corresponding scientific pillar, and the EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes, which has helped Ukraine continue export its goods via rail, road, and inland waterways. In July 2024, EEAS and the European Commission have launched the fourth implementation report of the Black Sea Synergy, which notes the significant priority projects that have been implemented as part of this policy, including the funding of more than 90 supported actions on marine pollution, blue economy entrepreneurship, environmental actions and tourism, worth of about 500 million EUR in 5 years. Through the Interreg NEXT Black Sea basin programme for 2021-2027, focused on creating a "blue and smart region" by strengthening research and innovation capacities of the riparian states, the Commission has allocated an additional 20 million EUR to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova (additional funds resulted from the discontinued cooperation with Russia and Belarus).

However, to offer strategic depth to the current policy towards the Black Sea, the European Commission needs to understand that, in the words of Josep Borrell, "the EU cannot be a herbivore in a world of carnivores". This is especially true in the context of the Black Sea, which has become a mosaic of security challenges, ranging from Russia's military activities that threaten global food security to China's growing geoeconomic influence.

How can the EU affirm itself in this region of overlapping divergent interests of geopolitical actors? For a start, the next Commission may consider the following:

The political gesture of the Commissioner-designate for Enlargement Marta Kos to pledge for an EU Black Sea security strategy is good news for a troubled region that was for far too long the subject of strategic ambiguity from the Western allies. However, to escape this territory of strategic ambiguity, yet another "shopping list" of unachievable objectives will not suffice. A credible EU posture in the Black Sea will require funds for robust interconnectivity projects, more transatlantic coordination, and a toolkit of measures that will incentivize the riparian states to work more together and achieve military modernization.