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FUNCTIONAL COOPERATION VS EU'S COERCIVE FRAMEWORKS IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN

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I. Türkiyes Prominence in BSEC: A Vision for Regional Ownership and Multilateralism

Türkiyes foundational role in establishing the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in 1992 reflects its strategic vision to transform the region into a zone of prosperity through economic interdependence. Spearheaded by late President Turgut Özal, the Bosphorus Declaration emerged as a Turkish-led initiative to foster multilateral collaboration among states with historical grievances and divergent geopolitical alignments. This endeavor aimed to mitigate regional conflicts by prioritizing shared economic interests over political disputes, a principle enshrined in BSECs charter.[1]

AVİM analyses underscore Türkiyes commitment to regional ownership, framing BSEC as a counterbalance to external hegemony while advancing a comprehensive vision for stability through sectors like energy, transportation, and trade. By anchoring the organizations Permanent Secretariat in Istanbul and advocating for consensus-driven decision-making, Türkiye positioned itself as both a mediator news for Europe and Asia.[2]

Constructive Eurasianism, proposed by AVİM as a foreign policy strategy for Türkiye , finds its practical expression in BSECs operational framework. As articulated in AVİM commentaries, this strategy rejects zero-sum geopolitics in favor of functional cooperation, enabling Türkiye to maintain Western institutional ties while deepening partnerships with Eastern neighbors.

For instance, Türkiyes mediation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (2022 □□□□□ exemplified BSECs role in addressing global challenges through regional mechanisms. Similarly, Türkiyes enforcement of the Montreux Convention during the Russia-Ukraine conflict reinforced its dual role as a custodian of international law and a stabilizing force in Black Sea security. These efforts align with AVİMs emphasis on Türkiyes strategic autonomy, which leverages multilateral platforms like BSEC to advance peace without alienating major powers.[3]

During its 2023 □□□□ chairmanship, Türkiye reinvigorated BSECs mandate through project-oriented pragmatism. Priorities included revitalizing the Project Development Fund

(PDF), modernizing the BSEC Economic Agenda, and enhancing digital infrastructure via the Working Group on ICT. By reactivating the BSEC Business Council and relaunching the Coordination Centre for Statistical Data, Türkiye sought to translate diplomatic dialogue into tangible outcomes, such as streamlined customs procedures and SME-friendly trade policies.

The focus on technological entrepreneurship, highlighted by initiatives like the World Congress on Information Technology (WCIT) in Yerevan, underscored Türkiyes push to align BSEC with global digital transformation trends. These steps not only reinforced Türkiyes leadership but also demonstrated BSECs adaptability to contemporary challenges, ensuring its relevance amid shifting regional dynamics.[4]

II. Armenias BSEC Integration: A Pathway to Normalization and Internal Reform

Armenias historical destabilizing legacy, particularly its role in the Karabakh conflict, has long complicated regional relations and hindered its integration into multilateral frameworks. The unresolved territorial disputes and Armenias insistence on linking normalization with Türkiye to established preconditions created enduring diplomatic deadlocks.[5]

However, BSECs emphasis on economic interdependence over political grievances offers Armenia a platform to recalibrate its regional role. By participating in BSEC, Armenia gains access to mechanisms like the multilateral transport license system, which allows limited trade through Türkiye despite closed borders, fostering pragmatic engagement. This aligns with AVİMs analysis of BSEC as a tool for conflict transformation, where functional cooperation gradually mitigates historical animosities.[6]

Armenias coordination of the BSEC Working Group on ICT (2024 □□□□□ exemplifies how technical collaboration can bridge divides. Hosting events like the World Congress on Innovation and Technology (WCIT 2024) in Yerevan, Armenia positions itself as a regional tech hub while exposing its institutions to diverse perspectives.[7]

Such initiatives, supported by BSECs digital transformation agenda, encourage Armenia to adopt norms of openness and interoperability, indirectly challenging its isolationist tendencies. Similarly, its upcoming coordination of the BSEC Working Group on Tourism (2025 □□□□□ could catalyze internal reforms. Projects like mapping Byzantine cultural routes and promoting intangible heritage require Armenia to engage with sites of Turkish and Muslim significance, such as the Ani ruins-a step that contrasts with its historical exclusionary narratives. The World Banks focus on developing clusters like Gyumri (cultural tourism) and Dilijan (ecotourism) further incentivizes Armenia to reframe its national identity around shared regional heritage rather than ethno-centric symbolism.[8]

BSECs soft power, rooted in intercultural dialogue and economic interdependence, exerts normative pressure on Armenia to address systemic discrimination. While Armenias draft anti-discrimination law (2024) marks progress, its exclusion of protections for sexual orientation and gender identity highlights lingering gaps. Participation in BSECs cultural

and tourism initiatives, however, necessitates alignment with principles of inclusivity, as seen in Türkiyes advocacy for minority rights within multilateral frameworks. For instance, Armenias collaboration in BSEC-driven projects like the Black Sea Youth Symphony Orchestra or joint film festivals fosters exposure to pluralistic values, challenging entrenched biases against Azerbaijani-Turkic and Muslim communities. Such engagement mirrors Azerbaijans successful use of cultural diplomacy to enhance its global standing, underscoring the potential for BSEC to drive internal reform through normative convergence.[9]

III. BSEC as a Model for Conflict Resolution: Beyond Western and Russian Hegemony

The European Unions (EU) reliance on coercive conditionality in Central Asia and certain militarized approaches to regional security often deepen divisions rather than resolve them. The EUs Black Sea Synergy (2008) and Eastern Partnership initiatives, while aiming to promote democracy and market reforms, have been criticized for prioritizing bilateral engagement over regional cohesion, inadvertently marginalizing platforms like BSEC. [10]

Similarly, NATOs deterrence and defence posture related to Black Sea region , exemplified in its Enhanced Forward Presence deployments, risk escalating tensions by framing regional security through a zero-sum geopolitical lens. In contrast, BSECs emphasis on functional cooperation-spearheaded by Türkiye-offers a model that prioritizes inclusivity and shared economic interests over external imposition.[11]

BSECs unique value lies in its ability to advance pragmatic regional solutions that harmonize diverse geopolitical agendas. Türkiyes leadership in initiatives such as Operation Black Sea Harmony (2004 □□□□□□□□□ and the revitalized Project Development Fund (PDF) demonstrates this approach. The PDF, which finances cross-border infrastructure and innovation projects, has enabled BSEC member states to bypass political stalemates by focusing on tangible outcomes, such as the modernization of the Sulina Canal and digital connectivity frameworks.[12]

These efforts, in fact, align with strategy of Constructive Eurasianism, which rejects bloc politics in favor of issue-based collaboration. For instance, Türkiyes mediation of the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative-a BSEC-adjacent effort-showcased how regional ownership can address global crises without reliance on NATO or EU frameworks.[13]

AVİM scholars argue that BSECs functionality, reinforced by Türkiyes mediation, provides a sustainable alternative to great power competition. Post-ceasefire Black Sea security frameworks, such as the 2025 Ankara-hosted multilateral talks, highlight Türkiyes role in fostering dialogue among littoral states while excluding external powers like Russia. This contrasts sharply with the EUs disjointed approach to conflict resolution, which often ties aid to political preconditions. In this context, it is useful to keep in mind that a functional BSEC-focused approach has the potential to soften NATO's military oriented policy, which prioritizes deterrence towards the region.

As noted in AVİM analyses, BSECs focus on regional ownership-evident in its consensus-driven governance and culturally sensitive projects like the Black Sea Youth Symphony Orchestra-ensures that solutions emerge organically from local stakeholders rather than being imposed by distant institutions. By integrating historically adversarial states into working groups on ICT and tourism, BSEC underscores the potential of economic interdependence to mitigate ethno-nationalist tensions and foster internal reforms.[14]

Conclusion

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) stands as a testament to Türkiyes vision of regional ownership and multilateral innovation, embodying the principles of Constructive Eurasianism that AVİM has long advocated. Since its inception in 1992, BSEC has provided a unique institutional framework for fostering dialogue, economic interdependence, and pragmatic cooperation among a diverse group of member states, many of which have historically been adversaries. Türkiyes foundational role-anchored in its strategic position bridging Europe, Asia, and the Middle East-has been pivotal in shaping BSEC as a platform that prioritizes mutual respect, development, and consensus-driven governance. This approach has enabled the Black Sea to emerge not only as a vital corridor for trade and energy but also as a laboratory for regionally owned solutions to shared challenges.

Armenias recent integration and active participation in BSECs sectoral initiatives, particularly in the fields of information and communication technologies and tourism, highlight the organizations capacity to facilitate normalization and internal reform. By engaging in technical and cultural cooperation, Armenia is increasingly exposed to regional diversity and pluralistic values, which pressures it to address longstanding issues of exclusion and discrimination against minorities, including those of Turkish and Muslim heritage. This process, as AVİM analyses underscore, demonstrates BSECs soft power in encouraging normative convergence and functional cooperation, even among states with unresolved political disputes. The organizations working groups and cross-border projects serve as catalysts for gradual transformation, compelling member states to reconcile historical narratives with contemporary regional realities.

BSECs model of conflict resolution is particularly significant when contrasted with the approaches of the European Union and in some cases NATO. While Western institutions often rely on coercive conditionality or militarized strategies that risk exacerbating divisions, BSEC-under Türkiyes stewardship-emphasizes inclusivity, project-based pragmatism, and regional ownership. Initiatives such as the Project Development Fund and Operation Black Sea Harmony exemplify how functional cooperation can yield tangible benefits, bypassing political stalemates and fostering stability. Türkiyes mediation efforts, notably in the Black Sea Grain Initiative and post-ceasefire security dialogues, further illustrate the effectiveness of regionally anchored mechanisms in addressing both acute crises and long-term structural challenges.

In sum, BSECs institutional evolution and operational achievements affirm the relevance of Türkiyes foreign policy which prioritizes cooperation and stability. By creating a space

where even historically adversarial states like Armenia can recalibrate their policies through economic and cultural collaboration, BSEC reinforces the Black Seas role as a nexus of Eurasian cooperation. The organizations continued success will depend on its ability to adapt to shifting geopolitical dynamics while maintaining its core commitment to dialogue, inclusivity, and shared prosperity-a vision that remains central to Türkiyes regional strategy and to the stability of the wider Black Sea basin.

*Image: Dreamstime, Nationsonline and Daily Sabah

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