

## **EU seeks stronger energy ties with Black Sea nations**

The Commission, on 11 April, presented plans to forge stronger ties with its energy-rich neighbours around the Black Sea and to bring stability to the conflict-ridden region.

"We think it is important to put a particular focus on this region," said External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, explaining that with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in January, the EU now has an immediate concern in the area's prosperity, stability and security.

The new cooperation initiative will focus on areas like good governance, transport, environment, and, chiefly, energy. The Black Sea region, a major transit route for oil and gas coming to Europe from Russia and Central Asia, is "of strategic importance for EU energy supply security", said the Commission.

The aim is to spread the EU's influence in the area, which includes former Soviet Union republics such as Ukraine and Georgia, amid growing unease over Moscow's role in these countries and over its reliability as Europe's main energy supplier.

The move follows an agreement last week by Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania and the European Commission to start building a new oil pipeline bringing oil from the Black Sea to central Europe by 2012 (EurActiv 4/04/07).

Ferrero-Waldner said she planned to forge formal links with the Black Sea Economic Cooperation group (BSEC), which set up a regional economic pact in 1992. The BSEC already includes three EU nations — Bulgaria, Greece and Romania — as well as Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine, Russia and Turkey.

The regional strategy comes in addition to ongoing initiatives, including membership negotiations with Turkey, efforts to negotiate a closer "strategic partnership" with Russia, and existing bilateral trade and aid agreements under the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Ferrero-Waldner also said she hoped that the 'Black Sea Synergy' initiative would "contribute to creating a better climate for the solution of the 'frozen conflicts' in the region".