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**Dear reader**

As is fitting for the summer months, with this issue we are taking you on a cruise around the Black Sea. The Black Sea and its coastal states might be termed the "black box" of a bygone world, teeming with secrets. One of many theories regards the breaching of the Bosphorus, which caused the flooding of the Black Sea with salt water from the Marmara Sea, as the event we know as the biblical flood. It is only since the opening of the Iron Curtain – which was pulled shut, as it were, at the 1945 conference at the Black Sea city of Yalta – that researchers, tourists and oil companies from the West have had access to a largely untouched wealth of cultural and historical sources, stunning landscapes and natural resources.

Once the centre of the classical world and located at one end of the Silk Road, the region was pushed to the periphery of European consciousness, as Christian Giordano explains in his article. Today, however, the cheap tourist beaches in Bulgaria and oil and natural gas deposits have brought the Black Sea back into the focus of a variety of actors. And by 2014, when the Winter Olympics are held in Sochi, the eyes of the world will be on the Black Sea region, at least for a few weeks.

The articles in this issue are written by researchers specialising in the Black Sea region within diverse academic fields. They deal with a variety of political, cultural and historical, economic and literary aspects of cities, regions and countries whose ports mean they are closely connected to the Black Sea and which are hoping for the region's economic and political growth – for example Istanbul and Trabzon in Turkey, Varna in Bulgaria, Constanța in Romania, Odessa, Sevastopol and Yalta in Ukraine, Sochi in Russia, Sukhumi in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and Batumi in Georgia. The authors thereby decode the "black box" of a forgotten cultural and historical heritage while highlighting new prospects for development.

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Regula Zwahlen