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STRENGTHENING SECURITY AND RESILIENCE IN THE BLACK SEA REGION:

Reflections from the Sofia Workshop (19 September 2025)

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1. Introduction: A Strategic Moment for the Black Sea

The Black Sea today stands at the center of Europe's geopolitical, economic, and security map. It is a crossroads where the strategic interests of the European Union, NATO, Russia, Türkiye, and the Eastern Partnership countries converge. Previously a sea on the periphery of Europe, the Black Sea has now become an essential test of Europe's capacity to safeguard its eastern flank, to ensure energy resilience, and to manage hybrid threats in a contested environment.

On 19 September 2025, the international conference "The EU Black Sea Strategy and Bulgaria-Romania Cooperation for Protection of the Offshore Critical Infrastructure" was held in Sofia, Bulgaria. The event was co-organized by the Sofia Security Forum (SSF) of Bulgaria and the New Strategy Center (NSC) of Romania. Its aim was to enhance mutual understanding of the evolving risks in the Black Sea, to strengthen bilateral cooperation, and to explore how NATO and the EU could support regional resilience. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

The workshop gathered around 50 participants from Bulgarian and Romanian ministries of Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs, Energy, Environment and Water, Transport and Communications, as well as representatives from the naval forces, border police, private operators of critical infrastructure, think-tankers, and academics. It brought together senior government officials, diplomats, military officers, and representatives of the energy sector.

At a time when the war in Ukraine continues to reshape Europe's security order, and energy diversification has become a strategic necessity, the Sofia discussions reflected a shared conviction: the Black Sea's security is Europe's security. Ensuring its stability requires close cooperation among regional allies, stronger EU - NATO coordination, and an integrated approach between defense, energy, and governance.

2. A Region Under Pressure: Security, Energy, and Hybrid Threats

The discussions in Sofia revealed the challenges facing the Black Sea region. The participants emphasized that the security situation is defined by the intersection of military, hybrid, and environmental risks, all of which are intensified by the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia's growing assertiveness in the Black Sea.

An evolving threat landscape under Article 5

The Black Sea security environment, similar to the broader European one, has entered a phase of hybrid escalation, characterized by a growing number of high-impact operations. Particularly, it has become an arena of constant provocations and pressure from Russia. Participants described an increase in hybrid operations below Article 5, including drone incursions, electronic interference, and GPS jamming which affects civilian and military navigation. Russia routinely declares "temporary danger zones" in the Exclusive Economic Zones of other countries, under the pretext of military exercises. Floating mines, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns have become daily challenges for the coastal states.

Participants noted that Russia's hybrid actions extend beyond military maneuvers to information warfare, exploiting environmental and social issues to divide societies. For example, in Romania, coordinated disinformation campaigns about offshore drilling and environmental safety delayed projects and generated public distrust. Environmental risks are also a direct result of the ongoing war activities. Participants concluded that clear communication with the public is essential to prevent misinformation and to ensure social acceptance of energy projects.

Unfavourable are drone incursions into Romanian territory and other European countries. These underscore the permeability of airspace and the ease with which hybrid actions can test response thresholds without triggering collective defense mechanisms. These trends reveal possibly deliberate strategy aimed at creating strategic ambiguity, stretching national response capacities, and probing allied coordination. This reinforces the urgency of a coherent integrated EU – NATO operational posture in the region.

Energy as a security priority

Energy independence and security emerged as central themes. Both Bulgaria and Romania are transitioning from energy importers to future suppliers through the exploitation of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Black Sea. Romania's Neptun Deep project, led by OMV Petrom and Romgaz, is expected to deliver gas to the EU market by 2027, transforming the country into a regional energy hub. Bulgaria's Khan Asparuh perimeter, operated by OMV Petrom and NewMed has similar potential. Together, these projects represent the foundation of a regional energy corridor that could strengthen the EU countries by reducing the dependence on Russian imports.

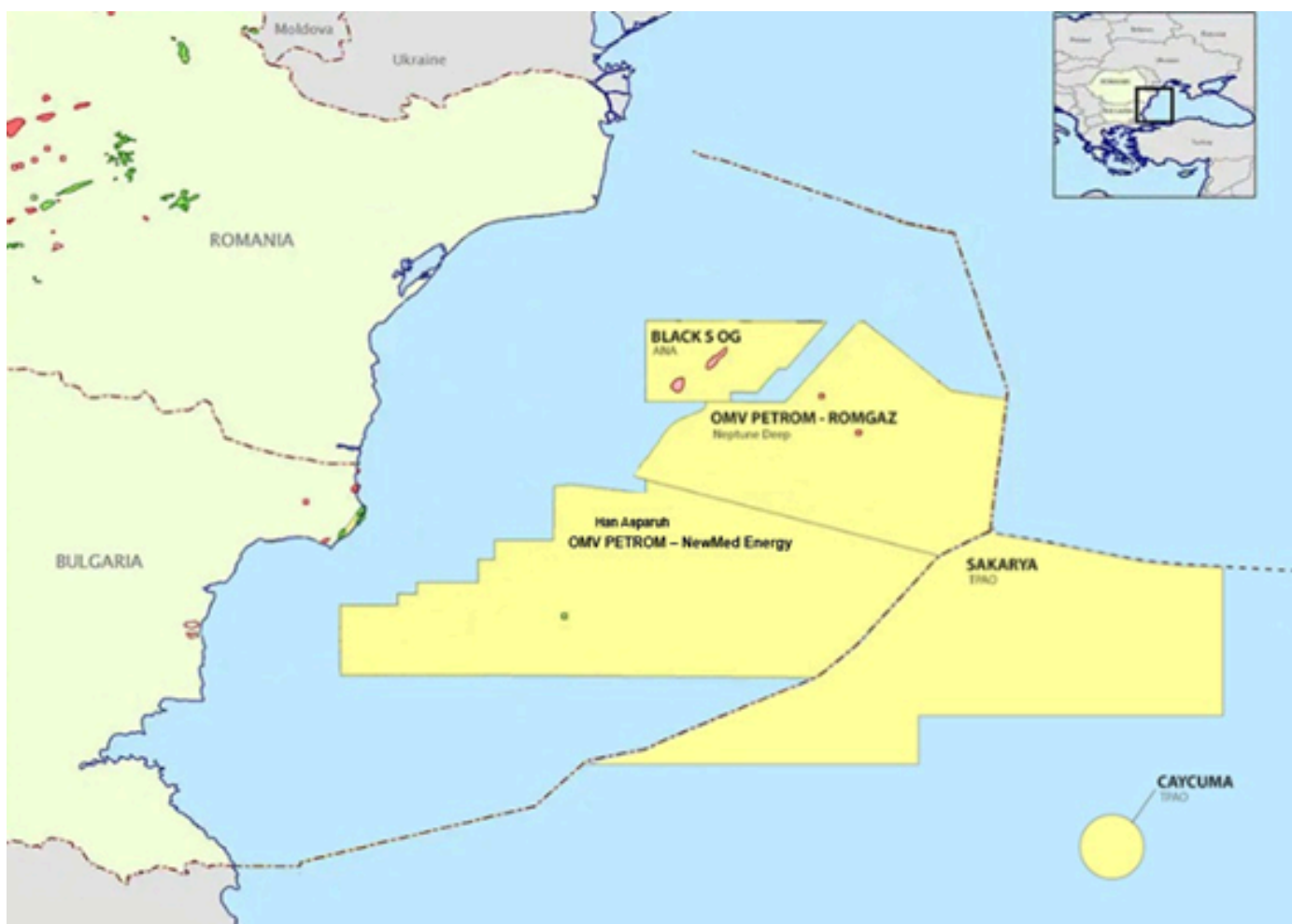


Figure 1. Map of Western Black Sea oil & gas perimeters
Source: New Strategy Center

Thus, the offshore installations of energy projects: pipelines, platforms, cables, and others, are strategic targets in the hybrid domain. They require coordinated protection, combining national capabilities, private sector monitoring, and NATO-supported situational awareness.

Legal and environmental vulnerabilities

A specific concern is that some areas of the air-space above the EEZs of Bulgaria and Romania are currently in de-facto Russian control and these zones remain in a legal gray area. Such uncertainty complicates not only navigation and investment but also the activation of rescue operations.

A critical dimension of the Black Sea's vulnerability lies in the legal and normative gray zones that hybrid actors exploit. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the foundational legal framework for maritime governance, it was not designed to address the below-threshold hybrid activities that characterize today's security environment. The protection of undersea infrastructure—pipelines, communication cables, and energy platforms—remains legally ambiguous, falling between peacetime regulatory provisions and wartime protections. This gap allows hostile actors to operate in a legally contested space, complicating attribution, response, and deterrence. Establishing clearer legal signalling—through coordinated national declarations, allied statements, and enhanced interpretation of existing norms—would reduce this ambiguity, reinforce freedom of navigation, and increase the costs of gray zone actions targeting critical infrastructure.

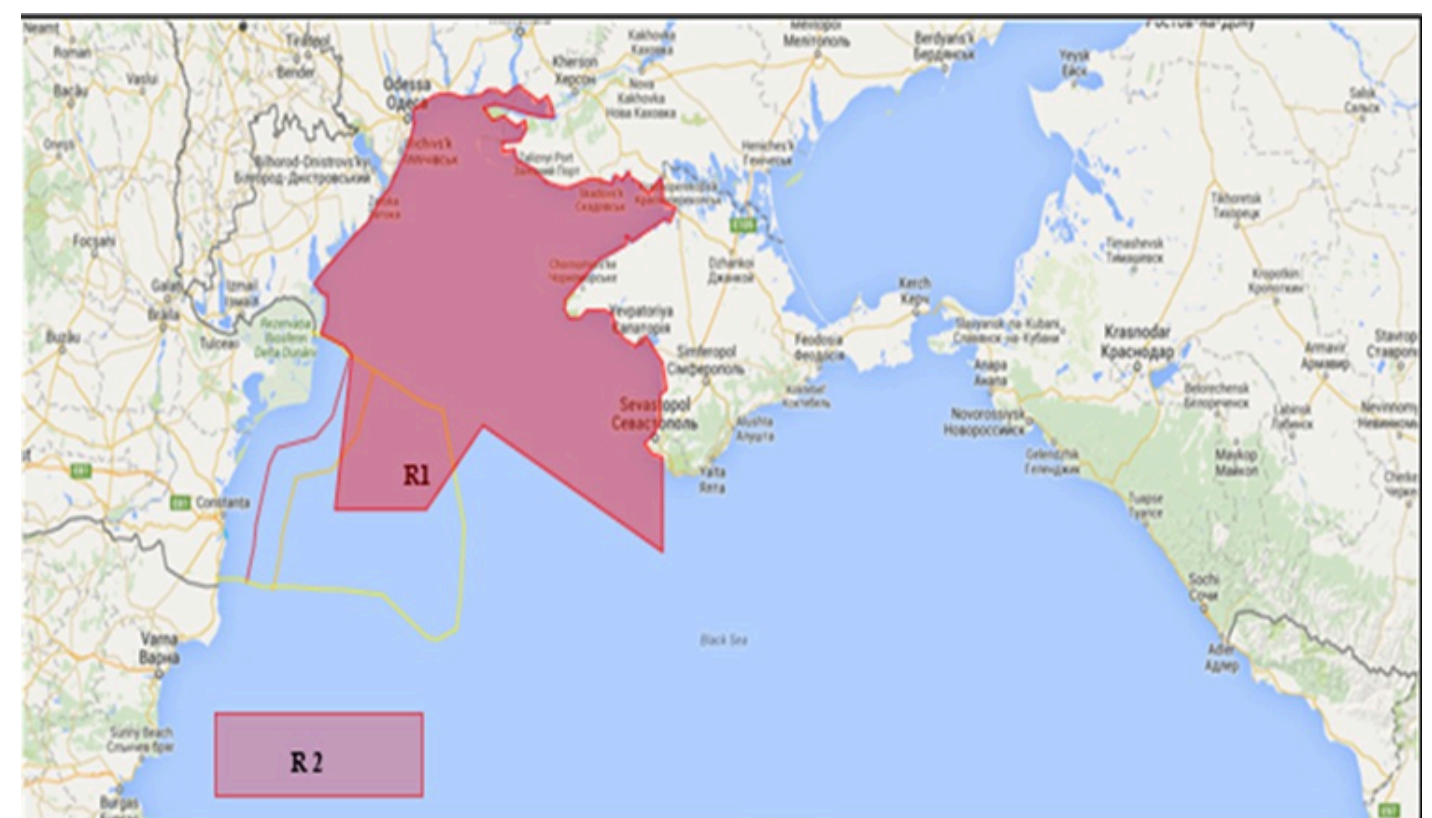


Figure 2. Map Example of blocked perimeters by the Russian Navy under the pretence of military exercises (R1 was blocked in 2022, R2 in 2023)
Source: New Strategy Center

After Crimea's annexation in 2014 the de facto map of Black Sea Exclusive Economic Zones changed, with Romania becoming the border with the claimed by Russia EEZ of Crimea's western coast. Moreover, the Simferopol Flight Information Region and Romania's Exclusive Economic zone further underscores this tension. A hypothetical emergency situation requiring aerial intervention in the East of Romania's EEZ would require the approval of FIR Simferopol, which would implicitly recognize Russian sovereignty over Crimea. Such examples are possible in some zones of Bulgaria, too.

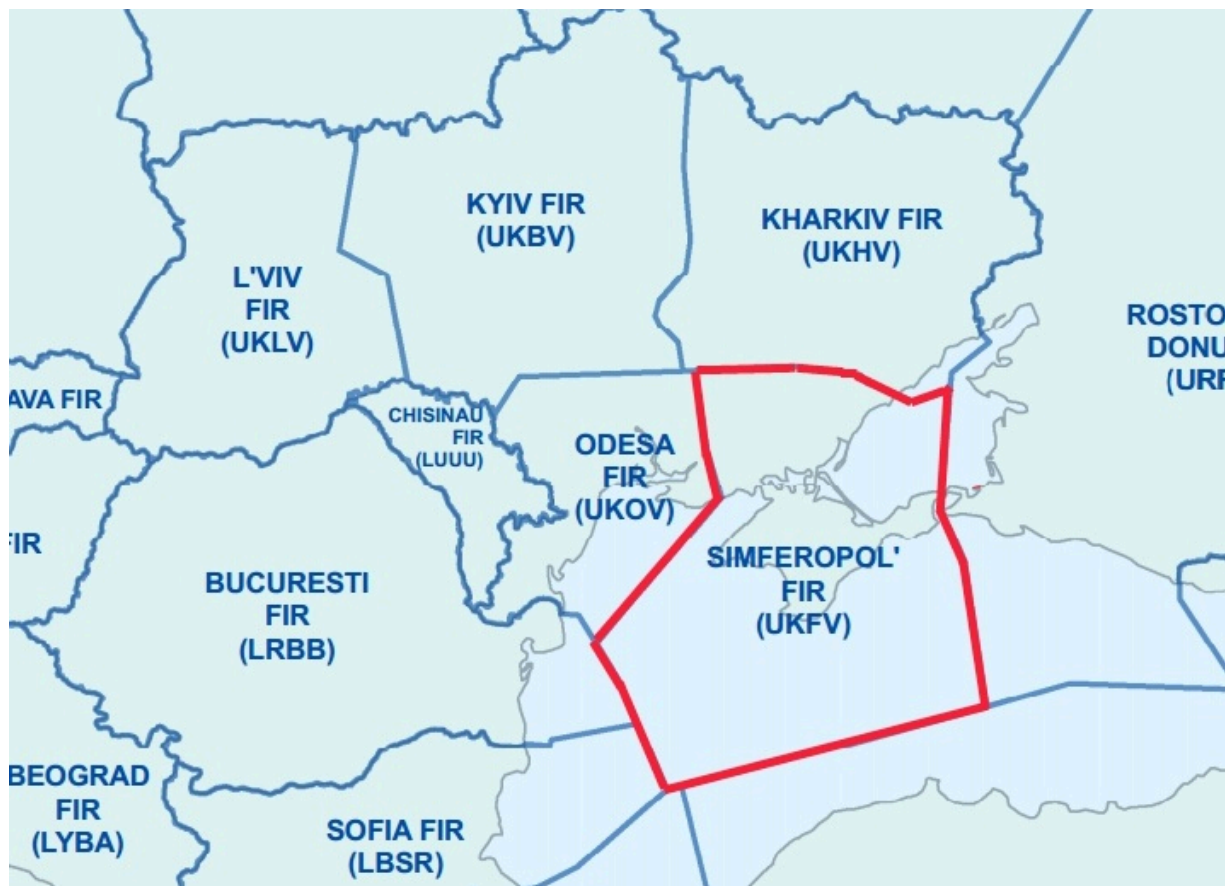


Figure 3. Map of Flight Information Region Simferopol
(Source: Eurocontrol. Flight Information Region (FIR/UIR) Charts 2024)

In this context, it is of critical importance that NATO and EU allies do not recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. Such a recognition could set in motion a lawfare domino effect, resulting in Russian claims regarding the de jure make-up of Black Sea EEZs. In such scenario, an argumentative point can be found in the continental shelf around the Snake Island – after a dispute with Ukraine, it was awarded to Romania by the International Court of Justice, Hague, 2009.

3. Bulgaria–Romania Partnership and the Role of the European Union

The Sofia workshop reaffirmed that the partnership between Bulgaria and Romania is a cornerstone of regional stability and prevention of different risks and threats. Both countries share similar security challenges, energy ambitions, and strategic goals within the EU and NATO.

Bilateral cooperation and crisis response

The two states have developed robust mechanisms for military and civilian coordination. Their navies regularly conduct joint exercises, including demining operations. Cooperation between border police and coast guards has improved situational awareness.

An achievement of the Sofia workshop was the simulation of a crisis scenario involving hybrid attacks against offshore infrastructure. The exercise exposed operational and communication gaps, and showcased effective coordination among ministries. Romanian participants shared their approach to the complex crisis situations and integrated emergency management which combines efforts of different organizations under one control mechanism.

Bulgarian participants discussed the order and action in crisis situations. Participants recommended for Bulgaria to establish a multi-agency coordination centers, and to adopt a model of rapid decision-making at the lowest operational level.

The EU Black Sea Strategy 2025 and the Maritime Security Hub

The EU's Black Sea Strategy 2025 was recognized as a timely and ambitious framework, the implementation of which needs action. The creation of the Black Sea Maritime Security Hub is a cornerstone of this strategy, intended to improve information sharing and early warning. However, the workshop highlighted that several issues have to be discussed and resolved, including the division of responsibilities between Bulgaria and Romania, the classified information exchange, the coordination EU-NATO on information sharing, and the location of the hub.

The participants discussed the possible inclusion of Türkiye as a stakeholder. Being the gatekeeper of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Türkiye's cooperation is vital for ensuring freedom of navigation and implementing regional security mechanisms.

Moreover, Ukraine is expected to play a pivotal role in the future security architecture of the Black Sea, due to its experience in maritime and aerial unmanned vehicles. A number of European countries already invest in the development of its indigenous defence industrial base.

Foreign investment and strategic trust

An important point raised by experts was the protection of foreign investment in the Black Sea. Energy projects worth billions of euros can only proceed if governments demonstrate their capacity to defend them. The presence of U.S. companies in similar projects was discussed as ensuring both economic commitment and security backing. Without credible deterrence, investment risks in the Black Sea could deter future participation from private and international actors.

Strengthening strategic trust between governments and investors is essential for unlocking the Black Sea's energy potential. Public–private intelligence-sharing mechanisms—such as trusted nodes or dedicated fusion cells—can serve as early warning and rapid response channels, enabling companies to make informed decisions and reducing operational uncertainty. By integrating private operators into situational awareness frameworks, states can build a resilient security ecosystem, demonstrating credible protection measures to investors.

4. NATO and the Future of Black Sea Security

For NATO, the Black Sea is not an isolated theatre, but a vital link in the defense of the Euro-Atlantic area. It anchors the eastern flank and serves as a bridge between Europe's southern and northern security systems. The discussions in Sofia reached a consensus: NATO must adopt a sustained, multidimensional approach to the Black Sea, one that integrates deterrence, resilience, and cooperation. It should be well coordinated with the EU.

NATO's strategic role

Participants agreed that NATO's role should evolve along three main lines:

- Deterrence and defense: maintaining a credible, rotational presence through joint exercises, surveillance, and rapid-response mechanisms;
- Critical infrastructure protection: developing regional frameworks to monitor and defend undersea pipelines, cables, and energy platforms;
- Hybrid resilience: supporting national capabilities in cyber defense, counter-disinformation, and strategic communications.

NATO's cooperation with the EU is crucial in all three areas. As discussed, coordination, not competition, must define the transatlantic approach. Aligning the EU's Black Sea Maritime Security Hub with NATO's structures would maximize situational awareness and operational readiness, in an extend favourable for both the EU and NATO. For NATO, the path ahead lies in deepening its engagement, expanding its partnerships, and developing the strategic awareness and operational commitments and capabilities.

Regional partnerships and inclusiveness

Beyond Bulgaria and Romania, the stability of the Black Sea depends on effective engagement with Türkiye, Ukraine, and Georgia. Türkiye's balancing role and its influence on maritime access cannot be overstated. Looking ahead, the trilateral Romania-Bulgaria-Türkiye Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group (MCM BS TG) has the potential to be extended to the protection of critical infrastructure in the Black Sea by current and future investments in infrastructure of all three countries. Ukraine's future post-conflict status will determine the strategic balance of the entire Black Sea basin. The worst-case scenario would be Russia consolidating control over the Ukrainian coast which would challenge NATO's deterrence.

Therefore, the member states would do their best to avoid such scenario. In a ceasefire or a peace deal, some participants expected that the Russian Federation would continue to pursue its hybrid operations. Unfavourable for Europe is a return of Russia's maritime assets to Sevastopol and the North-Western Black Sea basin. In such scenario, Ukraine would not be able to use its capabilities to keep Russian assets at bay. In a situation where a peaceful settlement or a ceasefire is reached, the threats to offshore energy infrastructure would increase, with further intensification of jamming and spoofing, which impact the freedom of navigation and the implementation of energy projects.

Participants emphasized that the security of energy infrastructure must be integrated into NATO's resilience agenda. Energy independence is not separate from defense policy; it is its enabling foundation. Therefore, both security and energy should be examined as a united theme.

5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Sofia workshop underscored a clear message: the Black Sea's stability is an essential test for the cohesion and credibility of both NATO and the European Union. Bulgaria and Romania, through their strategic partnership, have the opportunity to lead by example, demonstrating how regional cooperation, joint defense, and shared energy interests can reinforce the European and Euro-Atlantic security order.

To consolidate these efforts and to translate the workshop's insights into action, the following recommendations are proposed:

Policy Recommendations for NATO

1. Institutionalize Bulgaria-Romania cooperation through a permanent joint coordination mechanism for critical infrastructure protection, energy projects, and maritime security.
2. Integrate energy security into NATO planning, ensuring that offshore installations and pipelines are treated as strategic assets within the Alliance's resilience agenda.
3. Develop joint regional crisis management centers, combining civilian and military coordination and enabling rapid, decentralized decision-making.
4. As a NATO ally with significant maritime capabilities, Türkiye can play a central role in future trilateral Romania-Bulgaria-Türkiye cooperation formats.
5. Promote public-private partnerships for the monitoring and defense of critical energy infrastructure, with clear information-sharing mechanisms between companies and states.

Policy Recommendations for the EU

6. Enhance EU-NATO interoperability by establishing structured liaison between the EU's Black Sea Hub and NATO's structures for real-time information sharing.
7. Strengthen public communication and counter-disinformation strategies, ensuring that environmental and energy narratives are grounded in transparent scientific data.
8. Engage Türkiye, Ukraine, and Georgia in cooperative frameworks for mine clearance, maritime domain awareness, and post-conflict reconstruction.
9. Encourage participation of major EU and NATO states such as France, Italy, Germany, Spain, the UK, and Norway to provide political weight and technological support for regional initiatives.

For the EU, the next steps are to put into action its Black Sea Strategy 2025. Particularly, action is needed in the following subtopics:

EU-NATO coordination: EU Black Sea Maritime Security Hub

In the EU Black Sea Strategy 2025, the creation of Black Sea Maritime Security Center (Hub) is envisaged, with the purpose to enhance the exchange of information, early identification of threats and defense of the critical infrastructure. This regional security hub should deal with coordination and quick reaction, common standards, simulation trainings, offshore infrastructure, green energy, digitalization and connectedness.

The Black Sea Security Hub could consist of different components – naval, interior, and others, on different locations, with a good coordination mechanism. The responsibilities could be split between Romania and Bulgaria.

Two issues shall be further discussed:

- 1) Bilateral: the responsibilities should be divided between the two countries, Bulgaria and Romania, and by areas of competence of the different institutions so that the EU can have an integrated institutional design and a concept assumed by both EU Black Sea states.
- 2) Cooperation between EU and NATO, including the exchange of classified information.

Engagement of Türkiye

The role of Türkiye in the Black Sea is important, as the country controls access of military and trade vessels through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. Free shipping without its agreement is impossible. Türkiye has enough power and means, capabilities and opportunities, so that it could participate in the implementation of the EU Strategic approach. Apart from that, Türkiye is competing for regional influence with Russia. Furthermore, Türkiye makes business with the Black Sea countries. This means that Türkiye could be the closest partner of the Black Sea Maritime Security Hub. However, participation of Türkiye suggests connecting the activities of NATO and the EU. The coordination between EU-NATO needs to be clarified.

Russia: after the war in Ukraine terminates

Currently, Russian ships and airplanes are careful in the Black Sea waters and air, as Ukrainian missiles or drones could shoot them. For Romania, the least favourable scenario is if Russia undertakes the Black Sea shores under its control, making Ukraine a continental state. In this case, Romania would have a wide border with Russia, not favourable for NATO and EU either. The sovereignty of Moldova in such situation is questioned. However, if Ukraine becomes a continental state, Russia could expose its great power ambitions in the Black Sea waters, aiming control of its energy resources as well, which is not preferred by Romania and which also runs counter to the EU and NATO's security interests.

It was concluded that much closer coordination between the EU and NATO in terms of information sharing and implementation of projects is necessary.

EU-NATO coordination

The EU and NATO should coordinate and mutually complement their actions, without competition. Platforms of risk analysis in real time are necessary, cyber threats response, regional hubs of scientific research, and cooperation of universities and youth organisations as elements of the well-developed partnership are recommended.

Bulgaria and Romania would welcome greater participation and support supported from other countries in the EU and NATO, such as France, Italy, Germany, Spain, aiming to guarantee the security and stability in the Black Sea.

Final remarks

The Sofia workshop marked a pivotal step in redefining regional cooperation for protection of critical maritime infrastructure in the Black Sea. It reflected not only the urgency of shared threats but also the maturity of Bulgaria and Romania as proactive contributors to the European and Euro-Atlantic security.

The Black Sea is no longer a peripheral concern, it is the frontline of Europe's resilience, a testing ground for the credibility of collective defense, and a shared space where security, energy, and sovereignty intersect. Safeguarding it requires more than deterrence; it demands integration, innovation, solidarity, mutual coordination.

The Black Sea is emerging as a prototype for hybrid resilience strategies that can be replicated across other maritime theatres. Its complex security environment - where conventional deterrence intersects with hybrid, legal, and infrastructural vulnerabilities - offers a critical opportunity to develop scalable models of integrated defence, public-private cooperation, and legal-normative signalling. By building robust coordination mechanisms and demonstrating operational coherence, NATO, the EU and their partners can transform the Black Sea into a strategic laboratory for future deterrence frameworks, with coordinated confrontation to hybrid threats in contested maritime spaces worldwide.

The Sofia Security Forum is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization, specialized in the fields of national and international security, international relations, defence, political leadership etc. The forum has wide research program and organizes different types of events, including conferences, seminars, trainings, etc. The members of the forum are well known experts and university professors. The Forum provides a platform for representatives of the Governments, International organizations, think-tanks, academia and businesses from Bulgaria and abroad to hold discussions in order to contribute to the national and international decision-making processes.

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New Strategy Center is a leading Romanian think tank specializing in security and foreign affairs. New Strategy Center is a nonpartisan, non-governmental organization that operates at three main levels: providing analytical inputs and expert advice to decision-makers; holding regular debates, both in-house and public, on subjects of topical interest; and expanding external outreach through partnerships with similar institutions or organizations all over the world. Our areas of interest are represented by Black Sea region and the Balkans. Within our work we promote the importance of the wider Black Sea region, freedom of navigation, considering that a free and open Black Sea contributes to the connectivity between Central Asia and Europe, between the Balkans and the Middle East, the development of energy projects and has an important role in global food security.

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