

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRATEGIC APPROACH TO THE BLACK SEA REGION – IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY AND THE ROLE OF ROMANIA –

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The European Union's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region marks a defining stage in the evolution of the European Union's foreign and security policy. The document reflects a paradigm shift, whereby the Black Sea is no longer perceived as a geopolitical periphery, but as a central strategic space for the security, stability and prosperity of Europe. The context for the development of the strategy is determined by the war of aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022, the intensification of maritime and hybrid threats, as well as the process of the Union's enlargement to the East. The new strategy, structured on three pillars – security and resilience, sustainable growth and environmental protection – provides an integrated framework for collective action. For Romania, the document creates opportunities to consolidate its role in the region and to actively engage in the European security architecture in the Black Sea.

Keywords: Black Sea; strategy; maritime security; critical infrastructure protection; connectivity;

INTRODUCTORY CONTEXT

The European Union Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region issued in May 2025 represents an essential landmark in the foreign and security policy of the European Union. This document comes against the backdrop of profound changes in the geopolitical architecture of Eastern Europe, the intensification of threats to maritime and energy security, and the need to transform the Black Sea region into a stable, secure, and prosperous space. A number of factors underlie the EU's decision to issue such a strategic document – long awaited by the EU Member States in Eastern Europe, especially those bordering the Black Sea.

Thus, the most important factor influencing the development of this strategy is the *Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine*, which began in February 2022 and is still ongoing in 2025. The Black Sea has become, in part, a *theatre of war*, Russia using it for naval blockades, sea-launched missile attacks, sabotage operations, and threats to Ukraine's trade and export routes. Civil navigation has been seriously affected, including by attacks on port infrastructure in Odessa, Chornomorsk and Izmail, located very close to the border with Romania – a state that is also facing (M.Ap.N., 2025) airspace violations by drones or drone fragments falling in border towns. Also, the *massive militarization of the region* by Russia, including in the Crimean Peninsula occupied in 2014, has created a *security gap* perceived by the EU as a strategic threat to the entire eastern region. Thus, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, explicitly emphasized that *"the security of the Black Sea is also vital for the security of Europe"*¹.

Another factor that determined the creation of the document lies in the *need for strategic coherence and joint action at EU level*. Until 2025, European approaches to the Black Sea region were fragmented, sectoral and, often, reactive. EU Member States in the region – notably Romania and Bulgaria – have repeatedly called for an integrated European strategy for the Black Sea, including in the context of the adoption of the new EU Strategic Compass (2022). Previously, in the first half of 2019, the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU focused on promoting regional cooperation in the Black Sea region, with the support of the

¹ *Black Sea Strategy: Press remarks by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, 28 May 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/black-sea-strategy-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas_en, retrieved on 10 September 2025.*

European Union. The most notable result of this period was the adoption in the same year of two framework documents: the *Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea* (Ministerial Declaration on a Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea, 2019) and the *Strategic Black Sea Research and Innovation Agenda* (Black Sea Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda, 2019), both subsumed under the Black Sea Synergy. Also, previous instruments, such as the Black Sea Synergy (Black Sea Synergy – A New Regional Cooperation Initiative, 2007) or regional cooperation projects with the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, did not provide a unifying strategic vision. In fact, the EU Strategic Approach to the Black Sea is built on the Black Sea Synergy, the latest implementation report (Black Sea Synergy: 4th review of a regional cooperation initiative – period 2019-2023, 2024) being published on 3 July 2024 and covering the period 2019-2023. In light of the above, the unstable context in the region has imposed the need for coordinated collective action to ensure not only security, but also economic development, connectivity and environmental sustainability. Thus, the May 2025 strategy responds to the need to position the Black Sea as a central strategic area in the EU's foreign, energy and defence policy.

Another key element that determined the development of this strategy is the *EU's enlargement process to the east*, with a focus on supporting Ukraine and Moldova in their reconstruction and integration. Thus, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have been official candidates for EU membership since 2022 (European Council meeting Conclusions, 2022), and accession negotiations are ongoing. In this logic and in relation to the regional security context, attention is focused both on the reconstruction of Ukraine and its integration into the single market – which requires modern infrastructure, access to transport and energy corridors, and secure maritime connectivity, as well as on the Republic of Moldova which, as a landlocked state, depends on access to Romanian and Ukrainian ports for trade and essential imports. Therefore, a *strategic approach at regional level* is essential to avoid fragmentation of support and to contribute to the success of the European integration process in the Wider Black Sea Region.

In addition, multiple crises (energy, climate, migration, infrastructure) have also had their say, with the Black Sea also becoming a nodal point for several interconnected crises: the post-2022 energy crisis that forced the EU to seek alternative corridors for gas and electricity; climate change and excessive pollution that threaten biodiversity and the quality of life in coastal areas; migration from the Caucasus and the Middle East, intensified by regional instability, affecting sea routes and ports on the Black Sea. In this context, the strategy issued in May 2025 proposes not only security measures, but also structural measures for climate change adaptation, sustainable development and civil protection, in a coherent and long-term manner.

Last but not least, the adoption of the strategy also reflects the *unity and solidarity between the Member States* within the Union. Romania and Bulgaria, Member States directly affected, have consistently called for a more applied focus on Black Sea policies. The Baltic countries and Poland have also supported this approach, seeing a direct connection between Black Sea security and Baltic Sea security. By connecting the two areas, the Commission also saw in this approach an opportunity to demonstrate the EU's internal cohesion and its capacity to react at a difficult time for the neighbourhood policy.

Thus, the EU Strategic Approach to the Black Sea did not emerge in isolation, but is the result of cumulative geopolitical, security and economic pressures, accentuated by the war in Ukraine, climate change and the challenges in the Union's Eastern Neighbourhood. The Strategy reflects a *paradigm shift*: the Black Sea is no longer treated as a fringe of Europe, but as a space essential for the future security and prosperity of the European Union.

In terms of content, the approach is organized around *three main pillars*: security, stability, resilience; sustainable growth and prosperity; and environmental protection, climate change adaptation and civil protection. The Strategy includes several key projects that unite the three pillars: a regional hub for maritime security in the Black Sea; an energy, transport and digital connectivity agenda; and other actions to support partners in the region (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey) to benefit from cooperation with EU policies.

The first pillar focuses on strengthening maritime security and regional resilience. The strategy proposes the creation of a regional maritime security hub, focused on maritime intelligence collection and analysis, civil-military cooperation in the field of maritime security, monitoring of critical offshore infrastructure and data sharing between national institutions, the EU and regional partners. This would eventually become the core of regional cooperation between EU Member States and coastal partners. In addition, the importance of intensifying cooperation in the field of maritime mine clearance – which already benefits, starting from 2024, from a unified approach of the Black Sea littoral states through the establishment of the *MCM Black Sea Task Force* (Semnarea Memorandumului de Înțelegere privind constituirea grupului operativ pentru combaterea minelor marine în Marea Neagră/Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of the Task Force to Counter Sea Mines in the Black Sea – Mine Countermeasures Black Sea/MCM Black Sea, 2024), countering hybrid and cyber threats, as well as the security of submarine energy infrastructures are highlighted. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the interoperability of naval forces and on strengthening rapid response capabilities in the event of a crisis.

The strategy introduces, through the second pillar, a dedicated connectivity agenda, focused on transport (through the corridors related to the Trans-European Transport Network – TEN-T²), energy and digitalization, which aims to extend European corridors to Central Asia through the Caucasus. By modernizing transport corridors and developing energy interconnections, the EU aims to reduce dependence on traditional routes controlled by unstable actors and create an integrated economic space on the Black Sea, competitive and resilient.

The third pillar reflects the concern for sustainability and environmental risk management. The strategy proposes common mechanisms for preparing for and responding to natural or man-made disasters, combating pollution and coastal erosion, and protecting marine ecosystems. At the same time, the document supports the development of green offshore energy, in particular wind projects, and encourages the protection of submarine infrastructure, essential for communications and energy transport. The ecological approach of the strategy is complementary to the security objectives, as environmental degradation and climate change can generate new strategic vulnerabilities.

ROMANIA – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Romania is one of the states onto which the developments and risks in the region have a direct impact, so the EU's strategic approach for the Black Sea region can create opportunities. Thus, the first of them is the *consolidation of the geostrategic role*. Romania can become a regional hub for maritime security, by actively participating in its structure and by cooperating with the other littoral states. A first step in this direction has already been taken at the ministerial meeting³ on trans-regional security and connectivity, organized on the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council on 20 October 2025, by presenting Romania's availability to host the hub on maritime security. Beyond the obvious benefit from a security perspective, other advantages that such a proactive approach would create would be increasing the capacity to react to hybrid threats and sabotage on offshore infrastructure, creating specialized jobs in security, IT and marine analysis, as well as positioning Romania as a regional hub for EU – NATO – Eastern partners cooperation.

² *Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T): The Council gives final green light to new regulation ensuring better and sustainable connectivity in Europe*, press release, European Council, 13 June 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ro/press/press-releases/2024/06/13/trans-european-transport-network-ten-t-council-gives-final-green-light-to-new-regulation-ensuring-better-and-sustainable-connectivity-in-europe/>, retrieved on 24 September 2025.

³ *Participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Oana Țoiu, in the Ministerial Meeting on Security and Trans-Regional Connectivity, organized on the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council*, MFA press release, 20 October 2025, <https://mae.ro/node/67627>, retrieved on 21 October 2025.

In relation to the proposals in the document, Romania can also increase its role in military and logistical mobility, through adapted port and transport infrastructure (airports, railways etc.). A second benefit lies in *improvements in security and resilience*, by ensuring the protection of critical infrastructure, as well as through increased cooperation in preventing hybrid and disinformation threats.

Romania can also capitalize on European investments for the modernization of port and railway infrastructure, contributing to the military and logistical mobility of the Union. The benefits are, however, conditional on the absorption capacity of European funds, efficient inter-institutional coordination and the maintenance of a sustained political commitment. Thus, planned investments in port, railway and airport infrastructure must be designed with a dual purpose: supporting civil mobility and increasing the Union's military and logistical mobility capacity.

Among the challenges that Romania could face are: limitations in administrative and financial resources; persistent risks generated by the conflict in Ukraine; as well as the complexity of multilateral cooperation with diverse partners, sometimes with divergent interests.

First, although the tendency is to focus on the security perspective, namely on the creation and operationalization of the regional maritime security hub, the *implementation of the EU strategic approach to the Black Sea* should be viewed in its entirety. This means, on the one hand, approaching the other two pillars of the strategy with similar attention and, on the other hand, close coordination and, possibly, institutionalized through an inter-ministerial group-type mechanism, with the participation of institutions with responsibilities in the field, but also the creation of a fund dedicated exclusively to the Black Sea region. Fragmented management of lines of effort can be effective only in the respective segment, and in this case, a unitary approach can be the key to the successful implementation of the EU strategic approach in its entirety.

The EU strategic approach to the Black Sea is an important step, providing a coherent framework for action in the area of security, development and environment. For Romania, it means an opportunity to strengthen its regional role, attract investment and enhance national security, but its success will depend on its properly reflecting the lines of effort into concrete policies and projects. The lack of a clear financial mechanism, fragmentation of institutional competences and poor coordination with other partners may affect implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

The *European Union's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region* signifies a maturity reach of European security policy and a reaffirmation of the commitment to the stability of the Eastern flank. The Black Sea can represent not only a risk

perimeter, but also a vector of European integration and projection of stability towards the eastern neighbourhood.

Beyond the national framework, it is essential to emphasize that the responsibility for implementing the strategy belongs to all EU Member States. Furthermore, it is useful to see the strategy as a piece in a puzzle, with the document also highlighting synergies with other EU policy frameworks and initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership, the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the revised EU Maritime Security Strategy and the Global Gateway, the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea, as well as the Common Strategic Agenda for Research and Innovation for the Black Sea. In addition, implementation efforts need to be reflected in EU-NATO cooperation, both at the political level (e.g. by renewing the Joint Declaration on cooperation between the two, the most recent of which dates back to 2023) and at the practical level, by identifying the complementarity of existing measures and initiatives and making the best use of them. In addition, cooperation with Türkiye, including from the perspective of guardian of the 1936 Montreux Convention (1936 Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits, 1936), will be another element that will determine the efficiency and sustainability of the EU Strategic Approach to the Black Sea.

For Romania, this document does not represent just a political framework, but a strategic opportunity to assert itself as a key regional actor – through active participation in security, development and environmental initiatives, in an *inter-institutional synergy*. Capitalizing on this position will depend on the capacity to articulate coherent policies, to cooperate effectively at regional level with the Black Sea littoral states and at European level with the other EU Member States, as well as to integrate the security dimension with that of sustainable development.

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