BLACK SEA AND BALKANS 2023 SECURITY FORUM

7th edition
18-19 May
Bucharest

NEW STRATEGY CENTER

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Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum - 7th edition

The seventh edition of the Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum was organized between 18-19 May 2023. The event brought together 167 speakers and featured 42 panels on various topics. This large-scale international event is organized by the New Strategy Center in partnership with the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, with institutional support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Defence and support from NATO's Public Diplomacy Division.

The 2023 edition took place in the context of the second year of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The long-term effects of this conflict will have started to crystalize, while the battlefields of Southern and Eastern Ukraine will provide a case study for how the newest military technologies fare in real life situations. Of course, the lessons to be drawn from this conflict expand way past the military domain, penetrating all strategic sectors. From energy, to logistic and health, the war highlighted our region's vulnerabilities. This year's enhanced format seeks to match the complexity of the threats that we face, spearheaded by the Russian's Federation unprovoked aggression in Ukraine. NATO's new Strategic Concept signals the beginning of a new era in the Euro-Atlantic world, a tectonic shift which invites to a deep reflection process, rooted in the belief that in-depth analysis and strategic planned are two sides of the same coin. The 7th edition of the Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum has provided an arena for in-depth, high-level dialogue, solution-oriented dialogue aimed at shedding a new light on the ever-increasing complexity of the security environment in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine.

The Forum's reputation translates in the participation of elite public officials, analysts, scholars, experts, representatives of non-governmental organizations and the business sector engaging in in-depth analysis and multi-dimensional approaches to old and emerging challenges. In testing times, where old frameworks screech due to the weight of the burden, this brings an invaluable transversal contribution, stretching from theory to practice, all the way to the regional and the global dimension of security studies and international relations.

The New Strategy Center expresses its gratitude to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Defence as institutional partners, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division for its support, the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine for being our partners in organizing the event, to the the partners in organizing the panels, the media partners and the sponsors, without whose support this event would not have taken place.

Welcome remarks

The forum was opened by Mr. Ionel Nițu, President of New Strategy Center and Mr. Sorin Cîmpeanu, Rector of the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Romania, former Minister of Education, Romania.

Mr. Nițu pointed out that this edition proposes to delve deeper into the medium and long-term effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, by using a multidisciplinary approach. The Black Sea and the Balkan regions represent a strategic continuum, as this forum attempts to find ideas for a safer, more prosperous and more stable region.

Mr. Cîmpeanu remarked that Russia's war in Ukraine has both regional and global effects on aspects such as food security, energy security and freedom of navigation, becoming a confrontation between democracy and autocracy. He emphasized that Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova belong in the European Union and that Romania supports them in that endeavour.

Panel I. Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region. Increasing the Resilience of States Affected by Current Crises through Cooperation

Chair: Ambassador Sorin DUCARU, Honorary Chairman of the Scientific Council, New Strategy Center; Director, European Union Satellite Centre, Romania
H.E. Mr. Nicolae CIUCĂ, Prime Minister, Romania
H.E. Mr. Dorin RECEAN, Prime Minister, Republic of Moldova

The very first panel of the conference highlighted the current relevance of the Black Sea and Balkan region security issues. 2022 marked a return to a long-lasting, large-scale war that is exhausting the resources not only of the nation in conflict, but also of all European countries. Russia's abuse of vast areas of the Black Sea poses a threat to the whole of Europe. These threats affect the safety of navigation, the freedom of movement of commercial and tourist vessels, the protection of trade routes, energy and transport corridors.

Prime Minister Ciucă recognized that this regional war has the potential to become a conflict of attrition, requiring a reassessment of security strategies for the Black Sea and the Balkans, including strengthening the resilience of the states in the region. Resilience requires flexibility in economy and industries to support countries within the alliance and maintain solidarity against Russia's attrition warfare. In this context, the Prime Minister also stressed Romaniaț̦s role in countering the threat Russia poses to Black Sea security, affecting freedom of navigation, and implicitly, energy security and food security.

Regarding energy resilience, Romania wants to establish green energy and data cables on the Black Sea band as part of the Caspian Sea Corridor, which is crucial for transportation and gas. Furthermore, Moldova no longer depends on Russian energy supplies thanks to Romania's swift assistance and integration into the European energy network.

Prime Minister Recean has discussed the way that the Republic of Moldova understands its role on the international scene and the assumed responsibility of increasing regional security by strengthening the country's defense capabilities. He also reaffirmed Chișinău's commitment to join the European.

After all, the likelihood of Russia or any other world player acting aggressively has increased due to the invasion of Ukraine, highlighting the importance of assessing regional security challenges. Attention should also be drawn to the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova, which includes propaganda, protests, and actively promoted inter-ethnic hatred. Political leaders must regain citizens' trust to prevent societal damage, while Moldova strives to fight corruption, implement justice reform, and create jobs for its citizens to come closer to the EU model.

Panel II. The Reconstruction Begins Now. Ways to Support Ukraine's Economy and European Integration of Ukraine and Republic of Moldova – in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States

Chair: Mrs. Alina INAYEH, Adviser to the German Marshall Fund, President on Black Sea Security

H.E. Mr. Ruslan STEFANCHUK, Speaker, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine

H.E. Mrs. Alina GORGHIU, Acting Chair, Senate, Parliament of Romania

H.E. Mr. Marcel CIOLACU, Chair, Chamber of Deputies, Parliament of Romania

H.E. Mr. Igor GROSU, President, Parliament of Republic of Moldova

The discussions of the second panel started from the premise that what is happening in Ukraine is a strategic wake up call for the EU and NATO, which requires an adaptation to the new geopolitical realities by all actors involved. In this sense, the reconstruction of Ukraine does not only involve rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by the Russian Federation during its invasion of the neighboring country, but is a process that must take into account several dimensions. The first dimension concerns attitudes towards the Russian Federation. Thus, it was necessary to apply sanctions against Russia in order to prevent further financing of its war in Ukraine, while a paradigm shift is also needed in terms of Russian propaganda favoring the actions of Russian troops and energy blackmail towards the Republic of Moldova. In the first case, the withdrawal of broadcasting licenses for pro-Russian channels and the management of propaganda on social media have been brought into question, as the Kremlin's propaganda has become much more aggressive with the outbreak of the war to cover up Russia's atrocities in Ukraine and destabilize European democracies that are helping this country. President Ciolacu has especially insisted on the significance of the energy security dimension in the Black Sea and the role that Romania must play in this regard.

Thus, the future of Ukraine, as well as that of a peaceful Europe, depends on continuous military support for Ukraine. The speakers also argued in favor of the involvement of women in the decision-making process on the reconstruction of Ukraine in order to meet the needs of the female segment of the Ukrainian population. It is paramount that this project, which must represent a country project for Romania, must start now, not at the end of the war. An important role in this regard must be played by the global banking sector, whose involvement is vital in providing financing to foreign companies which will take part in the reconstruction process.

The panelists concluded that this process must take place at the same time with the accession of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova to the EU, as the European path of the two countries must be a common one, in addition to the fact that we cannot talk about the reconstruction of Ukraine independently of that of the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, the latter will contribute, together with other countries in the vicinity, to the reconstruction efforts of the former, while it is also necessary that, by the end of this year, the two countries begin the process of negotiating with the EU regarding their accession.

Panel IIIa. Standing by Ukraine. Cohesion of the Democratic World and the Challenges of a Year of War – in partnership with Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), USA

Chair: Mr. Edward LUCAS, Senior Fellow and Advisor, Center for European Policy Analysis, UK
Mrs. Jeanne SHAHEEN, US Senator for New Hampshire (pre-recorded message)
Mr. Titus CORLĂȚEAN, Chairman, Committee for Foreign Affairs, Senate, Parliament of Romania
General (Ret.) Sir James EVERARD, Honorary Chairman of International Consultative Board of New Strategy Center, former DSACEUR, UK

The discussion focused on how democratic nations might cooperate to overcome the problems brought on by the conflict in Ukraine. The debate was opened by a message delivered by Senator Jeanne Shaheen, who underscored the need for a united effort against Putin's Russia, while also appreciating Romania's key role in supporting Ukraine and bolstering Black Sea security. She expressed the importance of consistent US and Western action from the Western Balkans to the Black Sea, with the goal of maintaining stability and promoting Western values.

After a year of fighting, it is obvious that democratic states must protect the multilateral world order by establishing an international court to hear cases of crimes related to the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. This becomes necessary in light of the fact that western sanctions against Russia were ineffective in seriously harming the Russian economy. The international community must work to ensure that future violence is punished and that international law is upheld. The speakers emphasized the necessity of continuing initiatives to develop economic assistance programs for Ukraine as it rebuilds its war-devastated economy.

The speakers emphasized that, from a military standpoint, one of the top priorities is to bolster Ukraine's air defense capabilities by forming a coalition with advanced Western aircraft to handle the formidable challenge posed by the Russian forces, while also focusing on potential NATO membership at the upcoming summit. Finally, this panel has emphasized the necessity for NATO countries to raise defense spending and preserve transatlantic cooperation in order to thwart Putin's expansionist goal and support Ukraine's fight for democracy.

Panel IIIb. Can Europe Achieve Energy Independence? New Strategies for Old Problems – in partnership with Delphi Forum, Greece

Chair: Mr. Symeon TSOMOKOS, Founder and President of Delphi Economic Forum, Greece
H.E. Mr. Victor PARLICOV, Minister of Energy, Republic of Moldova
Mr. Yannis MANIATIS, former Minister of Environment, Energy, Climate Change, Greece
H.E. Mr. Virgil POPESCU, Minister of Energy, Romania
Ambassador Lazăr COMĂNESCU, Secretary General of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Romania

At the beginning of the debate, the speakers warned of market manipulation of natural gas prices by Russia through Gazprom and the need for continued solidarity and support for Ukraine and Moldova. Romania is working to strengthen energy integration with Moldova through building gas pipelines, increasing capacity, and supplying electricity to ensure energy independence.

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine coincided with Ukraine's disconnection from the old Soviet Energy System, causing market manipulation and high gas prices in Europe. At the same time, the Republic of Moldova overcame dependence on Russian gas supply during the first winter and integrated with the European gas and electricity markets, making it resilient to gas deficits created by Gazprom. With international support from the EU, US, and Romania, state-owned Moldovan company Energocom has expanded its capacities to trade and purchase gas from the international market. Nonetheless, the biggest challenge for Moldova's energy future and for its European integration in general is the battle for public perception due to the ongoing hybrid war commenced by Russia.

The speakers emphasized that Europe needs to focus on three pillars - green transition, energy affordability, and energy security - and formulate a new energy strategy to address current and future problems. Green transition creates new geopolitical challenges, as China dominates the critical and strategic raw materials market. The EU must learn from past mistakes, ensure key technologies are produced in Europe, and develop all available energy resources to avoid future price surges. Europe’s security is also as much about consolidating and coordinating its own resources as it is about interconnecting with countries in Africa, the Middle East or Central Asia.

Panel IIIc. Weaponization of Food as a Risk to World Stability – in partnership with University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Romania

Chair: Mrs. Gina FÎNTÎNERU, Vice-rector for Research & Innovation, University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV)
Mr. Brian LANDER, Deputy Director, Emergency Division, World Food Programme, United Nation, USA
Ms. Iuliia OSMOLOVSKA, Director of the Kyiv Office of GLOBSEC, Ukraine
Mr. Jean VALVIS, Chairman, General Director, Valvis Holding, Romania
Mr. Andrei URSULESCU, CEO Scandia Food, Romania
Mr. Nawaf SALAMEH, Chairman Alexandrion Group, Romania

The panel discussed the relationship between humanitarian and economic effects of food crises, in Ukraine as well as internationally. The impact of the war over the economic and agriculture of Ukraine was also one of the topics of the panel, with the main argument being that Russia is committing an ecocide in Ukraine. The goal of the Russian Federation becomes clear: to destroy and contaminate Ukraine's farmlands in such a way that they will not be usable in the medium and long term. In total, there are five million hectares affected by the war.

The discussions then approached how food security is perceived in Romania, through the lens of the national legal framework. The panelists focused on a detailed economic analysis on food security, taking into account key variables such as inflation, consumption and production, concluding that the great potential of Romania's food sector should be stimulated through investment and modernization.

Ultimately, the speakers assessed the immediate issues caused by the weaponization of food exports by the Russian Federation and the need to properly manage the influx of Ukrainian cereal exports, which puts the economic situation of Eastern European farmers at risk.

Panel IVa. Zeitenwende: Turning Point of the German Foreign and Security Policy – in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Germany

Chair: Mrs. Cristina CILEACU, Senior editor, Digi24, Romania

Mr. Michael SCHARFSCHWERDT, Director of Policy Planning at the Federal Foreign Office, Germany

Mrs. Katja PLATE, Head of the KAS Offices Romania, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Germany

Mr. Liviu HOROVITZ, Researcher, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Germany

The debate centered around the argument that we are talking about two different periods in German domestic and foreign policy compared to the period before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This paradigm shift is conceptualized by Zeitenwende, a concept proposed by Olaf Scholz last year. Before the war, Germany was one of the states that did not oppose the authoritarian tendencies and influences of Russia and China in Europe because it did not strategically prioritize them, and it even carried out two pipeline projects with the Russian Federation. Moreover, it had an underdeveloped security culture: there was no interest in security and defense debates, either at the national or European level.

The term Zeitenwende focuses on three dimensions. The first is that we used to have a different world order, and now everything has changed. The second is the critics' view that the term is just a way of underpinning the lack of action and subsequent change. The third dimension concerns the hope that Germany will be more proactive in its foreign policy in the new post-Ukraine world order in relation to two issues: the economic dimension of the Black Sea area and limiting the rise of China. Two topics of interest were also raised in the Q&A. The first of these concerns the usefulness of conscription and compulsory military service, the emphasis being that German soldiers will say that there is no need for this because the reform that the German army needs would be too difficult to implement, and that the country needs a change in security culture: for example, when faced with a disaster, citizens are seen as victims, not actors, and instead need to understand that everyone has an active role to play when it comes to security. The second topic of interest revolved around Iran as a state allied with Russia and supporting Moscow in its war efforts, the answer being that we cannot only talk about an Iran-Russia dyad, but also about Israel's security in this context, a priority on Berlin's foreign policy agenda.

Panel IVb. Energy Opportunities in the Black Sea Region in the Context of Current Security Challenges – in partnership with West University of Timișoara, Romania

Chair: Mr. Radu TUDOR, Journalist, Antena 3 CNN, Romania
H.E. Mr. Virgil POPESCU, Minister of Energy, Romania
Mr. Bende SÁNDOR, Chairman, Committee for Industries and Services, Chamber of Deputies, Romania
Mr. Casian NIȚULESCU, State Secretary, Ministry of Energy, Romania
Mr. Cosmin GHIȚĂ, CEO, Nuclearelectrica, Romania
Mr. Ion STERIAN, CEO, Transgaz, Romania
Mr. Alexandru MAXIMESCU, Vice president, OMV Petrom, Romania

The speakers approached the situation of those countries in the region that are looking for new energy alternatives, achieving energy independence from Moscow, in the context of the tense situation in the Black Sea caused by Russia's war in Ukraine. Terminals in Azerbaijan and Turkey will prove to be key in this endeavor. From Romania's point of view, a very important objective is energy connectivity with the Republic of Moldova, which is also a factor in the country's European integration.

From 2027, when many Black Sea energy projects will be completed, Romania will be in a favorable transit position and will become a source of energy security for the Republic of Moldova and for the region in general. Energy can transform the Black Sea from an unstable area into an export hub to the West.

Romania will play an important role in natural gas security and supply to Moldova with the development of infrastructure and interconnectors. Extraction from the Neptun Deep perimeter is estimated to begin in 2027, producing 100 billion cubic meters. This, combined with Romania's nuclear projects (building two new reactors at the Cernavodă NPP, experimenting with American modular nuclear reactors), will increase the country's role as a regional energy hub.

Meanwhile, the European Union is focusing on environmentally friendly energy solutions in the Balkan countries. Romania is working on passing an offshore wind law in that sense.

Panel IVc. Societal Resilience and Emergency Preparedness – How Can We Prepare Critical Infrastructures for Medical and Civil Emergencies? – in partnership with Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

Chair: Mrs. Liliana Ana TUȚĂ, Vice–Rector for International Relations, Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania

Mr. Raed ARAFAT, State Secretary, Head of Emergency Situations Department, Ministry of Interior, Romania (via VTC)

Mr. Andrei BACIU, State Secretary, Ministry of Health, Romania

Mr. Daniel IONIȚĂ, Cyber Security Manager, Cymed/Infoworld, Romania

The panel began by stressing the need to evaluate the success of health systems in different countries, and to integrate the lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis, in order to increase resilience capacity and prioritize a paradigm shift towards replicating what worked and finding solutions for future health care challenges. One of the main challenges was represented by the fact that hospitals faced IT system nightmares due to new pathways, equipment installations, and password changes overnight, highlighting the need for digitalization and cyber security expertise. In effect, if we don't secure patient data, ill-intentioned people can exploit it, and the health system needs to improve its resilience and reduce disaster risks.

Several other measures include investing in pandemic preparedness, including inventory stocks and industry strengthening, as well as facilitating clear plans and better interaction with the population, in order to be prepared for future shocks. Romania's healthcare system needs more resources, and the NRRP beam provides an opportunity to inject 2.8 billion euros into developing infrastructure and resilience mechanisms. Romania needs more resources to improve its healthcare system, as it currently allocates only 6% of its GDP to healthcare, compared to the European average of 9%. The NRRP requires careful planning and implementation with periodical monitoring to meet objectives and make ongoing adjustments. Trust in state institutions plays a crucial role in improving the resilience of the health system. In Romania, one of the main issues in overcoming the identified problems is accepting the cost of solutions. Another problem stressed by the speakers was the over-reliance on countries other than those in the Euro-Atlantic area in terms of material preparedness for a health crisis.

Panel Va. Russian Political Warfare and Threats from High North to the Black Sea – in partnership with Norwegian Institute for International Affairs

Chair: Mr. Ion IONIȚĂ, Senior editor Adevărul, Editor in chief, Historia, Romania
Mrs. Alina BÂRGĂOANU, Senior Associate Expert of New Strategy Center, Dean of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, SNSPA, Romania
Mr. Jakub GODZIMIRSKI, Research Professor, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Poland (via VTC)
Mrs. Olga REZNIKOVA, Researcher, National Institute for Strategic Studies, Ukraine

The speakers indicated that the war in Ukraine started long before 24 February 2022, mainly involving elements of hybrid warfare. Special attention should be paid to propaganda, which now exceeds any historical precedent, and takes place in a new and distinct information environment. We are confronted with a novel type of information warfare waged by the Russian Federation, characterized by its transnational nature. Its aim is to generate polarization and provoke divergent public opinions in society. Still, a warning was issued in the panel against demonizing those who think differently and assuming everyone who wants an end to the war in Europe is a Russian troll or under Russian propaganda.

That is even harder to manage nowadays, since the distinction between actual reality and computerized reality is becoming blurred with the emergence of technologies like chatbots, deep fakes, and gamification. The distinction between mainstream media and social media has also become blurred. To combat propaganda and fake news, it is necessary to treat the information ecosystem like the financial system, with clear institutions and regulations.

As part of its hybrid warfare toolbox, Russia used economic instruments of power, such as reducing gas supply to the EU, to influence policies and undermine US cohesion, while some countries like Finland have managed to become less dependent on energy supplies from Russia.

Another objective of the Russian Federation is to undermine the unity of Western states, thus affecting their ability to respond promptly to various crises. The speakers also stressed that the invasion of Ukraine highlighted the absence of international mechanisms to prevent the outbreak of war and restore peace.

Presentation of the NUPI and New Strategy Center study on Russian Disinformation Campaigns in the NATO Space in the Context of the War in Ukraine

Chair: Mr. Sergiu MITRESCU, Coordinator of International Relations Department, New Strategy Center
Mrs. Ileana ROTARU, Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania
Mr. Jakub GODZIMIRSKI, Research Professor, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Poland (via VTC)

The study revealed that Romanian citizens have a positive perception of NATO and European institutions. A significant proportion of the population feels protected by NATO in the face of challenges from the Russian Federation. However, public opinion has become polarized. This polarization has been influenced in particular by the fear of a possible economic and energy crisis and the impact of the information war in the public space. Young people with stable, higher education and income support NATO and Romania's decision to help Ukraine, while those who are unemployed or have blue-collar jobs do not. A large portion of the Romanian population consumes television despite not trusting it as a source of news.

As far as Norway is concerned, support for the North Atlantic Organisation is full because Norwegian society trusts the institutions. Also, the high level of digital literacy among Norwegians contributes to identifying fake news.

There is a public consensus that Russia is to blame for the war in Europe, and there is support for helping Ukraine, but caution is needed in both countries, considering the polarized world we live in currently.

Panel Vb. Reconstruction of Ukraine. The Biggest Project of the Western World after WWII – in partnership with Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Poland

Chair: Mrs. Alexandra GĂTEJ, Member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center
Mrs. Alina INAYEH, Adviser to the German Marshall Fund President on Black Sea Security, Romania
Mrs. Jadwiga ROGOŻA, Senior Fellow, Ukraine Department, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Poland (via VTC)
Mr. Cătălin PODARU, CEO, Leviatan Design, Romania
Mr. Adrian FLOREA, Development, and Digital Transformation Director, Concelex, Romania

As in the case of the other panel on the subject, the central argument was that the reconstruction of Ukraine is not just a simple civil process, but a multi-faceted one, in this case the entire transformation of the country into a legitimate member of the transatlantic international community, the largest reconstruction project since the Second World War. In the most exhaustive sense of the term, when we talk about reconstruction, we must take into account two fundamental aspects: rebuilding the civil infrastructure and attracting foreign companies, with the focus in the first case on rebuilding towns such as Bucha and in the second case on building a hub for Romanian and foreign companies that can provide aid of any kind in the reconstruction of the country.

Until then, however, as discussed by the speakers, certain issues need to be resolved. The first of these relates to war insurance, since this is something that states on both sides of the Atlantic are looking at, but not every insurance company has the resources to take on such a risk. The second issue was raised in relation to the standardization of reconstruction: while some areas will be rebuilt from scratch, this needs to take into account the use of higher quality materials as well as EU energy standards, with a focus on green energy. The third issue discussed was the political situation in Ukraine related to corruption, so the $600 billion allocated to reconstruction must be invested in a transparent manner and any corruption punished.

Furthermore, the idea has been put forward that participating in Ukraine's reconstruction as a neighbor is both a moral imperative and a pragmatic approach, as we want Ukraine to revive and integrate into the Euro-Atlantic alliance system. In this context, we need a working group to discuss and decide what local companies and strategic partners can do for the reconstruction of the neighboring country.

Panel VIa. The Balkans at the Crossroads: Stability or a New Crisis? – in partnership with Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Serbia

Chair: Mr. Robert LUPIȚU, editor-in-chief, Calea Europeană, Romania
Mr. Yordan BOZHILOV, President, Sofia Security Forum, Bulgaria
Mr. Manuel SARRAZIN, Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans of the Federal Government of Germany, Germany (pre-recorded message)
Mr. Bojan ELEK, Deputy Director, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Serbia
Mr. James GOW, Department of War Studies, King's College, UK

Tackling the issue of the Western Balkans, this panel revolved around the central argument that, on the one hand, the EU must make every effort to include the six states that make up the Western Balkans region among its member states, but also that certain problems relating to Serbia's regional behavior and Russia's influence in the region must be resolved. The war in Ukraine will be the catalyst for many processes, including the inclusion of the Western Balkans in the EU, which must find its own balance between security and integrity and speed up the accession process of the states in the region.

In his message, Manuel Sarrazin explained how the Western Balkans are seen as the "strategic main focal point" of Germany's foreign and European policy, a conception only strengthened by Zeitenwende.

Moreover, accession is a process, before being an act in itself, that must take into account two factors: preparing the Western Balkan states for membership and preparing the EU to accept new members into its community. Also, before new states join, changes should be made to the treaties to reflect all these challenges of accession, as the EU needs a strategic approach given the new security environment created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Among the solutions proposed in this respect were the following: 1) the countries of this region must be included in the decision-making process at EU level, especially on issues that concern them, namely security and migration; 2) they must be given access to European funds, not only after accession but already as candidate countries; and 3) the efforts that these countries make in their EU accession process must be appreciated, as the EU needs to have more effective strategic communication with candidate countries.

However, there are three key issues that will need to be put on the EU agenda in the context of the current war: 1) the psychological effect of the invasion, which has led to a reminder of events in the 1990s during the wars in the former Yugoslavia; 2) the increased focus on security and defense on the component of improving national defense industries in the Balkans and that of countering Moscow's malign influence in the region; 3) resolving Serbia's ambivalent behavior, so that any deal on Serbia's accession to the EU will have to overcome the obstacle of the Kosovo issue.

Panel VIb. Protecting Critical Infrastructure. Safeguarding Communication Systems in Uncertain Times

Chair: Mr. Marcel FOCA, Senior Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania
Brigadier General Maxim DOBRINOIU, Head of Internal Security Division, Special Telecommunications Service, Romania
Mr. Dan CÎMPEAN, Director, National Cyber Security Directorate, Romania
Mr. Romeo MILEA, Network Development Director, Vodafone, Romania
Brigadier General Mihai BURLACU, Chief of Communications and Information Technology Directorate, Ministry of Defence, Romania

The central argument of this panel started from the assumption that the strategic and security context forces us to take a pragmatic approach to the role of critical infrastructure for society, defense, and national security, manifested by a shift in focus from protection to resilience. The Special Telecommunications Service, one of the institutions with a key role in this area, has adapted to this context and has started to implement a number of principles, such as security by design, privacy by design, redundancy, and recovery in the area of zero trust security, as well as insisting on interoperability between state institutions and the private sector. It also invests in attracting human resources and skills, as well as preventing insider threats or cyber hygiene.

The National Cyber Security Directorate, in turn, is tasked with monitoring the resilience of critical infrastructure, keeping operators active, and accelerating cooperation between actors. In the context of the war in Ukraine, what has been seen is that we need to activate the institutional ecosystem within the limits allowed by law and procedures. Moreover, it could also be seen that Ukraine has been effective and efficient in activating state bodies in collaboration with international partners, beyond the use of the renowned Ukrainian Cyber Army on the digital front of the war in Ukraine.

As a result, in the future, we can expect two trends given the new realities of cyberspace: 1) proliferation of partnerships - in the future, there will be more rules and partnerships in the field of cybersecurity; and 2) technological proliferation - any new device and technology connected to cyberspace can be a vector of cyber-attacks.

Against this backdrop, it is essential that organizations stop perceiving cyber security as a cost. In the private sector, given the explosion of devices and technologies in the IoT area, Vodafone has a role in ensuring continuity of service, especially in critical situations such as earthquakes or conflicts. In this way, resilience plays a key role in two respects: technological resilience, which consists of ensuring communications in all conditions, and the cyber security component in the customer awareness area.

Panel VIIa. What Will Security Architecture Look Like After the War? How We Can Restore Stability in Europe?

Chair: Ambassador Gheorghe MAGHERU, member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center, Romania
Mr. Iulian CHIFU, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Romania, Romania
Mr. Markus KAIM, Senior Fellow, Research Division, German Institute for International and Security Affairs – SWP, Germany
Ambassador Cristian DIACONESCU, member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Romania
Mr. Mirko MUSSETTI, Geopolitical Analyst, Limes, Italy

In tackling the daunting task of envisioning a future security architecture that would rightly serve European stability, the panelists first discussed the need for fundamental changes in defense planning and the societal investment required for such an endeavor, focusing on effective and inclusive security institutions and monitoring military activities in key regions.

The war in Ukraine was highlighted as a significant factor in this context. It poses various dilemmas, and a peaceful resolution through treaty negotiations seems challenging. The panel considered three possible scenarios: total Ukrainian victory, a ceasefire, or a politically negotiated ceasefire. The Black Sea region was emphasized as deserving careful consideration due to its history of military tensions and political competition. Additionally, the war in Ukraine reaffirmed the importance of NATO and the concept of collective security for the Euro-Atlantic area. In this context, Romania and Poland were described as geometric security pillars on the Eastern Flank of the North Atlantic Alliance, facing Russian influence in the enclaves of Kaliningrad and Transnistria.

Lastly, the speakers acknowledged that while most countries adhere to international law, there are still states with revisionist foreign policies that resort to aggressive actions that are difficult to anticipate and prevent. It is in this context that building societal resilience truly becomes an imperative.

Panel VIIb. New Energy Sources for the Black Sea and Balkan Region. Opportunities for a More Secure Future

Chair: Mr. Laurențiu PACHIU, Vice-President, Energy Policy Group, Romania
Mr. Lóránt ANTAL, Chairman of the Energy Committee, Senate, Romania
Mr. George NICULESCU, Chairman, Romanian Energy Regulatory Authority (ANRE)
Mr. Piotr MARCZUK, Director, Government Relations, Central and Eastern Europe, Honeywell, Poland

The Balkan region was in a systemic energy crisis far before the war in Ukraine due to an obsolete energy infrastructure and a lack of alternative sources, but, as this panel assessed, this crisis can and must be turned into an opportunity.

In the case of Romania, there are promising energy projects with political backing: building new reactors at Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant, developing modular nuclear reactor systems, exploiting natural gas from Neptun Deep, and implementing offshore wind energy in the Black Sea (the first in the region). Romania is collaborating intensively with other countries in the region, such as Azerbaijan, with which it has signed an important natural gas deal. Furthermore, an agreement was signed for a green grain corridor linking the Caspian Sea to Europe through Romania, which will transport renewable energy and accommodate new production, with interest from Bulgaria to expand the project.

Also, for the first time, gas going to Moldova is coming from the West, not the East, thanks to Romania. These exceptional results were adopted under exceptional conditions, in an energy crisis.

The speakers recognized that, when it comes to alternative resources, new directives on energy efficiency, renewable energy, and building performance include provisions for charging stations in residential and non-residential buildings, with negotiations ongoing and implementation expected within the next year or two. There is potential for collaboration between the Black Sea region and the Balkans through hydropower. For this region, the current plans to interconnect renewable energy (solar panels, wind power plants) in the Mediterranean region should be an example.

Panel VIII. How the Conflict in Ukraine Will Influence the conduct of War in the Future – in partnership with King's College, UK

Chair: Brigadier General (Ret.) Hans DAMEN, Member of the International Consultative Board of New Strategy Center, The Netherlands
General (Ret.) Philip M. BREEDLOVE, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, USA
Mr. Christopher DANDECKER, Department of War Studies, King's College, UK
Mr. James W. DERLETH, Professor, College of International and Security Studies, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, USA

The debate on this panel started with General Breedlove's argument that the future of warfare will witness a greater role of operational and strategic level logistics, especially regarding precise munitions. Drawing from Russia's performance against Ukraine, the west must take into account the vulnerability of supply lines, and its industrial capacity. The question of efficient deterrence has also been brought to the table, as Russia has effectively threatened the West of nuclear escalation and war spillover in order to deter it from aiding Ukraine.

President Putin has also underestimated Ukraine, NATO, as well as a key element in the art of war: the morale of Ukrainian troops. Consequently, he took the decision to invade Ukraine because he received incorrect information, and was surrounded by some decision-makers who thought it would be a guaranteed victory.

From a non-military perspective, on both sides, a number of actors and factors played a crucial role in the war: artificial intelligence, the private sector, civil society, proxy groups, social media, and OSINT techniques. On the other hand, one lesson from this war is that command systems that enable the precise use of systems and weapons fall into what is conceptually referred to as the 'dialectic of weaponry', namely the shift towards centralization or reorganization of commands.

Moreover, Russia's desire to change the geopolitical realities in Eastern Europe gave President Zelenski the opportunity to increase support for his country and to receive billions of dollars from the West. On the same note, one of the questions asked related to the implementation of the suggestions offered during the panel regarding a Ukrainian victory, was answered by underlining the importance of Western leadership in ensuring a victory for Kiev: if the West decides to give Ukraine everything it needs, it will be capable of winning the war.

Presentation of the New Strategy Center study: A Synchronous Approach to the Reconstruction of Ukraine

Ms. Antonia COLIBĂȘANU, Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center & Chief Operating Officer & Senior Geopolitical Analyst, Geopolitical Futures, Romania, in dialog with the author,
Mr. Horia CIURTIN, Expert, New Strategy Center

The study emphasizes how crucial it is to focus investment on rebuilding and modernizing Ukraine's infrastructure in order to guarantee both economic and military mobility. The author also emphasizes the importance of giving the energy sector the attention it deserves because it is a key factor in enhancing the resilience of the Ukrainian state. In addition, there is a pressing need to reestablish the logistical capabilities required to revitalize agricultural trade, which has been negatively impacted by the ongoing conflict.

Night Owl Session (Panel IX). How Can We Define the Victory of Ukraine? Objectives and Strategic Impact – in partnership with Defense 24, Poland

Chair: Mr. Jacek RAUBO, Expert in International Relations, Defense 24, Poland
Mrs. Olga REZNIKOVA, Researcher, National Institute for Strategic Studies, Ukraine
Ms. Iuliia OSMOLOVSKA, Director of the Kyiv Office of GLOBSEC, Ukraine
Mr. Mykhailo SAMUS, Director, New Geopolitics Research Network, Ukraine

The panel explored the objectives and strategic impact of a possible Ukrainian victory over the Russian Federation. The panelists argued that it is crucial to prioritize aid to Ukraine based on distance from the front lines, accessibility of international partners, regional significance, and availability of air defense in order to help the Ukrainian resistance. Perspectives on the reconstruction of Ukraine consider neighboring countries such as Romania, Poland, and Slovakia as key players in terms of regional execution and logistical support for the process. Assistance could be provided by the European Union, as well as other international organizations, such as the Three Seas Initiatives. Some sectors, such as energy infrastructure and agriculture, can be significantly developed in as little as six months.

From a Ukrainian perspective, a Ukrainian victory would ultimately consist of the liberation of all Ukrainian territory, including Crimea. That is why the priority for Ukraine is to focus on military action to reclaim occupied territories, rather than creating a tribunal or capturing war criminals, as reclaiming occupied territories is easier to achieve and relies on the strength of the Ukrainian army and support from the West. In fact, Ukrainian society is determined to win the war and believes that the Ukrainian Armed Forces will eventually win militarily, even with reduced Western support. As for Russia, it is questionable whether a defeat would result in the collapse of the regime. On the contrary, the panel argued that Russia would instead become a stronger dictatorship using new technologies and artificial intelligence. At the same time, continuing business as usual with Russia is dangerous for global and regional security, and there needs to be a change in focus towards changing Russia rather than accommodating it.

Panel Xa. Migration and Border Security: New Challenges for Europe – in partnership with the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO), Croatia

Chair: Mr. Krševan Antun DUJMOVIĆ, Senior Associate, Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO), Croatia
H.E. Mrs. Ylva JOHANSSON, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Sweden (pre-recorded message
H.E. Mrs. Ana REVENCO, Minister of the Interior, Republic of Moldova
H.E. Mr. Lucian BODE, Minister of the Interior, Romania
H.E. Mr. Ivan DEMERDZHIEV, Deputy Prime Minister for Public Order and Security and Minister of Interior, Republic of Bulgaria

The panel began by examining the divergences among member states regarding topics such as migration and asylum, revolving around whether to prioritize solidarity or responsibility, while facing ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and economic challenges. The speakers stressed the need for the European Union to constantly adapt to the current migration dynamics and to work together with other organizations and institutions, both national and international, responsible for this field. In this context, supporting the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Zone, as well as supporting the Republic of Moldova in facing complex migration flows and hybrid manifestations at its borders with Ukraine and Romania are a priority.

The Republic of Moldova has become part of the European Union's security ecosystem due to the collaboration with its border police, while migration is being instrumentalized by Russia as a tool for exercising power. At the same time, Transnistria has the potential of aiding Russia at circumventing sanctions, increasing the importance of supporting the authority in Chisinau.

In the case of Bulgaria, increased cooperation with key neighbors has become a crucial aspect of Sofia's efforts to handle migration challenges. Consequently, Bulgaria is actively cooperating with Serbia to decrease migrant flows through measures such as joint Frontex operations, and is negotiating the establishment of a coordination mechanism to better cope with irregular movements at the border. Nonetheless, Sofia recognizes the importance of effective border protection and control, with a focus on external borders and cooperation with Turkey, particularly at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Romania is also facing difficulties in acceding to the Schengen Zone.

Panel Xb. New and Old Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean Area – in cooperation with the Abba Eban Institute, Israel

Chair: Ms. Antonia COLIBĂȘANU, Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center & Chief Operating Officer & Senior Geopolitical Analyst, Geopolitical Futures, Romania
Mr. Yossi MANN, Head of Israel and the Arab Gulf Program, Abba Eban Institute. Israel
Mr. Mitat ÇELİKPALA, Kadir Has University, Department of International Relations, Türkiye
Mr. Symeon TSOMOKOS, Founder and President of Delphi Economic Forum, Greece
Mr. Andreas THEOPHANOUS, President of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, Head of the Department of Politics and Governance, University of Nicosia, Cyprus

In exploring the complex dynamics present in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean basin, the panelists approached the current issues from the perspective of their respective countries.

Israel is dealing with climate change, which causes droughts that can lead to political instability, while also dealing with Islamic extremism. Israel's natural gas sales to Egypt, Jordan, and potentially Turkey have improved their economic and diplomatic status, while a regional stock exchange for natural gas has been proposed to reflect industry needs and provide a benchmark for prices. Israel is also considering supplying more non-attacking weapons to Ukraine, due to the potential of Russia supplying more weapons to Iran.

Meanwhile, Turkey is trying to maintain its balancer position in the Black Sea (between Russia and Ukraine) and in the Middle East. It looks to increase its role as a hub between MENA energy resources and the European market.

Greece, on the other hand, wants to focus on the European integration of Balkan countries and on reconciliation with Turkey, using the existing negotiation platforms. At the same time, Cyprus is dealing with separatism and with religious tensions within their country, doubled by constant tensions with Turkey.

Nonetheless, all speakers recognized that energy collaboration and diplomacy could be a decisive factor in creating regional stability. Furthermore, delimitation of economic exclusive zones can play a role towards regional de-escalation. Regional actors from the Mediterranean dream of a pipeline to Europe, but it's hard to achieve due to high prices and lack of investment. Turkey's established transportation network could serve as a hub, but political and financial will is needed to bring parties together to discuss this issue.

Panel Xc. The Impact of Russia's War in Ukraine on Post-Soviet Space. – in partnership with the Caucasus Institute, Armenia

Chair: Mr. Dan DUNGACIU, Member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, Romania
Mr. Alexander ISKANDARYAN, Director, Caucasus Institute, Armenia
Mr. Arseny SIVITSKY, CEO and Founder of Sarmat AnalytiX, Belarus
Mr. Igor MUNTEANU, former Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the US, Member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, Republic of Moldova

The central argument on which the speakers focused in their contributions to this panel starts from the assumption that the post-Soviet space is a space that belongs neither to the East nor to the West, which is why it is more difficult to find a precise definition. In other words, the post-Soviet space no longer exists because people in the different countries of the region think differently. The former Soviet countries have similar paradigms in their development, they have similar historical legacies, but not similar political ones. And yet a common element since the war is that Russia has brought all these countries together against itself, given that they are also smaller countries and feel more vulnerable to it.

However, the reality on the ground is diametrically opposed to this in many ways. Firstly, a weak Russia may be more dangerous than a strong one, although there may be additional risks, such as the entry of countries in the Middle East. Although post-Soviet countries have ways of resisting Russia, the war in Ukraine may have a twist designed to force it to strengthen its pressure on its former colonies. Secondly, despite the negative military dynamics on the battlefield, the meetings of leaders from post-Soviet states with Vladimir Putin are an example of a very interesting manifestation: after 15 months of conflict, most of these partners have still shown their support for Russia, especially from Central Asia and the South Caucasus, areas that have become trade hubs for Russia which can thus avoid sanctions and benefit from the war.

While these countries have tried to mitigate some of the risks, none have said they would withdraw from the post-Soviet integration institutions. Moreover, these countries have no interest in abandoning trade with Russia that benefits them, so they have no other geopolitical and geostrategic options.

Panel XIa. Strategic Thinking in Times of Crisis. Managing Threats and Seizing Opportunities

Chair: Mr. Ionel NIȚU, President, New Strategy Center, Romania
H.E Mr. Sebastian BURDUJA, Minister of Research, Innovation, and Digitalization, Romania
Mr. Sabin SĂRMAȘ, Chairman, Committee for information technologies and communications, Chamber of Deputies, Romania
Mr. Ionuț STANIMIR, Director of Marketing & Communication, Banca Comercială Română – BCR, Romania

In order to compete worldwide and close the digital divide, the panel examines Romania's emphasis on migration, integration, and technology, highlighting the necessity of strategic thinking and investment in emerging technologies. The panelists talked about how Romania serves as a strategic pillar in the area and has the potential to develop into a technological hub thanks to the shift in innovation emphasis to the private sector, which has sparked a digital revolution and made Romania an innovator and example in digitalization. The importance of artificial intelligence has also been highlighted, which, thanks to the use of large amounts of data, can shed light on often overlooked information. AI can help with supply chain traceability, environmental monitoring, crisis management, strategic decision-making, and training for emergency personnel.

To encourage innovation and research across the continent, actions at the European level must also be implemented. Despite increasing demands, the EU's cohesion funds are diminishing with each expansion. Therefore, those who submit multiple projects have a higher chance of securing funding. However, a strong innovation ecosystem is required for growth and success. Therefore, there is a need for a bigger budget for research and development (R&D), reformed organizations, and the promotion of consortiums that would combine forces and viewpoints with institutions currently unable to succeed.

Panel XIb. NATO Defence Policy and Host Nation Strategic Infrastructure. Smart Investments in Security

Chair: BG Eduard SIMION (Ret.), Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania

Lieutenant General Iulian BERDILĂ, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff for Operations and Training, Romania

Mr. Phillip PETERSEN, Chairman, Center for the Study of New Generation

Mr. Bogdan MĂRGINEAN, Special Projects Director, Concelex, Romania

Mr. Bogdan LĂZĂROAE, Complex Program Manager, Defense & Security, Ernst & Young, Romania

The central idea behind the contributions of the speakers on this panel was that, given the Putin regime's war against the liberal democracies in NATO and the EU, which started in 2007, the Eastern members of the Alliance are no longer a flank, but a real front. In this regard, several assumptions were made about NATO's defense policy. First and foremost, a key point was the integration of regional and national plans, so that states actively participate in setting their defense priorities. On the basis of these plans, Romania has invested in C2 (command and control) capabilities in order to bring the Multinational Division South-East to full operations, all the more so as it is appropriate that these plans should be congruent.

The first problem identified by the panelists is that 50% of NATO's strike potential is too inflexible to maintain bases of operations, the second that NATO still has towed artillery vulnerable to counterattack by mechanized forces, the third raises the issue that NATO lacks heavy infantry assault vehicles, and finally, the fourth addresses logistical vulnerabilities that raise the level of susceptibility to disruption by the enemy. Modern and new infrastructure is needed to deter, since deterrence, among other things, requires military mobility. Unfortunately, narrow roads and bridges that cannot support military equipment make it difficult to deploy troops from the West, and we need to support the strengthening of the eastern flank with these troops.

As solutions are to be implemented, the following have been proposed:
1) assessing the dual infrastructure and prioritizing its use,
2) proper stakeholder management that can assess needs and expectations,
3) streamlining procurement processes by eliminating certain bureaucratic processes
4) approaches on the project and execution side.

At the national level, given the current context, NATO troops need infrastructure to be able to operate on Romanian territory, especially on defense and deterrence components. Although the current contingents are predominantly positioned in the West, Romania has the opportunity, through its geographical position and constant role in NATO, to be an important player in the region. This also creates economic opportunities: jobs, access to technology, increased access to capabilities and economic growth.

Panel XIc. Future Russian Cooperation with China and Iran. Strategic Association or Opportunistic Collaboration? – in partnership with the Council on Geostrategy, UK

Chair: Ms. Viktorija STARYCH-SAMUOLIENĖ, Co-Founder and Director of Strategy, Council on Geostrategy, UK

Ms. Tomiko ICHIKAWA, Director General, The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) (via VTC)

Mr. Justin BASSI, Executive Director, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) (via VTC)

Ambassador Doru COSTEA, member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, former ambassador of Romania to Beijing, Romania

There is a Russia-China-Iran triangle, to which North Korea can be added. This is the argument around which this panel discussion revolved. As far as China-Russia relations are concerned, they have not been constant, but more recently have evolved into strategic relations based on common interests with the US and Western states. Moreover, the two countries have closer defense cooperation, the concrete example being the recent joint exercises in the vicinity of Japan.

Also, in relation to the balance of power between China and Russia, it could be in the former's interest to prolong the war in Ukraine. In the case of Iran, both it and North Korea support Russia and benefit from the strategic situation marked by the division between the West and the Russia-China dyad. Thus, while North Korea is interested in nuclear weapons, Iran prioritizes the security agenda in its neighborhood. Of all, China is the most powerful, and becoming even more powerful amid the war, with the greatest global influence.

At the other end of the spectrum, Russia's power projection capability is declining, but it maintains its equally strong online and offline disruptive capability. Russia and China can learn from each other, especially when it comes to methods and techniques of population surveillance and information control, while both focus on transactional gains and show opposition to the US, as well as intent on reshaping the world order.

However, Beijing, in particular, is trying not to rely on the international community, but to rely on the fact that economic and energy dependence on other actors is a form of manifestation of power. It should be borne in mind, however, that Russia, China and Iran have relatively similar objectives but different instruments for achieving them: if one side were to satisfy its interests, it would create discontent among the other two sides. Therefore, this triangle, at least hypothetically, is quite unstable, even if, at a tactical level, they make efforts to cooperate. This is why three main ideas have emerged regarding the approaches of the three actors in this configuration: the most oppositional attitude towards the West is in Russia, the three states have common goals, but the history of relations with the West is different, and we also see other differences related to their individual relations with other regional and continental powers.

Presentation of the New Strategy Center study: A Possible Ominous Partnership: The China-Russia's 'Friendship Without Limits'

Ms. Antonia COLIBĂȘANU, Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center & Chief Operating Officer & Senior Geopolitical Analyst, Geopolitical Futures, Romania
In dialogue with the author, Ambassador Doru COSTEA, member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, former ambassador of Romania to Beijing, Romania

Despite the rhetoric of limitless friendship, the partnership between China and Russia has its limits and complexities. For example, China attempted to access the Black Sea through the Belt and Road Initiative, but their efforts were thwarted by Russian intervention. This could be an impediment to their collaboration.

Ambassador Costea explained how the very idea of having a 'friendship without limits' is somehow strange, especially at this level, while also considering that China and Russia were at war in the past century and have several conflicting interests.

In such a context, the author advises us to "think Chinese in order to understand China, and think Russian in order to understand Russia".

Panel XIIa. How to Avoid War Fatigue in the Western World? Coping with Economic Crisis and Social Problems while Resisting Kremlin's aggressive autocracy

Chair: Ambassador Doru COSTEA, Member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center
Ambassador Mrs. Luminița ODOBESCU, Presidential Advisor, Department of European Affairs, Romania
Mr. François HEISBOURG, Special Advisor, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, France
Ambassador Sergiu CELAC, Honorary Chairman, New Strategy Center, former minister of Foreign Affairs, Romania
Mr. Matthew BOYSE, Adjunct Fellow, Hudson Institute, former Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for Central Europe at the State Department, USA

Despite predictions of war fatigue setting in by the summer of 2022, it has not yet occurred 450 days later. Starting from this fact, the panelists explained how, in the face of Russian propaganda, European countries have put mechanisms in place to help Ukrainian citizens and cope with the consequences of the war, emphasizing the importance of unity, coordination, and solidarity. Limited ezrosion in opinion polls regarding support for Ukraine has been registered, as war fatigue remains a concern, but success in Ukraine's counter-offensive could alleviate it. If Ukraine and Europe continue to be successful in the current war context, war fatigue will be avoided.

War fatigue in the United States would by far be the most detrimental. If the US, who is leading the Ukrainian aid effort, changes its mind, minds will also change in Europe, which is why it is very important to have an American head of state that supports Ukraine's war effort. We also have to consider that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine may distract attention and resources from other important international issues, such as the evolving situation in Asia Pacific, but progress in discussions between the US and China may have a positive impact on bringing about a just and lasting peace for Ukraine.

Lastly, Ukraine's allies have to realize the major difference between what is right and what is easy when it comes to truly helping Ukraine.

Panel XIIb. France's Black Sea Strategy. Policy shift or long-term commitment?

Chairs: Ambassador Gheorghe MAGHERU, member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center, Romania & Mr. Quentin JALABERT, Non-Resident Associated Expert, New Strategy Center, France

Mr. Emmanuel DUPUY, President, Institute for European Perspective and Security, France

Mr. Luca NICULESCU, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Romania

Mrs. Alice RUFO, Director General for International Relations and Strategy, Ministry of the Armed Forces, France (pre-recorded message)

The panel began with Mrs. Alice Rufo's message, outlining the continued French commitment to the Black Sea region and recognizing the need for long-term investments to counteract Russian influence, while also strengthening regional security through joint exercises and contributing to NATO's defense posture. France and Romania agree upon the importance that the Black Sea and Balkan region have for Euro-Atlantic security, regions greatly destabilized Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Consequently, France coordinates joint drills and provides 1.000 soldiers to NATO's defense posture to bolster regional security in the Black Sea.

Naturally, an important aspect stressed by the French panelists was the importance of strategic autonomy and long-term investments in a context in which European nations still cooperate with countries like China and are heavily reliant on the United States for defense. They argued, however, for a need to rethink geography "from Lisbon to Harkov" in articulating the vision for strategic autonomy.

The shared vision for the Black Sea region, constant communication and cooperation between their military sectors, and the funding of joint initiatives all contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations between Paris and Bucharest. At the same time, the Romanian military is addressing new challenges while attempting to strengthen their deterrence position through improved diplomatic relations and cooperation with their French counterparts and enterprises.

Panel XIIIa. Transatlantic Cooperation and the Challenges Posed by Russia`s War in Ukraine. Stronger Together!

Chair: BG Eduard SIMION (Ret.), Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania
Mrs. Mara E. KARLIN, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, USA (pre-recorded message)
Mrs. Simona COJOCARU, State Secretary, Ministry of National Defence, Romania
Mr. Jonatan VSEVIOV, Secretary General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Estonia

The speakers stressed how crucial it is for the transatlantic partnership to develop a shared stance toward Russia, particularly through a shared strategic vision of the Black Sea, a region of crucial geostrategic importance, described by Assistant Secretary Karlin as “a key frontline for transatlantic security”. Karlin has applauded the response of the West to Russia’s aggression, as well as Romania’s leadership in the Black Sea in promoting NATO interests. She also explained the changes brought by the new US strategic documents, recognizing the consequences of the war in Ukraine, and the way the US perceives the renewed relevance of Black Sea security.

The transatlantic relationship has historically shown to be essential for upholding democracy and fostering peace, and more recently, it has shown to be resilient in protecting democracy in Europe against authoritarian regimes in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, which has used new technologies to challenge existing security norms. It is only natural, in this context, that Romania places high importance on its alliance with the US, which contributes to deterrence and defense under NATO or bilateral agreements with a more assertive US force posture in Europe and 5.000 stationed allied forces on Romanian soil.

To counter Russia's war policy and give the Ukrainian people hope for a future in Europe despite Russian aggression, Ukraine needs both military support and long-term aid. As a result, the decisions made by governments in the upcoming weeks and months, including the NATO Summit in Vilnius, will be crucial in conveying a message about Ukraine's future as a NATO ally, and the decisions made by the European Union in the spring and autumn will also be significant sources of hope for the Ukrainian people. The panelists concluded that, besides support for Ukraine, it is necessary to increase defense spending among NATO members and integrate Sweden and Finland into the North Atlantic Alliance.

Panel XIIIb. Prospects for Türkiye's Foreign and Security Policy in the Current Security Context – in partnership with The Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), Türkiye

Chair: Mr. Dan PREDA, Director, Radio Romania News, Romania
Mr. Yücel ACER, Senior researcher, SETA, Türkiye
Mr. Murat ASLAN, Researcher, SETA, Türkiye
Mrs. Valeria GIANNOTTA, Director, Türkiye Observatory, Centro Italiano di Studi di Politica Internazional (CeSPI), Italy

In assessing Türkiye's latest foreign policy trends, the speakers recognized how Ankara has been criticized in many ways since Russia's aggression against Ukraine began for the fact that it does not apply sanctions to Russia and continues to trade with them. Still, Türkiye is not pro-Russian, since in the recent past it helped Georgia militarily after Russia's aggression and does not accept Crimea's annexation. Moreover, Türkiye condemned Russian actions in Ukraine as illegal, and applied the Montreux Convention by not allowing Russian warships in its harbors. At the same time, it maintained good relations with Russia without intimidating it. Keeping channels open through dialogue is crucial for finding a constructive diplomatic solution in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as demonstrated by Türkiye's efforts to bring together both sides and the success of the Grain Corridor.

Currently, Türkiye is a main geopolitical actor, since it is a necessary communication channel between Russia and Ukraine, and Russia and the Western world generally. As a NATO member and candidate for the European Union, the country plays a crucial role in the international system and has several interests connected to the region, including security, protection of borders, war on terrorism, economic and trade factors, and migration. Turkey's essential regional interest in foreign policy is to preserve stability and avoid revisionism, as any such movements, even on a small scale, could have a domino effect and could directly challenge the security of all countries across the Middle East.

The results of the upcoming Turkish elections will not affect the country's foreign policy radically.Although Kemal Kilicdaroglu has a much more Western-oriented, moderated approach, there are some taboo points in the EU-Turkey relationship which are hard to overcome, regardless of political leadership. Türkiye's current interest is focused on maintaining the status quo in its neighborhood, sailing through geopolitical shades of gray to advance its agenda.

Panel XIVa. Challenges to Western Military Capabilities in the Light of the Russia`s Ukraine War – in partnership with the Centre for the Study of the New Generation Warfare, USA

Chair: Mr. Greg MELCHER, Chief Operations Officer, Center for the Study of New Generation Warfare, USA
General (Ret.) Sir James EVERARD, former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR), UK
Lieutenant General Iulian BERDILĂ, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff for Operations and Training, Romania
Brigadier General (Ret.) Hans DAMEN, Member of the International Consultative Board, New Strategy Center, former Head of the Taskforce Logistics / J4 of the Netherlands MOD, Netherlands)
Mr. Justin CRUMP, CEO, Sibylline Ltd, UK

The central argument behind the whole debate of this panel is that the current war situation in Ukraine allows all actors directly or indirectly involved to draw some strategic and operational lessons. On the one hand, Russia and China are using the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine to use the information in other conflicts. On the other hand, the discussion is somewhat more complex for the West.

First of all, we need to reconsider how a war is fought from a logistical perspective: on the command and control side, headquarters are too big, too easy to locate, and therefore too vulnerable.

Secondly, NATO needs to quickly and reliably measure how plans are integrated. In other words, it needs to ensure that battle groups act successfully and can conclude with allies. In particular, the Romanian Armed Forces must address three things: the current border war, the integration of medium- and long-term capabilities following the synchronization plans, and the integration of human resources.

Also, after decades of peace and economic prosperity, NATO reverted to its original mission with the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Against this backdrop, the world is becoming more complex, many tensions have been primed, but neither do we have resilient societies.

As such, alliance capabilities have to take into account three components: the conceptual component, i.e. understanding, the physical component, i.e. what we have in terms of contingencies, and the moral component, i.e. why we do what we do.

During the question and answer section, on the issue of operating in an environment without sanctuary and applying lessons learned, the answers offered centered on two fundamental ideas: a good answer now is much more valuable than a perfect answer too late, but, from another point of view, the strategic cultural model of each ally, of the Alliance as a whole, but also of Russia as a whole, is also important. In addition, on the question of integrating the population into the multi-domain preparedness approach, we need to see how we can integrate things effectively, and in the case of civilian resilience, an enhancement in education is needed.

Panel XIVb. Russia`s War in Ukraine and Its Impact on the Naval Domain

Chair: Captain (Navy) (Ret.) John SANDOZ, former Assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence, USA

Rear Admiral Krzysztof JAWORSKI, Commander, Maritime Component Command, Polish Navy, Poland

Rear Admiral Rob PEDRE, Commander UK Strike Force, Royal Navy, UK

Rear Admiral Liviu COMAN, Deputy Chief for Operations & Training, Romanian Navy, Romania

The Black Sea has grown in significance, not only due to the Ukraine war, but also due to issues such as the disruption of European supply chains or the food supply of African countries. Unmanned systems emerged during the Russia-Ukraine war as an essential weapon in naval warfare and their ubiquity will only grow. Their usefulness has been showcased in Ukraine's attacks on Sevastopol. Ukraine and Russia are both developing their abilities to use unmanned systems for combat activities, including strikes against sea and coastal infrastructure.

The Russian Black Sea Fleet has failed to be efficient in the war in Ukraine because of a lack of coordination with other forces. Nevertheless, a persisting threat posed by Russia is that of naval mines, which require strong surveillance and involvement from multiple military assets to prevent disruption of sea lines of communication and protect critical infrastructure.

Since the Nord Stream incident, Russian activities potentially targeting European and Atlantic underwater infrastructure have intensified, impacting the global maritime industry. Moreover, Russia is building an unofficial "ghost fleet" of old tankers which poses a threat to shipping and environmental safety, highlighting the need for every country to have its own flagged merchant fleet. Lastly, blockade tactics have been applied with brutal effect in this war, as Russia waged resource warfare against Ukraine, with global repercussions.

In Romania's case, Maritime governance is crucial for the country due to the large scale of maritime traffic transiting their waters, and NATO members should increase Romanian Navy capabilities to defend these crucial waters and maintain free navigation in the Black Sea.

Panel XVa. European Strategic Autonomy in the Next Decade. Reality or Utopia? – in partnership with Elcano Royal Institute, Spain

Chair: Ambassador Gheorghe MAGHERU, member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center, Romania
Ambassador Wolfgang ISCHINGER, President of the Munich Security Conference Foundation Council, Germany (via VTC)
Mr. François HEISBOURG, Special Advisor, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, France
Mr. Charles POWELL, Director of the Elcano Royal Institute, Spain
Mr. Bart KOT, Program Director, Warsaw Security Forum, Poland

In light of the growing great power competition around the world, the speakers discussed the necessity for Europe to establish a powerful and credible voice. The long-term goal of a strategically autonomous protective Europe is, however, unachievable in the short term due to current dependencies and tensions. A thorough and effective military coordination among the EU member states would be necessary for that. According to the speaker, the key justification for strategic autonomy is still the continent's continued reliance on Washington for security and its dubious long-term commitment to European defense. However, due to its expense, strategic autonomy is still an unwelcome idea in Europe. This is true despite the fact that inefficiency brought on by national-level management of the military is the underlying issue, not a shortage of funding.

The EU is currently reexamining its 2019 tripartite definition of China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival as it seeks to redefine itself as a global actor. The EU faces three major challenges in this endeavor: its relationships with China, the US in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the global South. To combat them, the EU would need to forge its own connections with important economies in the global South and maintain its place in the transatlantic game. Harmonizing relations between Brussels and nations like Poland is crucial on the internal front.

The panelists came to the conclusion that the European Union is just starting to build itself up to meet its newly conceived mission of playing a more significant role in the world and that it is the responsibility of the central and eastern European states to be an active partner in defining European strategic autonomy.

Panel XVb. War and Disinformation. The Struggle for Truth After a Year of War – in partnership with the "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, Romania

Chair: Mrs. Cristina IVAN, Director, National Institute for Intelligence Studies, "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, Romania
Mr. Joe CANNATACI, Head of the Department of Information Policy & Governance, Faculty of Media & Knowledge Sciences, University of Malta, Malta
Mr. Eldad BECK, Correspondent for EU area, Israel Hayom Newspaper, Israel
Mr. Nick THORPE, Central Europe Correspondent, BBC News, UK
Brigadier General Constantin SPÎNU, Chief of the Public Relations Department, Ministry of National Defence, Romania

Disinformation is one of the weapons in Russia's arsenal that is the hardest to detect and to counter properly. According to the speakers, Russia's tightening control and censorship of the internet, along with innovative monitoring techniques, highlights their concern for information warfare and regime security as well.

The thin line between news and opinion has been dissipating more and more in the last few years in the journalistic field, especially during wartime. The struggle for truth implies acknowledging and addressing misinformation and disinformation coming from any part. This is how transparency and credibility are built, as they are the best assets of institutions fighting Russian disinformation. Conversely, it was argued within the panel that there is a threshold for allowing space to disinformation narratives.

One narrative from social media, according to which the decision of whether Ukraine should give up land for peace, is fairly common. This decision is solely up to the Ukrainian people and it is not appropriate for other countries to suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, social media can be used not only for disinformation, but also for revealing the truth. An example of this is the crowdsourcing of digital evidence of war crimes in Ukraine. Public opinion drives political agenda and behavior, but state authorities also need to be cautious about giving too much space to extremist opinions that do not align with facts. When it comes to counter measures, developing early warning capabilities and prioritizing consistency with principles and policies are key to effectively countering misinformation, while transparency and community-based communication are crucial for providing verifiable facts to the public.

Panel XVc. Security and Enlargement. EU Policy Towards the Western Balkans and the Black Sea Region as related to the Current Security Crisis – in partnership with the Institute for Liberty and Democracy, Romania

Chair: Mr. Cristian DAVID, President, Institute for Liberty and Democracy, Romania
Mr. Leonard ORBAN, Member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center, former Presidential Advisor on European Affairs, Romania
Mr. Iulian GROZA, Executive Director, Institute for European Policies and Reforms, Republic of Moldova
Mr. Igor BANDOVIĆ, Director, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Serbia

The main argument around which the debate has been conducted is that when it comes to candidate or potential candidate countries with frozen conflicts on their territories, we must look at both the technical and political dimensions of the accession process: politically, the countries in question are called upon to implement a reform programme that must be uniform in terms of implementation on the ground, and technically, in certain territories, given the security situation, this quality may not be fulfilled, which may lead to imbalances. Despite this dichotomy, from the perspective of enlargement, for the Western Balkans and the Eastern partners, EU membership is the only option for sustainable peace, all the more so as security is not a permanent given on the European continent. These states need a credible path towards the EU to maintain and public support for this fact.

However, there have also been some misconceptions about the EU's behavior towards some candidate states. During the Juncker commission, the EU was no longer interested in enlargement at all, and it was a clear signal to the states in the region that they needed to find alternatives, which allowed Russia and China to offer them opportunities. Some EU leaders are also to blame, having prevented the fighting between Balkan leaders but unwilling to do more to integrate them. Moreover, there are countries which are trying to apply the criteria, but are not being given any credit, all the more so because the most important part of the Europeanisation of the Balkan countries, namely democratization and the rule of law, is lagging behind, and the EU should have taken a different attitude to these efforts. In the case of Moldova, he was waiting for a clear message from the EU.

At the moment, not only is the perception of society changing in favor of the European Union, but opportunities are being created to work with them in the area of security beyond pure political association, which has changed the union's perception of Moldova. In view of the situation in Moldova, the EU is deploying several instruments that were not used before in relations with countries like Moldova: defense support, civilian mission in Moldova to strengthen the capacity to face hybrid threats or facilitating energy independence from Russia.

Panel XVI. One Front, One Vision, One Strategy. NATO's Deterrence and Defence Policy Against Russian Aggression on the Eastern Flank

Chair: Major General (Ret.) Leonardo DINU, Member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center, Romania
General Daniel PETRESCU, Chief of Defence, Romania
Lieutenant General Stephen KELSEY, Deputy Commander of the NATO Joint Force Command (JFC) Naples, Canada
Major General Karel ŘEHKA, Chief of Defence, Czech Republic
Brigadier General Irakli TCHITCHINADZE, Deputy Chief of Defence, Georgia (via VTC)

This panel focused on the argument that the 2014 events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine led to major decisions on defense and deterrence, and that the 2016 NATO summit also discussed an increased Alliance presence on the eastern flank. Thus, NATO's deterrence and defense posture is not just a matter of military strategy, but primarily a political one that requires solidarity. We are talking about a new era of collective defense, and the Romanian armed forces are in sync with those of NATO. NATO plans are at a very advanced stage, command structures are in place and we are linking the authority of commanders to execute these plans.

This comes as a consequence of increasing instability in the Black Sea and Balkan region, and the war in Ukraine has the potential to fuel frozen conflicts in these regions. In this context, planning preparedness, defense preparedness and territorial preparedness are very important elements. To deploy European defenses, we need robust IFR, long-range air defense capabilities, capabilities to protect the defense industry, critical infrastructure and defense routes.

The plans we develop now influence how we will develop our forces, in addition to the fact that the defense planning process must be linked to defense forces and synchronized with NATO plans.
As such, command and control plans are based on four pillars:
1) facilitation,
2) field intelligence,
3) command and control,
4) combat capability.
From another point of view, one with Russia at the center, it is waging a conventional war against Ukraine and a hybrid war against neighboring and EU and NATO member states. As a result, NATO's top priority is to deter Russia, as it will continue to be a threat to us regardless of the outcome of the war. In addition, we also need to think about the outcome of Ukraine: if there is to be a war with Russia, it will be a multi-contact zone war, and, given that sanctions have not worked as expected, there is a need to strengthen deterrence by denying access.

Beyond Ukraine, in the Caucasus area, Russian information warfare and special operations against Georgia have intensified in the form of cyber-attacks on infrastructure, integration tendencies into the Russian Federation or actions by radical groups. The South Caucasus region is an important artery of communication to Central Asia, so the stakes are high for Moscow.

Panel XVII. Democracy vs. Autocracy. Russia`s War in Ukraine and the Answer of the Democratic World

Chair: Mr. Marilen PIRTEA, Rector, West University of Timisoara, Romania
Keynote speaker: H.E. Mr. Bogdan AURESCU, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Romania

The last panel of the conference witnessed His Excellency Bogdan Aurescu, highlighting the importance of understanding strategic developments at both national and global level. The Romanian Foreign Minister reiterated Romania's commitment to support Ukraine in its efforts to confront the aggression initiated by the Russian Federation and called for close cooperation from the entire democratic community in this regard. Russia's attack on Ukraine is not just a war between two countries, but an aggression against the entire democratic community and international world order.

Romania promotes and supports democratic values and human rights, takes a stance against Russian aggression in Ukraine, and aims to isolate Russia on the international arena. Russia is leading a hybrid warfare in the Republic of Moldova to destabilize the state, and the authorities in Chișinău deserve multi-dimensional support from the EU and international community. Thus, Romania's support for the Republic of Moldova was emphasized, through the creation of a sanctioning regime against entities acting against its constitutional order, which was positively welcomed and will contribute to a more resilient Moldova while simultaneously strengthening Romania.

It is indisputable that the spread of autocracy generates instability at a global level. For this reason, the continued strengthening of democracy worldwide is of critical importance. It is necessary to act pragmatically and to develop cautious relations with all states interested in strengthening democratic principles in order to maintain a global order based on respect for international law.

Closing remarks

Mr. George SCUTARU, CEO, New Strategy Center
Mr. Sorin CÎMPEANU, Rector of the University of Agronomic Sciences

This forum, encompassing 167 speakers and thousands of viewers as well as featuring 42 panels on relevant topics such as the consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine on Black Sea and Balkans stability, energy security, freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, food security and the situation in the Republic of Moldova.

The Black Sea and Balkans are important for Romania's security and the security of the entire continent, and Ukraine's fight for independence is our fight as well between democracy and autocracy.

Thank you very much for joining us and we are delighted to invite you to the eighth edition of the Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum, which will take place on 23-24 May 2024.


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