



The Russian Attack on the Danube with a Naval Drone. Implications for NATO and EU Security

George SCUTARU

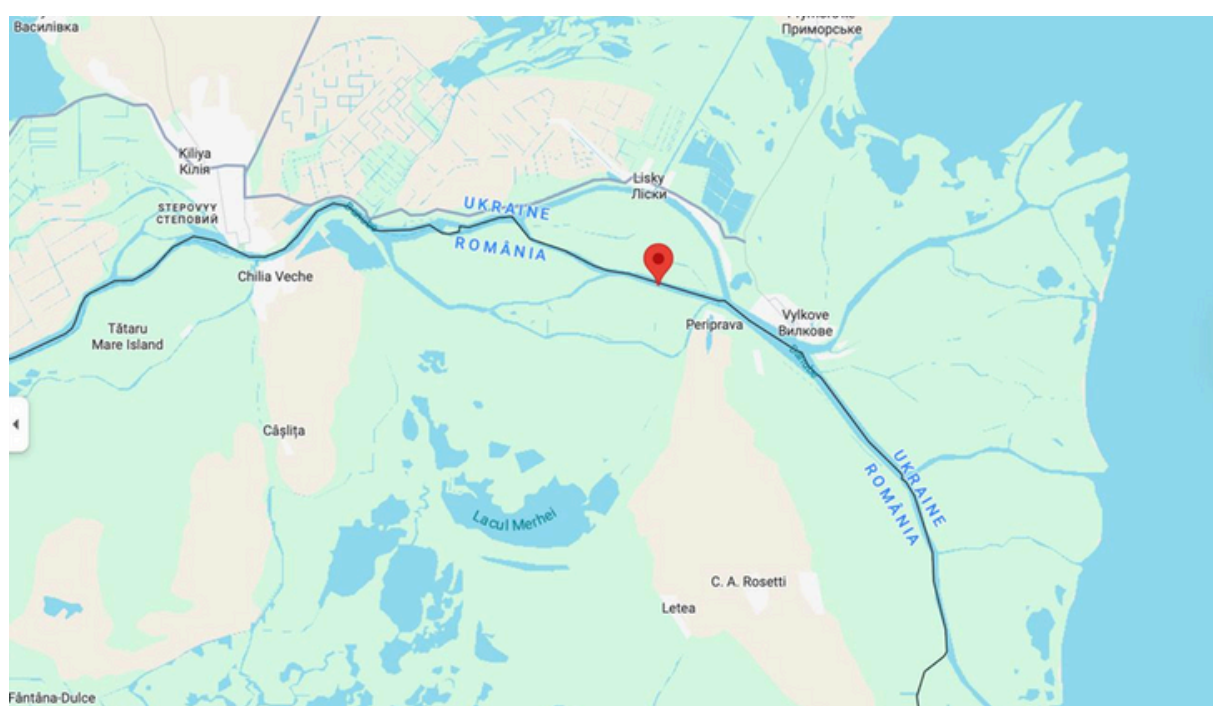
CEO, New Strategy Center, former national security advisor to the Romanian President



The Danube: A Multi-Domain Battlefield

The war in Ukraine has brought another first, which will have consequences for the conduct of naval warfare and should give NATO and the EU serious cause for concern, representing a challenge for the protection of critical infrastructure in the Black Sea, on the Danube, and in the Baltic Sea. On the morning of August 28, when Russia launched a massive attack on Kyiv that resulted in over 20 deaths, it also struck a target on the Danube for the first time using a naval drone. The attack took place on the Chilia branch, approximately 200 meters (0.11 miles) from the river border between Romania and Ukraine, 24 km from the mouth of this Danube branch into the Black Sea, 5 km upstream from the Ukrainian town of Vylkove, and 3 km upstream from the Romanian locality of Periprava. The target was the Ukrainian vessel Simferopol, a reconnaissance ship, commissioned in 2021 with a displacement of 1,220 tons.¹

The lower flow of the Danube during the summer prevented the ship from sinking after the impact with the drone, although it was capsized on its side. Most likely, the Simferopol was being used to jam Russian drones, which frequently attack the Ukrainian ports of Izmail and Reni on the Danube, benefiting from the advantage of being able to operate while in motion. These two ports play a key role in grain exports and have been under constant aerial drone attacks since 2023. Russia's goal is to eliminate the obstacles posed by the Ukrainians in the "drone corridor," while also testing the response of Romania, a NATO and EU member state. The attack also raises concerns about the possible involvement of a HUMINT network on the ground in Ukraine, providing intelligence to the Russians and marking targets.



Location of the Russian naval drone attack on the Ukrainian vessel „Simferopol”

Source: Google Maps, New Strategy Center



The vessel Simferopol after the attack. Source: New Strategy Center

Russia has used naval drones twice to strike Ukrainian targets, with both attacks made public. On February 10, 2023, it filmed an attack on the Zatoka bridge over the Dniester estuary, and now, on August 28, 2025, it struck the Ukrainian vessel Simferopol on the Chilia branch of the Danube. It is difficult to determine precisely where the drone entered from the Black Sea, most likely through one of the Ukrainian channels connecting to the sea. The fact that Russia has now successfully deployed a naval drone, which traveled a long distance across the Black Sea, launched either from Crimea or from a ship—and then covered a significant distance along the Danube Delta channels, demonstrates an improved capability in coordination, command and control, and target acquisition.



Source: Screenshot from video posted on Telegram
Attack on the Zatoka railway bridge, February 10, 2023



Moment of impact of the naval drone and explosion, August 28, 2025, filmed by a Russian UAV

Source: Telegram channel „MoD Russia”

The attack was filmed by a Russian reconnaissance drone and later made public by the Moscow Ministry of Defense. By doing so, Russia assumed full responsibility of the strike, precisely to demonstrate its capability to carry out attacks with naval drones not only in the Black Sea but also on the Danube, a complex operation that requires strong coordination.

Romania must not ignore Russia’s signal or the threat itself. At this point, it can no longer be claimed that an act of sabotage using a maritime drone to block the Sulina Channel, the main Romanian Danube waterway to the sea, or to target a platform in Romania’s exclusive economic zone is impossible. The incident must be carefully analyzed at both the level of the Romanian Armed Forces and NATO. Romania should assess the functioning of its early warning systems and examine how inter-institutional cooperation operates in such situations (between the various structures of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs). Additionally, Romania and Ukraine must collaborate to understand how a naval drone was able to penetrate so far along one of the Danube branches without detection, in order to prevent a future attack.

A ceasefire agreement does not mean that Russia will reduce its hybrid actions; rather, it is likely to intensify them. A naval drone can be used to strike a target without clear traceability if the aggressor state does not claim the attack, as the wreckage is difficult to recover afterward. Russia could carry out operations under a false flag even if the war comes to an end. During the “July Storm” exercise conducted by Russia in the Baltic Sea, unmanned submersible systems developed by the Rubikon Center of the Russian Armed Forces were deployed. Representatives of this center stated, in a recording published on a Russian Telegram channel, that their focus is on destroying naval assets and critical infrastructure in enemy ports and base areas. “At Rubikon, this unit was established at the end of April. Its specific focus is striking naval targets,” the Russian military clearly stated.²



A Rapid Response: Accelerating the Establishment of the EU Maritime Security Hub in the Black Sea

In June 2025, the EU adopted a strategy dedicated to the Black Sea, which, among other things, addresses the need to establish a Maritime Security Hub. The document specifies that “the Hub will enhance maritime situational awareness and information sharing on the Black Sea, real-time monitoring from space to seabed, and early warning of potential threats and malicious activities.” It also highlights the role of Danube ports as vectors of military mobility, important for ensuring security guarantees for Ukraine, which, however, could be threatened by Russian drones, both aerial and naval.

The EU Maritime Security Hub in the Black Sea must begin operations as soon as possible in Constanța, Romania, to help maintain freedom of navigation at sea and along the Danube.

Nicușor Dan, the President of Romania, stated on September 1st, during a joint press conference with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, held at the Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base on the shore of the Black Sea, that Romania wants to take on hosting the EU Hub in Constanța, emphasizing the need to make it operational.⁴

Romania, as the host country, should leverage the expertise of Bulgaria, the other EU Black Sea littoral state, as well as that of other EU countries, Ukraine, and Türkiye. France and Italy, which lead NATO battlegroups in Romania and Bulgaria, should be represented at the hub with their civilian and military experts. Likewise, Germany, a Danube country that will import part of the gas Romania will extract from the Black Sea, should participate, as starting in 2027 Romania will become the EU’s largest gas producer. The UK can make a valuable contribution to this hub, given its maritime tradition; Britain is jointly leading a Maritime Security Capability Coalition with Norway to support the development of Ukraine’s maritime fleet.⁵ In addition, both the UK and Norway have extensive experience in exploiting energy resources and protecting critical infrastructure in the North Sea, so both countries would be more than welcome at the Maritime Security Hub in Constanța.

Last but not least, Romania and the EU should also invite the United States, given its interests in the region. The U.S.–Ukraine agreement on rare minerals and other energy resources can be implemented if the security of Ukraine’s Black Sea and Danube ports is ensured.

Following President Trump’s success in mediating the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Americans have taken responsibility for the security and exploitation of the Zangezur corridor, which passes through Armenia and connects Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan. This corridor has been renamed in the document as the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).”⁶ Separately signed agreements between the U.S., Armenia, and Azerbaijan lay the groundwork for greater American economic engagement in the Caucasus region, with implications for U.S. interests projection in Central Asia and the development of the Middle Corridor. This creates an American outpost in the Caucasus, which naturally links to the U.S. presence in Romania, at Mihail Kogălniceanu, where the United States has maintained a military presence since the beginning of the campaign in Afghanistan.

A coalition of the willing to support Ukraine after the conclusion of a peace agreement entails a massive logistical effort, concentrated in Romania and Poland. The ports of Romania and Ukraine on the Black Sea and the Danube will play a crucial role in the movement of weapons, ammunition, and fuel. EU and NATO states in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions must take all these signals from Russia very seriously. The attack on the Danube was not accidental and opens the door to new challenges for NATO and the EU regarding the protection of critical maritime infrastructure.

ENDNOTES

- 1 - Kateryna Denisova, „Russia hits Ukrainian vessel, killing 2 crew members, injuring others, Navy says”, The Kyiv Independent, 28 August 2025, available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/russia-hits-ukrainian-vessel-killing-1-crew-member-injuring-others-navy-says/>
- 2 - Dmitry Lutovich, „400 ships to ports in one day: Russia armed with new unmanned boats, — "Flash" (video)”, Focus.UA, 2 August 2025, available at: <https://focus.ua/politics/721404-novyy-mirovoy-poryadok-kak-ssha-pereigrali-huseyna-noregu-i-asada-i-chem-riskuyut-seychas>
- 3 - EU Black Sea Strategy, available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921_en?filename=EU%20Strategic%20Approach%20Black%20Sea%20Strategy.pdf
- 4 - Joint press conference Ursula von der Leyen and Nicușor Dan, 1st September 2025, Digi 24, available at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ursula-von-der-leyen-este-asteptata-luni-la-constant-a-se-va-intalni-cu-presedintele-nicusor-dan-3393831>
- 5 - Ukraine Defence Ministry, „Minesweepers, boats, and drones – how the Maritime Capability Coalition is assisting Ukraine”, 29 January 2025, disponibil la: <https://mod.gov.ua/en/news/minesweepers-boats-and-drones-how-the-maritime-capability-coalition-is-assisting-ukraine>
- 6 - „Memorandum on Establishing a Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity Working Group”, Federal Register, 8 August 2025, available at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/15/2025-15683/establishing-a-trump-route-for-international-peace-and-prosperity-working-group>