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Founding member of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS)

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“The Economic and Social Council shall be a consultative body of the Parliament and the Government in the specialized fields established by the organic law on its establishment, organization and functioning.” (Art. 141 of the revised Constitution of Romania)

The Economic and Social Council, having regard to the provisions of Article 2(3) and (4) of Law No. 248/2013, republished, with subsequent amendments and additions, formulates the following

OPINION

on “Public policies for the socio-economic strengthening of the Black Sea region and the border regions of the European Union”

Having regard to the **Joint Communication from the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the European Parliament and the Council** “The European Union’s Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region”, the **Resolution of the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria** on this communication, as well as the **European Commission’s initiative** “The Pact for the Eastern Border Regions” and the **official response of the Ministry of European Investments and Projects of Romania**, the Economic and Social Council (ESC) of Romania has decided to draft and adopt the present opinion.

I. General Assessments

The ESC welcomes the initiatives launched by the European Commission, considering them timely and essential for strengthening territorial cohesion in the EU Member States bordering Ukraine, Belarus, and the Russian Federation. These endeavors represent an important step in recognizing and addressing the economic, social, environmental, and security challenges facing the Black Sea region, contributing to the development of solutions tailored to local realities and promoting constructive cross-border dialogue.

The ESC expresses its appreciation for the contributions made by the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria and the Ministry of European Investments and Projects of Romania, considering them valuable examples of interinstitutional cooperation and regional coordination in the European decision-making process.

II. Geopolitical Context and Implications for the Region

Recent developments in the European Union's eastern neighborhood have placed the Black Sea region at the center of international attention, confirming its status as an area of major relevance for European security and regional stability. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has not only had humanitarian and economic consequences but has also brought about a paradigm shift in how the European Union defines its interests and presence in this area. The consequences of the conflict are reflected in the disruption of logistics and trade chains, increased risks to energy security, and multiplied vulnerabilities associated with critical infrastructure. At the same time, there has been an intensification of hybrid forms of pressure, such as disinformation, the exploitation of migration, and heightened social tensions, which can undermine the cohesion of border communities and trust in European institutions.

In this context, the ESC considers that a coordinated approach is needed, building on the complementarity between the European Union's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region and the Pact for the Eastern Border Regions. Together, these two documents provide a framework for formulating a coherent and sustainable European policy that combines security, economic, and social dimensions and supports the development of the regions on the European Union's eastern border.

At the same time, the ESC stresses the importance of including in the Pact clear mechanisms for anticipating and counteracting radicalization, disinformation, and extremism. Strengthening societal resilience, reinforcing community cohesion, and increasing confidence in the European project are objectives which, pursued in parallel, can contribute to long-term stability and cooperation in this strategic region.

In order to clearly structure its contribution, the ESC formulates both specific recommendations for each of the two initiatives and joint proposals that complement the positions previously expressed by the Bulgarian ESC and the Ministry of European Investments and Projects.

III. Proposals and Recommendations

III.1. “*The European Union’s Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region*”

III.1.1. Urgent development and implementation of a comprehensive EU strategy for the Black Sea region

Given the scale of the ecological consequences of the war in Ukraine on the Black Sea, a thorough assessment of the short- and long-term impact on the marine ecosystem is needed. Water pollution, disruption of food chains, and risks to biodiversity reflect not only the direct effects of the conflict, but also the fragility of an environment already affected by the intense industrialization of the 20th and 21st centuries. The destruction of the dam on the Dnieper River on June 6, 2023, and the spill in mid-December 2024 of approximately 4,300 tons of heavy fuel oil, known as Mazut, following the sinking of two Russian oil tankers in the Kerch Strait, which connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov, caused the worst ecological disasters in the Black Sea since the beginning of the war.

The ESC stresses that such a transnational threat requires multilateral measures. The Black Sea strategy must therefore take into account cooperation between the EU and other countries in the Black Sea basin, such as Turkey and Georgia, with all parties participating in monitoring common risks and jointly combating environmental degradation. In 1992, the Bucharest Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea against Pollution was signed, but since 2010, progress under this convention has slowed significantly.

At the same time, EU member states bordering the Black Sea face the challenge of naval mines laid by both Russia and Ukraine near the port of Odessa and carried into Romanian and Bulgarian waters by sea currents. As a result, fishing has been affected—for example, off the coast of the port of Constanța—as has commercial maritime traffic. With regard to fishing, detailed assessments of the losses incurred as a result and specific measures that could be adopted at EU level are also needed so that the impact can be better managed.

In all these respects, firm political and financial measures and commitments are essential on the part of the EU, the Member States, and non-EU countries directly affected by the phenomenon of accelerating pollution in the Black Sea and the presence of drifting sea mines in the Black Sea.

III.1.2. Support for ports in the region

In 2022, following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the maritime trade deficit worsened in all countries in the Black Sea region. However, Romania and Bulgaria recorded the largest increases in the deficit, of 143.3% and 133.7% respectively. In 2023, the deficit decreased in both countries, by 35.4% in Romania and 46.9% in Bulgaria. This phenomenon reflects significant changes and fluctuations in regional trade dynamics.

Furthermore, with Ukraine's traditional export routes blocked, Romania has become the main logistics corridor for Ukrainian exports of grain, steel, and iron. This situation has put pressure on the port infrastructure in Constanța, increased logistics costs and transit times, caused significant delays in the delivery of goods, and created trade imbalances in the region.

The ESC considers that financial and technical support from the EU is needed to modernize port infrastructure, expand cargo handling capacity, and digitize logistics flows.

III.2. *“The Pact for the Eastern Border Regions”*

III.2.1. Support measures for agriculture in border regions

Romania has significant agricultural potential, with an agricultural area of approximately 13.5 million hectares, and this sector is an important component of the national economy. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine and the measures adopted to support that country (including facilitating grain exports through Romanian infrastructure), Romanian farmers have suffered significant losses of income due to direct competition and falling domestic prices.

These economic imbalances have fueled social discontent and been used in critical statements about the European Union, highlighting the political vulnerability of border regions to major economic disruptions.

It would therefore be appropriate for farmers' losses to be covered by the EU budget and for their competitiveness to be protected.

Measures to stimulate local production are also needed to reduce the trade deficit, as well as investment in the development of agricultural storage and processing capacity, specifically for

the establishment of regional warehouses and processing facilities for primary agricultural production.

III.2.2. Financial and technical assistance for the tourism sector in border regions affected by conflict

Tourist regions close to the conflict, such as the Danube Delta, have suffered a significant decline in visitor numbers since 2022, with losses estimated at 30% in the summer of 2024.¹ This decline has been driven not only by security concerns, but also by rising operating costs (energy, food, transport), affecting the economic sustainability of local operators.

In this context, the ESC proposes that the “Pact for the Eastern Border Regions” include measures to support tourism in these areas by allocating funds to cover economic losses caused by the geopolitical context; investments in accessibility to tourist areas and tourism infrastructure; specialized technical assistance to facilitate access to European funding for local small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector.

The ESC also proposes funding integrated tourism promotion campaigns at national and European level, highlighting the safety and uniqueness of destinations close to the eastern borders, including the Black Sea region, with a focus on ecotourism, cultural tourism, and gastronomy; the creation of EU funding programs dedicated to tourism resilience in regions affected by geopolitical instability, enabling rapid adaptation to crises and the continuity of local economic activities; the integration of tourism components into regional development strategies supported by European funds, so that tourism becomes a strategic pillar of economic recovery for border areas and the Black Sea region.

III.2.3. Investments in the healthcare system

The healthcare system’s response capacity in border areas is limited, mainly due to depopulation, a lack of medical staff, and poor hospital infrastructure. In the event of an escalation of military conflict or a significant influx of refugees, Romania must be prepared with a robust and functional healthcare network, especially in border counties.

¹ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/turisti-delta-dunarii-scadere-razboi-ucraina-tulcea-5452677>;
<https://cursdeguvernare.ro/scadere-de-20-a-numarului-de-turisti-din-delta-dunarii-in-2024-cateva-motive.html>

Therefore, the Pact should include specific investments in regional border medical facilities; incentive programs to attract medical personnel to rural and isolated areas; funds for the modernization of health infrastructure, including the provision of modern equipment.

III.2.4. Energy security and preferential treatment for border states

Romania provides a significant portion of Moldova's energy needs and contributes to regional energy stability in the context of the border war. Therefore, Romania bears the costs of energy security at a time when energy prices are increasingly affecting the economic competitiveness of the country, particularly the border regions, and the well-being of the population.

In this regard, the ESC proposes introducing a preferential energy regime for border Member States and increasing investment in cross-border energy infrastructure.

III.3. Promoting and supporting regional solutions

The ESC stresses the need for a common vision on regional cooperation in the Black Sea area and between the EU's border regions. To achieve this, it is important to develop coherent policies at both national and European levels that support regionally developed solutions to the specific challenges facing these territories, and to ensure that the necessary financial resources and technical expertise are available to implement them. In this context, existing partnerships – or those that can be developed – between economic and social councils in the region and the European Economic and Social Committee can play an important role in strengthening regional cooperation. They provide a framework conducive to the exchange of best practices and the strengthening of the role of organized civil society across national borders. In a landscape marked by economic inequalities, climate change, demographic pressures, and accelerated technological transformations, ESCs are becoming key players in ensuring a more robust, effective, and visible social and civic dialogue in European decision-making processes.

In this regard, the ESC stresses the importance of supporting, at European Union level, the establishment of Economic and Social Councils in the countries of the extended Black Sea region. The consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in countries such as the Republic of Moldova could benefit significantly from the establishment of such permanent mechanisms for social and civic dialogue, which would facilitate the participation of representative civil society

structures in public decision-making processes. These councils can contribute to increasing transparency, strengthening social cohesion, and formulating policies that are better adapted to the needs of the population, especially in contexts marked by transition, vulnerability, or geopolitical pressures.

III.4. Promoting research in the Black Sea region

The ESC welcomes the proposals in the Strategic Approach to promote research and innovation in the Black Sea region as a natural continuation of existing European initiatives. This approach needs to respond to national and regional strategic priorities, particularly in the context of the EU's increased focus on the security of supply of critical raw materials. Romania has significant potential in this area, and the ESC proposes that this topic be explicitly included among the key priorities of the Strategic Approach, alongside clear commitments by the European Union to provide financial support for relevant projects on marine research, existing resources in the Black Sea, and their potential exploitation in environmentally safe conditions.

Conclusion

The European Union's border regions are laboratories of European resilience, and the EU's ability to support them adequately will influence not only its internal cohesion but also its geopolitical credibility in its eastern neighborhood.

Rapporteur

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