Recovery Under Fire

27 JULY 2026

Age Steenbreker



Photo by Max Kukurudziak on Unsplash

Flags.

Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands.

In Kyiv, Lviv, and now Odesa and Mykolaiv for the Black Sea Security Forum, I have been confronted by the same sight whenever I enter a Ukrainian town's main square: a mass of little flags. Most are yellow and blue, some red and black, each symbolising a Ukrainian soldier killed in the war. Near these flags are widows, mothers, and sisters who maintain pictures, flowers, and sometimes other personal items beside the little flags. It is a harrowing sight. Beautiful, in a way that is normalised far, far too quickly.

"He who saves one life saves the world entire". Every one of those little flags is one world entire, and every one of those worlds has been lost. Encountering this is a quick reminder that the Black Sea Security Forum is not a regular security conference. Having attended the Berlin Security Conference, smaller-scale Dutch security forums, and several youth forums around the Munich Security Conference, I find it impossible to convey the difference between a conference far away from the danger of war and one

where Russian airstrikes forced us into a bomb shelter for a good portion of a night.

Across two days, voices from *RAND Europe*, the *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung* (KAS), the *International Centre for Defence and Security*, *Ukrainian Prism*, and political figures including Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Petro Poroshenko, and Lord Michael Ashcroft mapped Ukraine's position from several angles. This report follows three of them: the sea as an economic lifeline, Ukraine's international standing, and reconstruction in the front-line regions.

Odesa and the Black Sea as a lifeline for the Ukrainian economy

The Black Sea's strategic weight is consistently underrated. Panellists described it as the place where the map ends, long treated as a regional annex of the Mediterranean despite more than ten wars fought in the basin since 1945. It is strategically decisive yet chronically out of focus: the "ugly duckling" of European security. For Ukraine, this neglect carries a direct economic cost because the sea lanes are the precondition for both wartime survival and eventual recovery. The argument from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung *"Views from Abroad"* panel was blunt: without a secure maritime corridor, reconstruction simply does not happen. The importance of Odesa as the main harbour and logistical hub for Ukraine's economy situated the Forum as a solution to this neglect.

Furthermore, a myriad of voices at the conference returned to industrial capacity as the decisive variable for a Ukrainian and European victory. Ukraine's exposure to grain and fertiliser price shocks, its dependence on critical raw materials, and energy as effectively the last leverage Russia retains create key anxieties. To this end, the policy menu offered described securing Odesa and the Black Sea as a logistical hub: asymmetric area-denial in place of a standing fleet, development of the Danube corridor and the port of Izmail, leasing vessels to Bulgaria and Romania, and an EU civilian maritime mission. An open question, especially following reports of a Russian withdrawal from the Kinburn Spit, is what this could mean for the reopening of the port of Mykolaiv. Whatever the future holds, control of the sea lanes remains the load-bearing wall of the Ukrainian economy.

Ukraine's stakes in the European security architecture

Kramp-Karrenbauer named the elephant in the room directly: the United States' pivot to Asia. Several panellists pushed this toward a harder European posture: count the US out for now, stop begging for guarantees, and accept that Washington will return only once Europe becomes a stronger partner. That ambition met an unsentimental capability check. Europe cannot replicate American precision-strike capacity or space-based intelli-

gence, surveillance and reconnaissance, so talk of strategic autonomy risks running ahead of the means to deliver it.

A theme running through the Forum, and one easy to understate, was that Ukraine's leverage now rests on data and innovation. Access to real-time battlefield data, paired with a defence industry iterating at a speed established arms manufacturers cannot match, has turned necessity into a comparative advantage. Ukraine's edge, in other words, is not only that it fights, but that it learns and manufactures faster than its partners, and arguably faster than its enemy. Subsequent efforts, such as BRAVE1's granting Ukrainian companies access to its Dataroom and the launch of TrophyLab, which effectively provides semi-open-source access to technical intelligence on Russian weapon systems, demonstrate that data, innovation, and iterative development processes continue to rise in importance.

Reconstruction and development in the frontline regions

The picture that emerged from the delegation's trip to the frontline regions of Mykolaiv Oblast and Kherson Oblast was that reconstruction here is first and foremost local, social, and oriented toward the future. Governance was strikingly bottom-up: mayors and local leaders were the primary points of contact, the people actually driving recovery on the ground. That makes the withdrawal of USAID funding especially damaging, and it sharpened a recurring appeal for European partners to fill the gap, the same call for political will that ran through the rest of the Forum, now expressed in concrete budget lines. The harder challenge is social. Communities are straining to stay cohesive under enormous internal displacement and migration pressure, yet the effort to hold together is considerable. Children sit at the centre of that effort as social adhesive, which is why education is treated as a priority investment rather than a luxury: keeping schooling going, even in bomb shelters, is understood as keeping the community's future intact. Small signals of returning normality carry real weight here, and the reopening of a McDonald's in Mykolaiv was cited as a genuine highlight, a marker that ordinary economic life *can* come back.

Black Sea Security Forum: beyond the theoretical

The Forum's central message was that Ukraine's future is being decided where strategy becomes practical: in maritime corridors, defence-industrial capacity, political will, and local reconstruction. Odesa and the Black Sea remain indispensable to Ukraine's economic survival; Europe's security architecture remains incomplete without Ukraine as a central actor; and the frontline regions show that recovery is not an abstract post-war project, but an ongoing struggle to preserve social cohesion under fire.

The Black Sea Security Forum reminds us that the war is not merely about strategy, politics, and the making of history. War is inherently intimate. On an abstract level, it's about borders and alliances. In reality, it's

mainly about the kitchen table someone won't ever sit at anymore. War is about the "European Security Architecture", but primarily about the widow who prays for a name in the dark, that name ultimately forgotten. War is about grand national symbols, but mainly about the little flags. It is the central lesson that policymakers of tomorrow shouldn't forget.

EPIS