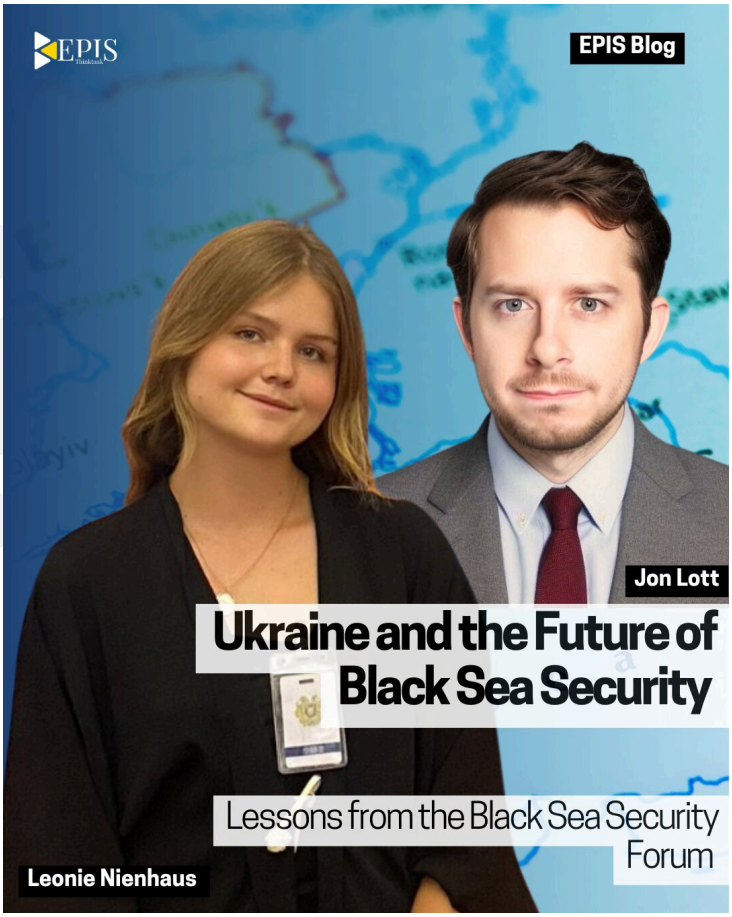
Ukraine and the Future of Black Sea Security

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"Chess is a war over the board. The object is to crush the opponent's mind." – Bobby Fischer

In June 2025, EPIS sent a delegation of researchers to the Black Sea Security Forum, in Odesa, to discuss, theorize, and troubleshoot the postwar situation—something which could materialize later in 2025, or still lie years away. The venue of the Forum was the iconic Odesa Opera House—for security reasons, a classified location while the event took place. Hundreds of academics, researchers, defence professionals, activists, and other Tier 3 actors (civil society, academia, media) converged alongside other Tier 2

(mid-level government officials, former top officials, prestigious think tank & NGO personnel) and Tier 1 principals (executive branch officials, high-ranking military personnel, legislators) to discuss the security architecture of Ukraine, now and in the future. Oleksii Goncharenko, Lord Ashcroft and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) organized and sponsored the event, respectively. Chatham House Rules applied.

Chess played a central role as a metaphor for the war during the conference. Each move provokes a necessary countermove, and within a few turns, millions of possible scenarios present themselves. Yet the nature of the panels made it clear that there were other players on the board. Speciality discussions concerning the interests of Romania, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, and the Global South emphasize the various interests both collective and individual represented in the current struggle. Emphasis was often made on the need to build a "coalition of the willing" to preserve a favourable ceasefire in Ukraine and deter future Russian aggression.

Geopolitical futures of the Black Sea:

What does victory look like? What kind of peace settlement could possibly end this war? These topics were discussed but not entirely resolved, though everyone agreed there is no going back. Three possible futures for security on the Black Sea were floated. The first, and most optimistic, involves a rebalancing of regional influence to favour the EU's economic, social, and environmental agenda, despite the Black Sea's distant position. It imagines slow and unsteady democratization in Georgia and Moldova, Turkish ambitions to remain as a "regional stabiliser and potential spoiler", and a larger multipolar Black Sea struggling to coordinate a unified response as a result of political polarization. The second involves occasional economic disruptions, tensions between regional states competing for influence, a larger role for the EU in deescalating not-quite-frozen conflicts between smaller states, rising populism over war fatigue, potential environmental crises, and uncertainty resulting from Türkiye's 2028 elections. The third and least optimistic future includes "major instability" caused by increased Russian (hybrid) warfare in Georgia and Moldova, political polarization, Türkiye's lifting of restrictions dictated by the Montreux Convention, American recognition of Crimea belonging to Russia, and insecurity in the Greater Middle East pushing larger flows of refugees.

The role of the EU in the Black Sea:

The forum also, albeit briefly, touched upon the role of the EU. Interestingly, despite its growing geopolitical importance, the Black Sea region has seen a hesitant EU presence. In contrast to its more structured engagement in the Danube and the Baltic Sea regions, both of which benefit from formal

macro-regional strategies (MRS), the EU has relied on a rather soft initiative in the Black Sea region, through its Black Sea Synergy (2007).

Shortly before the start of the Forum, on May 28, 2025, the EU adopted a new Black Sea Security Strategy, which aims to strengthen growth, security and connectivity between Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. While this represents a strategic shift, participants pointed out that it lacks a timeline for implementation, a concrete action plan and dedicated funding, which raises questions about the EU's long-term commitment. It was also pointed out that the region still lacks a formal macro-regional status, which highlights the above-mentioned gap between the EU's engagement in the Black Sea region and its more established regional frameworks.

The patronage model in the reconstruction of Ukraine:

In a side conference preceding the main forum, the reconstruction of Ukraine was a key topic, specifically the concept of countries adopting a patronage model over Ukrainian cities and oblasts. Not to confuse with the municipal twinning approach, such European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, which brings together cities and regions from the EU and Ukraine and their national representative association. Unlike twinning, country level patronage goes deeper by addressing immediate needs while fostering long-term collaboration initiatives.

The example discussed during the forum was Denmark's patronage over Mykolaiev, which operates alongside Denmark's national level support for Ukraine. The partnership emerged following a request from President Zelensky in March 2022 and builds on Denmark's historical pre-war collaboration with Mykolaiv's shipbuilding sector. As of now, Denmark has said to invest EUR 190 million in reconstruction, focusing on replacing damaged energy infrastructure, electricity and heat supply and social infrastructure, among other things. In order to facilitate the initiatives, Denmark has even established an embassy in Mykolaiv.

While Denmark's involvement represents the most advanced examples of such patronage, other nations are beginning to follow suit. Estonia and Latvia, for instance, have focused on initiatives in Zhytomyr and Chernihiv Oblast. With the latest Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA4) estimating Ukraine's total cost of reconstruction at USD 524 billion (EUR 506 billion), patronage seems to have a great potential to support in the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine.

Unanswered questions and the road ahead:

Key issues remain ahead. Although the EU is slowly granting Ukraine fractions of the approximately $300B of frozen Russian assets, it remains to be seen whether G7 states will allow it to be spent on weapons or whether any of the money could become accessible to Russia again. The EU report on the Black Sea's strategic value, published days before the Forum, outlines a

number of priorities which will be difficult to balance in an uncertain peace. Progress is moving towards the U.S. ambitions to acquire lithium reserves located in Ukraine, along with other important minerals. Questions also remain related to anti-corruption measures, renewable energy, potential refugee returns, nuclear safety, sustainable use of marine resources, EU enlargement in the region, and foreign investment (especially in areas near the Russian line of control).

Russia's global and regional position after any ceasefire or peace agreement is also uncertain. Because it is independent of any individual state, the International Criminal Court will not rescind its arrest warrants for President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova. Nor will the incipient tribunal for prosecuting aggression in Ukraine be likely to be cancelled by European states. The status of Russia and Iran's partnership is also under question, a result of recent actions that threaten the short-term stability of Iran's regime.

Operation 'Spiderweb':

As the Black Sea Security Forum entered its final hours on Sunday, Ukraine demonstrated the cunning chutzpah hoped for by its attendees. An audacious, high-tech drone attack laid waste to over forty of Russia's strategic bombers across four distant airbases—inflicting an estimated $7 billion of damage, and comprising about a third of Russia's strategic bombing fleet. The innovative attack, Operation Spider Web, is said to have taken over a year of planning. Small drones stored with explosives were stored inside a secret rooftop compartment in modified shipping containers. These containers entered Russia, appearing as ordinary containers. At a signal, the roofs opened up, enabling the FPV drones (piloted by operators deep inside Russia) to take off deep inside Russia and then crash successfully into Russian aircraft. The drones (each costing less than $1000) delivered a massive return on investment, and they remind observers about the importance of imagination in modern warfare. The operation upended some of the assumptions expressed during the Forum, demonstrating that a well-positioned knight can capture a queen when she is left exposed on the board.

Two days after the end of the Forum, Ukraine executed an attack against the Crimean Bridge, the result of months of planning. Experts at the Forum said the bridge is one of the most heavily protected infrastructure assets in the Russian Federation, underscoring the importance of this Ukrainian strike on the bridge. The operation involved underwater sea drones placing explosives on a pair of columns supporting the bridge, to be detonated remotely. This was the third successful attack on the Crimean Bridge, although the bridge was not fully neutralized as a transportation corridor. Traffic across the bridge resumed within 24 hours.

Alongside numerous connections, EPIS collected a list of recommended books & authors from guests at the Black Sea Security Forum. They are presented here, although the individuals who recommend them are uncredited out of respect for Chatham House Rules. A number of authors were recommended without reference to a particular book or article.

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