

Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission

“Black Sea Security Summit - A Roundtable Dialogue Hosted by the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe”

Committee Members Present:

**Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Ranking Member;
Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member;
Representative Richard Hudson (R-NC);
Representative Ruben Gallego (D-AZ);
Representative Robert Aderholt (R-AL)**

Other Members Present:

**Senator John Cornyn (R-TX);
Representative John Garamendi (D-CA);
Representative August Pfluger (R-TX)**

Participants:

**Minister Bogdan Aurescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania;
State Secretary Simona Cojocaru, State Secretary and Chief of the Department for Defense Policy,
Planning and International Relations, Ministry of Defense of Romania;
MP Pavel Popescu, Member of the Romanian Parliament and Chair, Defense Committee;
MP Ana Cătăuță, Member of the Romanian Parliament;
Deputy Minister Oleksandr Polishchuk, Deputy Minister of Defense of Ukraine;
MP Alexander Goncharenko, Member of the Ukrainian Parliament;
Deputy Minister Yordan Bozhilov, Deputy Minister of Defense of Bulgaria;
Ambassador Radko Vlaykov, Ambassador of Bulgaria to Romania;
MP Kaloyan Ikonomov, Member of the Bulgarian Parliament and Chair, Bulgaria – USA
Friendship Group;
First Deputy Minister Lasha Darsalia, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia;
Ambassador Nikoloz Nikolozishvili, Ambassador of Georgia to Romania;
Ambassador Füsün Aramaz, Ambassador of Turkey to Romania;
Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană, Deputy Secretary General of NATO;
Major General Jessica Meyeraan (USAF), Director of Exercises and Assessments, U.S. European
Command**

**The Roundtable Was Held From 1:00 p.m. (UTC+3) To 4:00 p.m. (UTC+3), Constanța Art
Museum, Constanța, Romania, Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Ranking Member, Commission for
Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

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*Transcript By
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WICKER: (In progress) – very, very much. And on behalf of the American delegation, we very much appreciate the cooperation and hospitality that we have received here in the Black Sea area, particularly, in Romania.

It's good to be here, and I welcome all of you and all of those listening online to this summit on Black Sea security. We are incredibly grateful for all of our distinguished participants representing friends and close allies on an issue that is of vital importance to not only our nations but to the entire world and to the continuation of a peaceful Europe.

We're particularly gracious – grateful for the gracious hospitality of our Romanian hosts. Foreign Minister Aurescu will co-chair this event and will speak in just a moment.

We were greeted most warmly when we came in by Vergil Chițac, the mayor of Constanța – Mr. Mayor – and by Mihaela Lupu, the chief executive of the county. And so thank you both for your gracious hospitality. We're delighted to be here.

This is a very historic event. It is the first summit in the history of the Helsinki Commission, which, as many of you know, is the American part and the American participation in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

We gather on the shores of the Black Sea at very – at a very perilous time. Given Russia's monstrous war on Ukraine and its wider aggression in the region, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Black Sea is currently the epicenter of Euro-Atlantic security and global peace.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts. I will tell you on my behalf, as a senator from the state of Mississippi, I think it's vital that we be here to make a statement that Ukraine must be successful in this war and that Vladimir Putin's aggression – unprovoked aggression – against a neighbor cannot stand.

I'm grateful for the participation of all of you, and I now turn the mic over to the – to His Excellency, Bogdan Aurescu, the foreign minister of Romania and our host.

Thank you very much, Mr. Foreign Minister.

AURESCU: Thank you so much, Chairman Wicker, distinguished Senate and House members of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Deputy Secretary General Geoană, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Chair of the county council, ambassadors, members of parliament, your excellencies.

Dear colleagues, it is my honor and pleasure to welcome you all to Romania and to the city of Constanța, which is the main port of the Black Sea and very close to the strategic airbase, Mihail Kogalniceanu, or MK, as we call it.

I want to thank the Commission for the leadership and bipartisan support and keeping a sharp focus on the Black Sea, on the threats on and in the proximity of the eastern flank of NATO, on the importance of a strong transatlantic link, and, most importantly for us, on strengthening our vibrant strategic partnership between Romania and the United States.

All these are gaining in importance, considering the threat that Russia's illegal, unprovoked, and unjustified aggression in Ukraine and the Black Sea poses the European, the Euro-Atlantic, and the global security, peace, and stability.

I'm honored to co-chair this event dedicated to the timely topic of the strategic importance of the Black Sea for the security and stability of Romania, of the region, and of the entire Euro-Atlantic community, including the United States.

I fully welcome this initiative of the Commission. In 1997, exactly 25 years ago, Romania and the United States launched a strategic partnership designed to broaden and deepen all dimensions of our bilateral relationship with a major focus on security cooperation and on Romania's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Over the last 25 years, a key objective of our bilateral strategic partnership has been to act as partners in enhancing our joint security and promoting the democratic and economic development of the Black Sea region. The continuation of common decisive action in this regard at the bilateral and multilateral level is more relevant than ever.

Romania is the NATO ally and EU member state with the longest border with Ukraine, so we have an acute sense of the threats the Euro-Atlantic space is facing as a consequence of the illegal war of Russia against Ukraine.

No allied waters are directly threatened by Russia the way the Romanian Black Sea waters are here in Constanța, and all along the Black Sea coast lies the first line of defense for the Euro-Atlantic community and the first line of support for our partners in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia.

Romania has constantly warned of the rising threat posed by Russia in the Black Sea after the illegal annexation of Crimea. The Black Sea is and will remain a launch pad for Russian aggression and military activity. Beginning with his Munich speech in 2007, the conflict in Georgia in 2008, the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and the illegal annexation of Crimea, President Putin's effort to undermine international security have turned bolder and more overt. Each act of aggression was built on the previous one, culminating with his all-out attack against Ukraine.

The Euro-Atlantic community has gradually come to the uncomfortable conclusion that under President Putin Russia is not the reliable, constructive, or, at least, predictable partner we were looking and hoping for.

So the new Strategic Concepts we adopted the day before yesterday in Madrid states the obvious, as proposed by Romania and other allies – that Russia is the most significant and direct threat to the Euro-Atlantic security.

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the security parameters we are working with. But the Euro-Atlantic community has reacted in a robust and united manner, and this is our main strength and advantage. We are more united than ever in defending our citizens, our territories, our values, and the rules-based international order, and Romania is a reliable and active partner and ally.

And the historical decisions taken these days at the NATO summit in Madrid reflect a clear message regarding the Black Sea security – (audio break) – security but it is recognized for the first time in a Strategic Concept of the alliance as a region of strategic allied importance.

Transatlantic coordination in the face of Russia's aggression has been impeccable and it must continue to be so. The Bucharest Nine format launched by President Iohannis of Romania and President Duda of Poland has had in this context a clear added value in ensuring coordinated and cohesive approaches among the nine allies on the eastern flank but also at transatlantic level regarding the security of our alliance as a whole.

If President Putin hoped to divide us, he failed. To the contrary, we've shown the complete opposite of what he was trying to achieve. There is renewed drive and commitment to consolidate European strategic resilience. With the United States' support, the European Council granted Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova the candidate status, also recognizes Georgia's European prospective.

Finland and Sweden have started the process of joining NATO, and we have to see also very clearly that the decisions we have taken to make our posture of deterrence and defense stronger and more efficient are extremely relevant for us all. Our strong, multifaceted support for Ukraine should only grow in quantity and complexity.

All these show that we are doing what is right. Our support – Romania's support – for Ukraine has been manifold since the very first day of the aggression. We helped more than 1.4 million Ukrainian citizens who crossed our borders, mostly women and children. We provided for them facilities for educational needs and for integration in our labor markets. In addition, an international hub for distribution of humanitarian assistance in Suceava is functioning at full capacity.

And I also want to say a few words about the food insecurity generated by Russia. I am sure we will elaborate further on this topic. Romania is actively involved in facilitating the transit of Ukraine exports and in serving as a hub for its grain. We are working to find the best solutions to ease the transit here where we find ourselves, through the Black Sea port of Constanța and our ports on the Danube but also on our railways.

Romania also calls for the involvement of all relevant actors of a coalition of the willing who could support the international effort to create blue corridors, ensuring safe maritime transportation in the Black Sea.

Now, going back to the deliverables of the NATO summit, I want to underline that these are consolidating our posture of deterrence and defense on the eastern flank with the shift of our posture from forward presence to forward defense, and this is, for the first time, mentioned in the summit declaration of Madrid.

Through the new Strategic Concept we have shaped the long-term vision, putting collective defense in Article 5 at the core of our actions and implementing a significant transformation of our deterrence and defense posture.

We have seen the consolidation of NATO's posture on the whole of the eastern flank in a unitary and balanced manner, as Romania has been advocating for quite some years, especially in the southern part of the eastern flank of the Black Sea, and this was one of the main objectives promoted by President Iohannis in Madrid and in the previous summit in March.

The decision announced by President Biden to enhance the U.S. military presence in Romania is also a strong signal of U.S. commitment to allied and regional security, and we are very grateful to the United States and the American people for this. From now on, Russia's continued aggression in our region will be met by a stronger NATO and U.S. deterrence and defense.

So I am convinced that our discussions today will yield new opportunities as far as the cooperation between us, building on the historical decisions taken throughout the past four months, and, most importantly, at the NATO summit in Madrid, which ended yesterday.

So thank you so much. And, Mr. Chairman, back to you.

WICKER: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Minister, and we do appreciate you coming straight from the NATO summit.

We will proceed in this fashion. We hope to have conversations in the next few hours about confronting Russian aggression and the relevance of the Black Sea to Euro-Atlantic security.

I'm going to recognize several people in order. We will take a break at 2:40 for only 15 minutes and then come back. But feel free to talk about either of these topics when you are recognized.

And for those of you who are, as I am, technically challenged, the button on the right, you press it once and you can speak and when you're finished you press it again, and I think you can pretty much leave the button on the left alone.

So it is now my pleasure, speaking of NATO, to recognize the deputy secretary general of NATO, General Mircea Geoană, and Mr. Deputy Secretary General, we are delighted to have you and you are now recognized.

GEOANĂ: Thank you so much, Senator Wicker.

Dear members of the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, we are honored and privileged to welcome you here in Romania on the Black Sea shore in Constanța.

Mr. Aurescu, thank you so much for co-chairing and for supporting this issue.

I also come straight from Madrid. We usually say that NATO summits are historic, but this one was a truly transformative summit of NATO, I would say probably the most important summit of our great organization in generations. Also, because in generations we didn't have war in Europe. In generations, the security architecture in Europe seemed more or less predictable.

Russia today is the number-one threat to our allies. Our Strategy Concept adopted by our leaders recognizes that. We also consider the rise of China as an important challenge to our interest, values, and security, and we also consider the Black Sea as one of the critical areas of strategic relevance to NATO.

As my friends and colleagues from the Aspen Institute and the German Marshall Fund next week will discuss in our Black Sea forum, the Black Seas today are sort of a vortex. In micro, the Black Sea is reflecting the broader competition between revisionist and brutal and aggressive Russia and our democratic world. This is why this region is reflected in the Strategic Concept as a region of maximum strategic importance for NATO.

I would like also to take a few minutes to thank and congratulate my good friend, Oleksii Reznikov, the minister of defense of Ukraine, who will be, I think, through VTC with us. I talked to Oleksii when he was with us at the defense ministerial meeting. I want to thank him and Ukrainian military for the successful offensive on the Serpent Island, which led to the liberation and – of this occupied important piece of strategic locations in the Black Sea.

This is a first step in reestablishing the freedom of movement, shipping, and navigation in the Black Sea. This is very important for NATO in providing security to the riparian allies and starting to really implement the decision we took in Madrid.

Oleksii, congratulations to you and your brave women and men in uniform in Ukraine.

Also, we decided at the NATO summit yesterday in Madrid to continue to support Ukraine. Their fight is our fight. We'll continue to support Ukraine militarily, financially, in humanitarian ways, and let me thank the U.S. Congress that, in a bipartisan way, has appropriated significant amount of resources to the brave, heroic fight of the Ukrainian people and army. We owe you a great deal of respect and gratitude.

And this is what America is all about, leading by example, and as President Biden said yesterday at the summit, we see now NATO re-galvanized, reenergized, and have found, again, a sense of purpose. This is a historic moment for all our democratic world.

I want to thank our American friends and allies for the impeccable bipartisan support for our great alliance. Please do continue. This is the right way to conduct world affairs and to maintain and support our values of freedom, rule of law, and human dignity.

Let me say just one word on something that probably will be part of our discussion today. Of course, I salute the decisions by the U.S. to strengthen the presence in Romania and Poland. Two additional U.S. destroyers will be based in Spain. This is something that we all appreciate.

We also appreciate the decisions by France and by the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, and Poland to raise the level of the battle group in Romania to the level of a brigade. That's great news.

I want to congratulate our Italian allies for leading the battle group in Bulgaria. I want to thank the Czech Republic for leading the battle group in Slovakia. I would like to thank Germany for leading and investing massively in Lithuania, and Canada in Latvia, and the U.K. in Estonia, and the U.S. in Poland.

But let me try to tell you something that we also have decided in Madrid that didn't take the headlines that much. The headlines are clear. But there is something that our leaders in more than close to 40 decisions that they took. We took decisions not only on deterrence and defense, not only in supporting Ukraine, not only in supporting Georgia and the Republic of Moldova and Bosnia-Herzegovina, not only inviting the leaders of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea for the first time ever to a NATO summit, not only discussing about the risk coming from the south, and, yeah, President Iohannis was right yesterday at the summit saying that the Black Sea is a natural continuum with the Mediterranean. It is not the Black Sea and the Azov Sea and the other seas. It is one sea. All seas are connected.

But something that our leaders have decided is also strengthening our resilience, supply chains, infrastructures, military mobility, fuel – things that are very important to us.

We also have taken decision on fighting hybrid activities by Russia. Today, in NATO, a severe attack by Russia or anyone else against NATO on hybrid, on cyber, or from space could trigger Article 5.

We also took decisions when it comes to fighting disinformation, and I'd like to talk to our American friends and to my Romanian friends and regional friends about something that all know will happen. Russia doesn't have the strength today to threaten NATO. We are rock solid. We are defending every square inch of our territory and our populations.

When it comes to the combination of cyber and disinformation and, basically, trying to change the mood and the mind of our democratic societies, they will continue to be very aggressive. We have to do a better job in fighting disinformation.

Now they're trying to turn not only in our own countries but also in Africa, in the Middle East, the ideas that the famine, which is looming, is the fault of the sanctions that we imposed on Russia because of the war. That's a blatant lie, but we have to do a better job in communicating that.

I will also mention something about our democracies, and I know that the Helsinki Commission is, basically, about this. There is some form of conversation that some people believe that authoritarian regimes have more discipline and can implement decisions, thus, being more efficient than our democratic societies.

Let me tell you something that I shared with our Ukrainian friends. I've never seen in my relatively long life already such a re-galvanization of our democracies in front of Russians' brutal war against Ukraine. Our young people in train stations and airports all over Europe and North America are fundraising for charities to help Ukrainian people.

We didn't tell Spacelink (sic; Starlink) or Microsoft or anyone else to come to the rescue. But without them, the cyberattack against the satellite that was providing telecom for Ukraine, which was incapacitated by Russia, in a few days only private sector came in and substituted this indispensable broadband internet access. Cyber – (inaudible).

So I will close in saying this issue. I think we have to make this moment a wakeup call for all of us, not only to strengthen our deterrence and defense, not only investing more in our defense, but also to use this moment to reenergize our democratic societies, and the holy triangle between government, private sector, and civil society is our strength. And I think here in Romania, my home country, a country that has come after a brutal dictatorship, a difficult transition, I think, for us, putting this holy triangle to work is the most important thing that we have.

In closing, let me say that we'll continue to pay special attention to this region, to the Black Sea, we'll continue to help Ukraine and Georgia, and I want to thank our allies from the Black Sea NATO shores in Bulgaria and Turkey. Turkey plays a critical role in this region. They played a very solid role in, basically, denying Russian warships additional passage to strengthen the fleet in the Black Sea. I also welcome the efforts by Romania and Turkey and others to facilitate the grain exports from the ports of Ukraine.

Thank you so much for inviting us. And it was a long trip from Madrid to Constanța, but it's worth taking such a trip under such gracious – Mr. Chairman, thank you so much for having us.

WICKER: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Secretary General, and that does mean so much that you would come directly from the summit to this summit.

You mentioned Oleksii Reznikov. We have, regrettably, learned that he's been urgently called away by the president of Ukraine. But he will be represented and Ukraine will be

represented virtually by Deputy Defense Minister Oleksandr Polishchuk. So when the time comes, he will be recognized rather than the defense minister.

We've already had two very, very powerful statements and I want to thank both participants for their comments and for the emphasis on NATO. I'm particularly delighted to hear that NATO, because of this aggression and because of what we've had to face, NATO is rejuvenated and revitalized. I hope people listening will take note of that.

And, Mr. Deputy Secretary General, the fact that you would say the – with regard to the Ukrainians their fight is our fight, that means so much coming from such a high-ranking official in NATO. So thank you both very much.

Now we'll begin, and we have nine more speakers so I hope we will be mindful of that and then others will be recognized as they seek recognition.

But at this point, it is my honor to recognize State Secretary Simona Cojocaru, the state secretary of the Ministry of Defense of Romania.

So, Madam Secretary, you are now recognized.

COJOCARU: Thank you, Co-Chairman Senator Wicker, Minister Aurescu, honorable members of the Commission, distinguished senators and representatives, Deputy Secretary General Geoană, distinguished principals, distinguished representatives of local authorities of Constanța, ladies and gentlemen, first and foremost let me express my gratitude for the invitation to testify before the Helsinki Commission on the Black Sea security. Black Sea is today a hotspot with an intensified strategic amplitude undergoing a sea change transformation.

One hundred twenty-eight days ago, Russian Federation went beyond its assertiveness and decided to brutally attack a peaceful, independent, and sovereign country. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine caused multiple crises – a humanitarian disaster with more than 8 million refugees, indiscriminate attacks against civilians, the weaponization of gas, and the dawn of a food crisis.

So this U.S. Helsinki Commission edition is taking place in a very, very strategic point on the NATO eastern flank, which is at the shore of the Black Sea.

We are particularly glad to see once-in-a-decade strategic blueprint. The alliance new Strategic Concept adopted two days ago at the Madrid summit recognizes this region is of a strategic importance. It is not only a conceptual recognition. It's more than that.

In the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, one of the Moscow first objective was to conquer the Snakes Island, as deputy secretary general just said, a piece of land situated 20 miles from the Romanian shore. The Snakes Island has a strategic role in the region. It is in the proximity of Sulina Channel, underpinning the control over the mouth of the Danube. We are very glad that, according to the latest information, the island is now, again, in the hands of Ukraine.

We are very much concerned here in the Black Sea about the threats of mines. Romania, Bulgaria, Republic of Turkey are very much concerned on the effort towards countering this danger.

Just yesterday a mine was destroyed in the vicinity of Varna by Bulgarian naval forces. Also, Romanian member forces are very much engaged with 11 ships, three maritime patrol aircrafts of NATO countries, and also the Coast Guard is very much determined to counter these dangers.

I would like also to say that last week a very important exercise – a real-life exercise – Shield Protector, was performed by the naval forces of Romania in the Black Sea.

So we are talking about this powerful and massive transformation at the level of traditional security (building ?), with a long-term impact on European and Euro-Atlantic security.

The Russian actions and maritime blockade in the Black Sea are not affecting Ukraine alone. Russian control over the entire southern part of Ukraine already has a major impact over Romania's economic activities in the Black Sea and the maritime Danube.

At this moment, the most likely military course of action is aiming at the control over Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson by the Russian armed forces.

Russia is focusing on eastern Ukraine without putting aside its plans for the south. Odesa is also included in the Russians' plans as part of the later stage and long-term military actions. So the most dangerous scenario for Ukraine, Romania, and NATO is if Russia would seek to create a land breach towards Odesa and the connection with Transnistria.

Moreover, all the decisions our leaders took in Madrid are organic to the transformation of the alliance. The minister Aureescu talked already about that unitary approach on the eastern flank, which is the most efficient way to defend every inch of NATO territory. Strengthen our forward defense, enhancing our battle groups in the east up to brigade level, modernizing NATO force structures are decisions to protect and make Romania and Black Sea region safer.

So the summit marked the birth of a new era of collective deterrence and defense. As an arc over time, these days 25 years later since U.S.-Romania strategic partnership was signed, President Biden reiterated in Madrid U.S.' strong commitment towards the Black Sea region, announcing additional actions to strengthen NATO deterrence and defense.

As announced, the U.S. will position in Romania a rotational brigade combat team that will maintain the ability to deploy subordinate elements across eastern flank. The details are to be clarified very, very soon at the military level.

Scale, scope, and speed of deployments on the eastern flank in Romania are unprecedented. U.S. deployed the Stryker battalion on Romanian territory very close to where

we are, to MK – Mihail Kogalniceanu base – as well as F-16 Fighter Falcon and F-18 Super Hornet aircrafts. These are real proofs on the ground for the U.S. commitment and engagement.

Very recently, elements of the 101st Airborne Division arrived to MK base with the mission to reinforce NATO eastern flank and engage in exercises. Another line of the effort mentioned here is MK airbase infrastructure development as well as ongoing (accession ?) and upgrade of Campia Turzii airbase infrastructure since these capabilities are of major importance for NATO eastern flank.

I cannot but to mention also the significant progress in implementing the multinational battle group in Romania and also the fact that this will be elevated to brigade level as reinforcement.

I would like to thank all our allies that are contributing to deterrence and defense with troops, with capabilities, here in Romania.

2.5 (percent) of GDP next year – starting with next year for defense, this will allow to implement ambitious modernization programs. I'd like to stress Patriot, HIMARS, F-16. These represent paramount national procurement programs with a significant impact upon fulfilling our national commitments.

We are also strengthening our defense institution and infrastructure while consolidating our cyber defense and intelligence cooperation. All these aspects are included in the roadmap of defense cooperation 2020-2030 U.S.-Romania.

To conclude, I really think that this summit, a very ambitious project of Helsinki Commission, provides an excellent insight in the specific features of the Black Sea.

Thank you very much.

WICKER: Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

We will now move to our representative from Ukraine, Deputy Minister of Defense Oleksandr Polishchuk. So are we connected and, Deputy Minister, are you there?

Yes. Thank you so much. We see you very clearly. Thank you, and we appreciate the exigent circumstances that have made Minister Reznikov required elsewhere. You are recognized, sir.

POLISHCHUK: Yeah. Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, dear participants of the summit, distinguished Congress members, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Reznikov sends his warmest greeting and gratitude for the particular attention given to Ukraine in terms of regional and global security. I would like to express my deep appreciation for the organization of this important event, not only for Ukraine but to the whole Black Sea region and broader Europe.

Preparing this speech, all of these point I would like to make, and I'm very much grateful that you already mentioned this point. Yesterday, armed forces of Ukraine made the strong – (inaudible). Yesterday, Russia announced that it would retreat from occupied Ukrainian Snake Island in a gesture of goodwill. Their statement was made after the precision strike of Ukrainian armed forces against the occupying forces there on the island. Our soldiers targeted air defense assets and support ships.

Much Russian(s) were defeated outside of Kyiv. We have observed the same gesture of goodwill in Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy region. Those and other example(s) demonstrate that Russian aggression plus – (inaudible) – meet with a strong resistance. The Kremlin is ready to compromise when it sees that the free world not only has means to defeat the aggressor, but is willing to act and fight and not just talk, the way Ukraine fight now.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine has been telling the world that Russia understood nothing but force. We have been telling the world that the nonresponse to the occupation of Crimea opened a Pandora('s) box. There's the fact the Russian occupation of the Sea of Azov and its attempt to occupy the Black Sea was a military exercise. This closed a huge area of sea – (inaudible) – of the freedom of navigation was a test for the free world. Thus, the Kremlin has been brutally violating the law of free and – (inaudible). The international community didn't react, unfortunately. The Kremlin saw that it could be – (inaudible).

In publishing of my minister in the Atlantic Council in December of 2021, we personally warned the international community that Russia full-scale invasion would pose a threat to global food security. Now everybody looking for the way to prevent the global food crisis. Therefore, Ukraine official representatives are raising this issue and on different stages all over the world.

Hence, I would like to make the following points.

Firstly, to stop the Russians, one needs force and readiness to use it. Russia is performing an act of terror on the island and sea. Twenty-seven battleship(s) and submarines, nine of them carrying Kalibr cruise missile – this missile will kill women and children not only Odesa, but also deep within Ukrainian territory. And controlling the use of sea means it reach Bosphorus, blockade and shelling of civilian vessels. All this are acts of terror.

The terror cannot be stopped only by diplomatic means. Russian(s) respect only power. Not a single word of their(s) can be trusted. They must be forced to accept the rules of free world.

At the meeting in Rammstein format two weeks ago, my minister asked his colleague to develop a program of military support for Ukraine based on a mission-oriented approach. Our mission is to de-block the Ukrainian Black Sea coast and to guarantee the security of western part of the Black Sea.

To achieve this goal, we need to increase the capability of Ukrainian naval forces. A practical step toward this goal will be a logistical continuation – logical, sorry, continuation of the NATO summit decision to enhance the defense of the eastern flank from both allies,

including the deployment of new NATO forces in Romania. This step needs to be taken at the earliest opportunity.

I would like to underscore that Ukraine is deeply grateful for the assistance in a scale already received thanks to the leadership of the U.S. and the U.K. and other partners. Russia has already been sent the signal that it cannot act with impunity. This has been the result. Now the result need(s) to be consolidated.

And second, for the Kremlin to retreat we need to demonstrate real unity. Sanction is the best example here. Russia is now openly stealing the Ukrainian grain from the temporarily occupied territories. From April to June, it has loaded 28 vessels with the Ukrainian grain.

Additionally, Russia has been employing logistical vessels using the gaps in the Montreux Convention. While the convention guarantees the freedom of passage of civilian vessels, these ships are the part of logistics system for the Ministry of Defense of Russia. They have been delivering weapons, military people, materiel, and technical support to Syria, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries.

On their way, these vessels can transport sanctioned goods, raw materials, and more. We need to strengthen the sanctions to stop the transport of goods. This is where we need unity. Sanctions can only work when there's no bypassing them.

We are now considering the two main ways of the blocking of Ukrainian ports and protection level communication, one military and one political/diplomatic. To accomplish this goal by military means, we need to block the abhorrent action in the northern part of Black Sea, including its airspace. (Inaudible) – operation needs to be accomplished. For instance, the naval situation, monitoring and target acquisition for coastal missile – (inaudible) – that necessary precondition.

We need to implement, as well, a variant of A2/AD system. We need to help our partners to create such capabilities.

Another way out of this crisis will be political/diplomatic instruments. It would envisage all the steps involving guarantor states in the form of conduction of a humanitarian operation. The preparations for this implementation has to be organized in the following stages.

Establishing as a security condition it has no includes delineation in order to operation in each part in case Russia violated security guarantees. Those are the protocol for the rules of engagement.

Establishing the humanitarian operation forces. Next is establishing as a passage for humanitarian convoys. The humanitarian corridor has to be controlled by Ukrainian surveillance system, establishing the duties and the responsibilities for the conduct of this humanitarian operation and the accomplishment of its goals. The Ukrainian defense forces have to ensure the safe exit of vessels from port as they are escorted to the area of eastern Ukraine territorial sea

waters, whereas they would pass under the protection of vessel of coalition of partners' countries.

(Inaudible) – the sea and air situation in the humanitarian operation there. Ukraine reserves the right to suspend the humanitarian operation due to the Russian violate security condition of such operation.

Guarantor state have to monitor the demilitarization of Snake Island and the gas platform on the neighboring gas field. The coalition forces should be responsible for the safety of vessel in the area where the convoy is formed – isolation of humanitarian operation area with predefined coordinates, ensuring mine safety for the vessel, arrange passage of the area where cargo is disbanded, and ensuring the vessel's safety in this area.

Russia full-scale aggression required that we considered the key aspects of regional security. Ukraine is open for this conversation. By unity of efforts for a free world we must make the Black Sea this place of peace. Thank you for your attention.

WICKER: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Minister, and some very interesting and thought-provoking proposals there. So we very much appreciate your participation and we wish you well in regards to the defense minister and to the president.

It is now my honor to recognize the deputy minister of defense for Bulgaria, Yordan Bozhilov.

Minister – Deputy Minister, welcome, and we are eager to receive your remarks.

BOZHILOV: Thank you. Thank you, Chair, senators, representatives, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm truly honored to have this opportunity to address you today, and this is the right forum and right time to express Bulgarian perception of the new security environment and challenges we face as NATO allies after the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine.

We strongly condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. It is a blatant violation of international law and greatly undermines international security and stability. All those responsible for the war crimes committed against Ukraine should be held accountable and must be brought to international justice.

We support all international sanctions against the Russian Federation and we welcome the latest ones of the United States. The Russian invasion in Ukraine is a direct threat to Euro-Atlantic security and it affects all NATO eastern flank member states.

It could lead to destabilization of the whole Black Sea region. It has far-reaching destabilization implications at the regional level and beyond. That is why transatlantic unity, solidarity, and cohesion are needed more than ever.

We must sustain our support to Ukraine as long as necessary until Russia stops its aggression and withdraws all its troops from Ukrainian territories. As Russia has intentionally exacerbated the food crisis that affects billions of people around the globe, we must do utmost to enable exports of Ukrainian grain.

We must all face together the challenges of looming energy crisis. Given this fundamentally changed security environment, the long-term strengthening of defense and deterrence posture of NATO's eastern flank is of crucial importance to our security and stability and ability to effectively defend against any Russian aggressive actions in the future.

For that reason, we strongly support the decisions of Madrid summit for bolstering the alliance presence on the eastern flank and for long-term adaptation of the alliance's defense. Our vision is that Black Sea should be given a distinct emphasis, including through our relevant increases of allied military presence in all domains.

We want NATO to take a firm and clear strategic approach to the Black Sea region, to involve more robust collective defense and deterrence measures, as well as intelligence, surveillance, information collection, and analysis measures, enhancing mobility and response to hybrid threats. Without a doubt, Black Sea region will benefit from NATO and EU working together in this regard.

Strengthening the NATO eastern flank means that we must, first of all, invest in our defense capabilities. Accelerated rearmament and modernization is a key in this respect, and Bulgaria has very ambitious plans in this respect as the NATO eastern flank member states must invest heavily in acquisition across all armed forces, services, and operational domains.

While their defense budgets are under pressure, the support of the United States and other allies would be incredibly valuable. Here, a new kind of a Marshall Plan for building up a strong NATO eastern flank could be an invaluable investment in our future part of growing the Euro-Atlantic family.

The Russian aggression is not only against Ukraine. It is also aggression against peace and stability of our continent. This is more – what is more, the Russian aggression is not only military. We are witnessing now increased Russian hybrid activities against NATO and EU. Bulgaria is under intensified Russian hybrid aggression as are other NATO eastern flank member states. Moscow has always sought to create and exploit any political instability in order to attain its goals in Bulgaria.

The Kremlin has been systematically trying to intervene in our internal political processes, including by use of proxy political formations, so as to influence strategic level – strategic decision-making.

The unilateral cut of gas supplies to Bulgaria serves as a perfect example of how Moscow weaponized energy to attain its strategic objectives. Public perceptions are a priority target of Russian-sponsored information campaigns in Bulgaria with primary focus put on online news

content and social media. Espionage, subversive operations of the Russian intelligence forces have always made a significant part of the Russian hybrid toolbox in Bulgaria.

Instability in the Black Sea has a negative impact on the security of western Balkans as well. Therefore, the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region is definitely in our interest.

Let me here point out that Bulgarian National Assembly just recently overwhelmingly approved the French EU president's solution regarding the start of the accession talks with the Republic of North Macedonia, and so now it's up to Skopje to meet us halfway.

The EU and NATO open doors and integration is the best remedy against Russian subversive influence in the western Balkans, and not only there. That is why we welcome the historic decision to grant candidate country status to Ukraine and Republic of Moldova and European prospective to Georgia. Those are necessary steps but still insufficient. We need to invest more effort in strengthening our resilience in all its aspects.

As an example, we need to join our efforts to overcoming the vicious gas dependency on Russia. Although building up resilience is, principally, a national responsibility, we need the support of NATO, EU, and especially of the United States as our strategic security and defense partner.

Making Bulgaria and also the rest of the Black Sea allies a partner resilient enough is of utmost importance if we are to succeed in building a stronger NATO, eastern Europe – NATO eastern flank and to deliver on ambitious goals set by the new Strategic Concept of NATO.

Thank you very much.

WICKER: Thank you very much.

And now turning to a member of the Bulgarian parliament, Kaloyan Ikonov.

Mr. Ikonov, welcome, and we're delighted to hear from you.

IKONOV: I'm sorry, sir. Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I don't have a speech ready because our defense minister was the one to discuss the topic. But I'd like to tell you that Russia is using a lot of hybrid attacks against Bulgaria in many regards, and this is the challenge that we are all trying to overcome. And NATO is, effectively, the biggest supporter of the defense in Bulgaria and I'd like to thank you all for the support.

Thank you.

WICKER: Thank you very much. And this Helsinki Commission was very pleased and honored to be received in such a welcoming manner both in Sofia and Varna only a year ago. So thank you very much.

Next on the list is Ambassador Radko Vlaykov, the ambassador of Bulgaria to Romania. Mr. Ambassador, welcome.

VLAYKOV: Thank you. Thank you very much.

I'd prefer to take part in the discussions on both panels. But now I want to say that our position was very clear and was presented by our –

WICKER: If you could pull your microphone just a little bit closer.

VLAYKOV: Yes. Sorry.

Our position was very clear, and the deputy defense minister, Mr. Bozhilov, was very clear. I want just to say one sentence in this part of the meeting and, eventually, during the discussions I will add something more.

I'm very satisfied that Bulgaria and Romania will have now very, very strong cooperation on the issues of NATO and, especially, here in the Black Sea. And for me, this meeting today – thank you very much for the organizers – is very important, having in mind the future of our Black Sea cooperation in frame of NATO. That's why I think that these conference hearings in Constanța is in the right time and on the right place, and with the countries and participants which are now in this moment very (actual ?).

Once again, thank you very much for organizing of this conference and I prefer to say a few words also during the discussions. Thank you.

WICKER: Thank you, sir. And it does mean a lot that you would endorse the concept of this hearing, and it bears repeating that the Helsinki Commission, on behalf of six members of the U.S. House of Representatives, two members of the United States Senate, members of both political parties, we believe we are making a strong statement, and the participation from all of the countries around the Black Sea speaks volumes. So thank you very much for mentioning that.

It's now my pleasure to recognize First Deputy Minister Lasha Darsalia, first deputy minister of foreign affairs of Georgia. Mr. Minister, you are now recognized.

DARSALIA: Thank you. Thank you, Senator Wicker, Your Excellency, Minister Aurescu, Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană, dear senators, participants of today's event, ladies and gentlemen.

From the outset, I would like to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission for organizing this hearing at such a difficult moment for the Black Sea region and the wider Euro-Atlantic security environment.

We greatly appreciate the Commission's active involvement in promoting security and stability in this strategic region. I also want to express our gratitude for the strong bipartisan support that Georgia enjoys on the Hill.

Over the past 30 years of partnership, United States support has been critical in strengthening democracy, building defense capabilities, and promoting economic growth in Georgia. This summit, once again, underscores the prominence of Black Sea's security for the European and the Euro-Atlantic security and the importance of the region to the United States.

The Black Sea is at an increasingly important crossroads of critical infrastructure, transportation, and energy routes. It's a gateway between Europe to Asia and has great potential to better connect these two parts of the world.

The Black Sea is home to three NATO member states and two of the alliance's closest partners, Ukraine and Georgia. The recent decision by the EU to acknowledge Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia's European perspectives attests to the growing awareness of the Black Sea region's significance for European security and the indivisibility of the region from the rest of Europe.

From many perspectives politically, economically, and security wise, the Black Sea region remains a top priority for Georgia. First of all, it is the most essential direct link for us to NATO and the European Union. We also see Black Sea as a region of great opportunities and immense potential for developing international cooperation and connectivity.

Unfortunately, parallel with the growing importance we see a consistently worsening security environment in the region. The invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the subsequent occupation of Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, along with the seizure of Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 that preceded this year's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, are all components of this destructive pursuit by Russia to assert control in the region.

I take this opportunity and reiterate, once again, that in these difficult times Georgia stands in full solidarity with Ukraine, its brave people, and its government. Since the beginning of war, Georgia has been and will continue supporting Ukraine through strong political and diplomatic steps, both bilaterally and through international platforms.

Georgia, together with the international partners, supported the most important decisions and co-sponsored or joined over 300 resolutions, statements, and other initiatives in support of Ukraine. We have been also providing new continued significant humanitarian assistance and supporting Ukrainian citizens arriving to Georgia.

Today, we are witnessing a critical time in history. Russia's war in Ukraine poses a challenge like never before to European security architecture, and the outcome of this war will define tomorrow's world, the future of our region, and the wider Euro-Atlantic security.

Now, the main question is what we can do together. There is no simple answer to this challenge but there is one critical element that must be at the foundation of any meaningful

policy, Western unity, and the enhanced engagement in the region, namely, by the U.S., NATO, and the EU. Accelerated commitment will be crucial for restoring security in the region and ensuring its democratic and independent future.

Equally important is having and maintaining a coherent policy towards the Black Sea region by these key stakeholders and an acknowledgement of the importance of the region for the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

We are confident that an intensified presence and engagement of the United States and Western partners in Georgia and the Black Sea region is critical to effectively handle the threats and challenges we are facing, enhance peace and security, and unlock the full potential of the region. Robust strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia and our joint achievements provide solid foundation for enhancing this partnership in all areas of our cooperation including security and economic ties.

Today, our alliance is more important than ever. We highly value Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative signed in 2021 that marks a new phase of security cooperation between our countries and advances Georgia's readiness, defense capabilities, and NATO interoperability.

As for the European Union, increasing political support and embracing the European aspirations of like-minded frontline states is critically important. The role of NATO and its increased deterrence and defense posture in the Black Sea is also essential.

Georgia has proved itself as a capable and reliable contributor to international security. For many years, Georgia soldiers sailed shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. and NATO allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is necessary to further increase NATO's presence in the region, including through more joint exercises, port calls, exchanges of information, and engagement through partners through the enhanced forward presence while also strengthening the resilience and security of regional actors through joint tailored programs.

We, therefore, welcome the Madrid summit decision by the alliance on tailored support measures for partners. It is also important for NATO to have a unified Black Sea vision defining the interests of NATO in the region and the steps it will take to enhance its security.

In that respect, the adoption of the new Security Concept of the alliance is a just and timely endeavor. NATO must finally embrace the deserving experience. This will not only ensure the security and democratic development of these countries, but also will have an immense stabilizing effect on the Caucasus and Black Sea region, ensuring benefit for Euro-Atlantic security.

Thank you very much.

WICKER: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Minister, let me ask you, would it be fair to say that you view the NATO summit as – the recent NATO summit as a very positive step for the Republic of Georgia?

DARSALIA: Yes. So, clearly, it was a very positive summit for Georgia, very important deliverables for Georgia. First of all, this is tailored support which Georgia did, and this is, again, one more time ensuring the Bucharest summit decision is there in time to start implementing of the decision.

WICKER: Well, I'm –

DARSALIA: It, clearly, was, and the stronger wording and the very supportive statements we received during the summit, this is all which is really important for us. So it, definitely, was – clearly, was really a positive summit for Georgia.

Thank you.

WICKER: That's good to know. Thank you very much.

Now we turn to our friends in Turkey and we have with us Ambassador Füsün Aramaz. Mr. Ambassador, you're recognized. Madam Ambassador. I'm sorry.

ARAMAZ: Thank you. Mr. Chair, Mr. Minister Aurescu, Mr. Deputy Secretary General of NATO Geoană, deputy ministers, honorable members of U.S. Senate and Congress, parliamentarians, distinguished local authorities, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, firstly, let me express my gratitude to be invited to such an important gathering among very distinguished participants and express congratulations for the very timely initiative of Helsinki Committee and of Romania.

With the war in Ukraine we are faced with a security challenge affecting not only the Black Sea region but the whole Euro-Atlantic area. But Black Sea region is at the forefront of the crisis unleashed by Russia's military attack against Ukraine.

From the first day of the attack, Turkey's position was clear. We strongly expressed our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity on every occasion.

The Black Sea is our common home and it will remain so. As the littoral states, we have common security, economic, commercial, cultural, and environmental interests. Actually, we have had a very good track record of cooperation in this region.

In the last 30 years we have developed exemplary multilateral regional cooperation under the umbrella of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization. We also work with all littoral states to help build a regional security architecture.

This aspiration has led to initiatives such as BLACKSEAFOR and Operation Black Sea Harmony. Obviously, unfortunately, current circumstances do not allow for such initiatives to function. We all know we cannot go back to business as usual.

But these are our common achievements as littorals and we should work to build on them when the conditions permit. Once the war is over, our collective steps will need to factor in Russia in one way or form. Totally discarding them is not a viable option. We should bear in mind that the Black Sea region needs less militarization, no more. We believe that this is a compelling case to advocate sustainable peace and stability in and around the Black Sea.

As we move forward, allies and NATO must focus on two lines of effort, firstly, adapting its deterrence and defense posture as required. This must not be provocative and lead to over militarization. NATO's measures need to be proportionate and in line with the Montreux Convention.

We understand and respect the security concerns of our friends and allies. But more vessels at sea or more fighter aircraft in the air alone do not mean more deterrence or stronger defense. Keeping the region safe and secure will require a strategic vision, cool-headed approach, and a broad thinking.

Secondly, supporting the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of countries of the region. Georgia and Ukraine have expectations from NATO. Our Moldovan friends must not be forgotten. We want to see them as closely aligned with NATO as possible.

In the meantime, we will continue to encourage them to do more to meet the NATO standards. We have the potential to also overcome the difficulties we face today by working together and standing in solidarity as longtime allies, friends, and neighbors.

Turkey has always supported NATO's open door policy. Consequently, the Madrid summit has been a real success that Sweden and Finland will be valuable additions to our alliance.

We will always support new members as long as they are ready to respect and support Turkey's fight against terrorism. Decisions taken at the summit and the new Strategic Concept will constitute a roadmap for NATO. Message of unity given by the summit has been especially meaningful, taken into consideration of the current critical geopolitical situation.

Russia's military attack against Ukraine is unacceptable. It constitutes a grave violation of the U.N. charter and international law. Our stance has been clear and consistent since the beginning of war. We are supporting Ukraine in political and humanitarian fields.

Our strategic partnership with Ukraine and working relations with Russia have been instrumental in our endeavors for diplomatic settlement. Atrocities on the ground, unfortunately, have stalled the diplomatic process. We want this war to end as soon as possible and the parties start negotiating a peaceful settlement.

We believe that diplomacy is the only way for establishing a just and lasting peace. Sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political unity of Ukraine should be preserved in a negotiated settlement.

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine continues to deteriorate rapidly. In the context of the ongoing crisis, humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and Moldova have been provided by Turkey as well and further planning for assistance is ongoing. We are also working closely with the U.N. and ICRC to ease the humanitarian situation.

At the global level, many nations are challenged by the rising energy costs, inflation growth, and impending food crisis. The U.N. approached us with a plan to export Ukrainian grain through Black Sea. We expressed our readiness to help. If the sides agree, we are ready to host a meeting in Istanbul to discuss the technical details of the U.N. plan. Our aim is to contribute to the international efforts to prevent a global food crisis.

Thank you very much.

WICKER: Thank you, Madam Ambassador, and I join you in expressing our welcome into the NATO family of Finland and Sweden, and I would endorse most strongly your observation that Russians' aggression is absolutely a gross violation of international law.

Now, we have two speakers left on the schedule, and it would now be appropriate while those two speakers are proceeding for persons who would like to be recognized afterwards to catch the eye of my two staffers that are right behind me.

And, Mr. Goncharenko, you will be next but if you'll catch their eye. They'll make a list and give it to me after we hear from our representative of the Ukrainian parliament and also then the major general from U.S. European Command, General Meyeraan.

But at this point, member of parliament, Alexander Goncharenko of Ukraine, you are recognized.

GONCHARENKO: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Thank you, dear Chair. Thank you, Your Excellences, and all distinguished members of the Senate and House.

You know, I have mixed feelings now. I want to be frank with you. We are listening, we are speaking now, and it sounds like everything is good. But this early morning in my native Odesa, which I represent, there was an air attack – missile attack – and 18 people were killed – 18 civilians, including children, just civilians from a residential building.

I am also came back from Madrid just. I've been to summit and was the only Ukrainian MP to be there, and when I was in Madrid my wife and my four-years-old son were calling me saying, we have a new attack, new signal of attack, new attack, new attack, because they are in Odesa now, and I want to tell you that the situation is very difficult.

You are saying that, and I absolutely agree, that the Black Sea today is a battlefield and is the center of – I can say, of the world because that is an epicenter – like you said, vortex, yes.

But if we are saying this, we should say next thing. Odesa is the biggest city on the Black Sea. So Odesa is the center of everything which is going on and it's a very pity we can't just meet in Odesa today. It's for sure for security reasons. But I hope that next year we'll be happy to welcome you in Odesa, so distinguished guests.

But we need to do something to change the situation and we need to make courageous steps. Be brave like Ukraine. That what I wanted to tell. I just want – diplomacy is very good. But what would be diplomacy if Ukraine would fail in four days like it was predicted by many? And now Russian forces will be on the border with Romania, with Moldova, with Poland, with other countries, and will go further.

And today, Russia – we haven't stopped Russians on the Donbas. Yes, we kicked off them from Kyiv. We kicked off them from Kharkiv. We secure Odesa. We take over – we took back Serpent Island, which is very important. But still they're advancing in the east of our country.

I just – I am not professional military. I just – for three weeks after the invasion, I took weapons in my hands and was in the territorial defense battalion guarding the Ukrainian parliament. See, in Ukraine you should guard your parliament if you want to vote there, you know.

And after Russians were kicked off from Kyiv, I came back to my parliamentary duties. But here are people who understand me. Corporal Gallego, Lieutenant Colonel Pfluger, Colonel Wilson, representatives honored, you understand when Russia two days ago shelled 45,000 shells and rockets just in Donbas – heavy shells and heavy rockets, 45,000; it's absolutely unbelievable number of artillery they concentrated. And the situation is difficult.

So what I want to tell Black Sea today is very important, the most important place in the world. I agree. So we need here strong military presence of NATO and, first of all, the United States. I believe that, yes, fighters, carriers, and destroyers are making difference, and I want to see American ships in Odesa today.

That is something which can make difference, and I want to see – I am absolutely happy with NATO Madrid summit, the revitalization of NATO uniting a free world – that is uniting a free world. That is not only about Finland and Sweden. For the first time in history Japan came to the summit. It was South Korea. It was Australia and New Zealand.

We see the whole free world is uniting and it's right, because if Putin would be successful today the international security would be over and we will live in wild jungles with a bear, with a tiger, which are hunting for peaceful nations, and maybe other predators, and that is so awful and that is so dangerous.

But I would be even more happy if in Madrid summit there would be a decision about some humanitarian mission in Black Sea to take out Ukrainian grains. We need this. We want to feed people. Four hundred million people in the world are dependent from calories from Ukrainian crops. Four hundred million. It's almost the whole population of the European

Union. Just imagine, and we can't feed them today. We want and can't because Putin took them as a terrorist. He took them as hostages.

So I'm sure that we need to show strength. It's very good that, finally, free world is uniting. There is no divisions. But also it should be strength showed to such dictators as Putin, and the first place where it should be done it is in the Black Sea, absolutely, on humanitarian reasons to save millions of people today, because thousands are killed in Ukraine but millions will die from starving.

And what will be in Egypt, which is – for 80 percent is dependent on wheat from Ukraine and Russia. Just imagine, for a 100-million population state what will be tomorrow? So we need to make courageous steps today.

And I'm finishing. Military steps can be clear. There is the mayor, major general, others, who can say more about military things.

But I believe, again, convoys, strong NATO presence, American fleet in the Black Sea – that what we are waiting for.

But speaking about diplomatic things, again, Black Sea is the vortex. But Russia is continuing to use Black Sea to export their oil. Every day millions of barrels of Russian oil is crossing Bosphorus. Why shouldn't we say to Russians either both Ukrainian grain is crossing and your oil or nothing is crossing? Why are you using Bosphorus – why are you using Black Sea still to sell your oil while you took millions of people as hostages like food terrorists?

I think that is something that should be changed. When Russia is receiving \$1 billion per day for fossil fuel this war can last forever.

So that's why I'm very much thankful to all of you for your coming to Black Sea to be – to meet in Constanța, for possibility to speak with you today. And I ask you, I beg you, to make courageous steps, to make steps which will show the aggressor – aggressor understands only force, which when we're speaking about provocation the only thing that provokes aggressor is weakness.

So let's be strong. Let's show it to them and let's see how we can solve as hard problems as we have today in Black Sea.

Thank you so much. (Applause.)

WICKER: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Goncharenko, and thank you for pointing out that the deaths that are occurring and will occur as a result of Vladimir Putin's illegal assault on his neighbor are not only on the field of battle, their own innocent civilians, and on millions of people around the globe who will, simply, starve to death because they don't have – they do not have access to the food coming out of the breadbasket of Europe, which is, largely, in Ukraine. Thank you very much for pointing that out.

Now, our last scheduled speaker is Major General Jessica Meyeraan. And, General, we're delighted to have you and I think it's fair to say we are eager to hear what you can tell us about the military situation on the Black Sea and what we can expect to see in the future. So thank you, and you're recognized to proceed.

MEYERAAN: Thank you, Senator Wicker.

I'd also like to thank Foreign Minister Aurescu. Thank you both, not only for pulling this summit together and hosting such an important conversation here and now but your tireless support and dedication to peace and security across all of Europe, and I would extend that thanks and acknowledgement to all of the distinguished and senior leaders that are gathered here today.

Greetings. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's my pleasure to join you and share some reflections.

I'm struck by all of our speakers. I believe the things that I'm going to share with you – I'm going to use the language that we've heard up until now, and I think some could roll their eyes at the repetition but, actually, I'm struck by how important it is that we're all using the same terminology in order to reinforce the same message and I think that we should gain comfort in that fact that we are united and aligned in our thinking as we contemplate the aggression that Russia has levied.

Russia violated core principles that uphold global peace and security with its unprovoked and unjustified war in Ukraine. This is Russia's war of choice and, as a consequence, it is rapidly losing its power and prestige in the world.

Today is an important day for United States European Command. Earlier this morning, General Wolters, who is extremely well known to just about everybody in this room, handed command of the European Command over to General Cavoli, who is also very well known to this group. That change is important, and I look forward to supporting General Cavoli as he commands.

But what I'd like to start with is the priorities, which I don't believe will change, and I'd like to use those priorities as context for my remarks.

Our first priority as we contemplate the situation in – the war in Ukraine is very clear and sometimes uncomfortable for some to hear is we are not seeking nor do we want to posture ourselves so that we find ourselves in a war with Russia in Ukrainian soil and, likewise, we do not want to enter into a circumstance that would also drag NATO into a war with Russia.

That said, however, we are very stalwart and fully in support of enabling Ukraine to defend itself against Russian aggression. We desperately want to see and assist Ukraine's return to a democratic, independent, sovereign, and prosperous nation that is able to defend itself against future aggression.

And, thirdly, we are devoutly dedicated as a member of NATO to see this unity continue going forward and, in such, we are full supporters of NATO's objectives of collective defense, smart crisis management, and effective security cooperation because we know that we are stronger together, and I'll return to that concept in a minute.

A lot of interesting developments regarding United States' posture in Europe. What I'd like to say before I dig into that just a little deeper is we have always been focused in a posture in Europe that is the right amount at the right time in order to present a combat credible presence that Europe needs and we do that because we're committed to deterring aggression, and then if we find that deterrence fails we are in a position to stand shoulder to shoulder with all of our allies against aggression and we do this by, with, and through our allies and partners.

EUCOM's strategy prioritizes NATO's deterrence and defense, countering malign influence, strengthening strategic relationships, and enabling global operations, and as some may have noticed if you had a chance to look at my bio at United States European Command, I'm the director for exercises and assessments, and so a very important mechanism to achieving EUCOM's strategies is delivered through training and exercises in the European theater.

We work diligently to maintain and build readiness across the alliance and with our partners. We do this in order to enhance our interoperability not only with capabilities but with our tactics, techniques, and procedures, and we do this in order to reassure each other. So if we find ourselves in a situation where deterrence fails we are prepared to defend and defend well, and our posture, our training, our exercises – all of these activities – manifest themselves in what, I believe, a very effective deterrence.

I also want to spend a minute talking about security assistance. United States European Command has been conducting security assistance activities for decades, and I would contend that we are pretty good at it because we have been very deliberate in developing deep, rich relationships throughout the European-Atlantic area and we have developed those deep, rich relationships because we listen and learn about our ally and partner nations' security requirements.

We collaborate and develop successful and achievable security solutions and then we commit to train and exercise in order to increase proficiency of those capabilities that have been acquired.

So what are we doing now in support of Ukraine's security assistance and in support of Ukraine's fight for freedom, sovereignty, and independence? We are collecting and deepening our understanding of Ukraine's security assistance requirements and we're doing that through our European Command's Coordination Center Ukraine, which we have very established and connected Ukrainian representation.

So we're collecting those security assistance requirements and we're coordinating and collaborating across over 40 nations to understand how we can quickly and effectively satisfy those security cooperation gaps and requirements.

We're doing that in very, very close coordination with the United Kingdom's international donor coordination cell. But the bottom line is we're facilitating – ultimately, facilitating the delivery of those needed items by, with, and through our allies and partners in order to get them in the hands of the Ukrainian armed forces so that they can effect the outcome that we all hope and pray for.

I'd like to return for a moment to the concept of stronger together, which is a NATO bumper sticker. We are, truly, stronger together. But it is not just NATO's bumper sticker or mentality. I believe that this has been a global and nation-by-nation whole of government response to this unprovoked and unjustified invasion – not invasion, reinvasion of Ukraine.

I'll bring it to a close by saying make no mistake, the security environment in Europe is changed. We are at a pivotal point in history. Our actions, Russia's actions, and the heroic actions of Ukraine will have implications that will be felt for generations.

Thank you, Senator Wicker.

WICKER: Well, thank you, General. We very much appreciate that and look forward to the participation of all persons present during the remainder of this summit.

I would remind members that we're actually addressing two topics at this point – confronting Russian aggression and the relevance of the Black Sea to Euro-Atlantic security.

I have a list that has developed and the first two people on the list are Pavel Popescu, chair of the defense committee of the Romanian parliament, and then Pavel will be followed by Senator John Cornyn of Texas.

So, Pavel, you are recognized.

POPESCU: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Co-Chairman, Mr. Minister Aurescu. Thank you for putting this into place.

Deputy Secretary General, Ms. Secretary of State, distinguished guests, American friends, welcome to Romania. We are always happy when our American friends are on Romanian soil and we feel that.

Three weeks ago in Washington, I was sitting in a panel with some of our friends and we were discussing and debating about what's going to happen in NATO Madrid summit. There was a lot of tension, and I have to confess we have our fears.

But here we are today, living an historical moment with historical decisions, and I'm saying historical decisions because for all these years we looked to U.S. like to a coach, a coach who's leading a team of like-minded countries – democracies – which are fighting together to protect our common values, and, yes, we were expecting that this time in the NATO Madrid summit the coach to step in and say to each of us what we have to do to set up a plan.

And, finally, we have a plan. We have a plan, which is a great plan which involves this Black Sea region in the Strategic Concept, and we are happy to see that. We are happy to be part of this plan.

I would quote our president, Klaus Iohannis, which said that this summit is one of the most significant allied meetings in recent years in terms of the results for Romania with all the objectives achieved and resolved in the sense that we want, and this is historical for us. It's historical because all over these years, if you will look back, Romania had the constant voice in terms of security and in terms of the common values that we protect together through our strategic partnership.

I want to underline that, that there was no moment in these last years when Romania did not commit to protect the values – the common values – that we have. In terms of legislation from a Romanian parliament perspective, we are happy to create legislation which is strengthening our partnership in this region.

We are happy to mirror legislation that we have back in the U.S. House of Representatives. We are happy to work with you in order to protect our common values.

I want to thank you, dear friends, to all of you for being today here. I want to thank the United States of America as being our coach, as taking the lead as usually, and setting up this plan. Now we need to follow it.

We need to follow this plan. We need to enforce it. We need to invest in it. We need to invest in a – with a long-term approach in order to help our friends from Ukraine, in order to discourage the criminal war, Putin, and the Russian invasion.

Thank you very much for understanding that this is a crucial region, the fact that Romania is defending 645 kilometers – more than 400 miles – with Ukraine, the largest – the longest NATO and EU border with Ukraine and 690 kilometers with Moldova, our little sister, which, by the way, it's in the same way happy that you are here with a plan.

Thank you for setting up this plan. Let's follow it together, and nobody – nobody – will break this unity ever.

Thank you.

WICKER: Thank you, Mr. Popescu.

I now recognize Senator John Cornyn of Texas.

CORNYN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's always a pleasure to be with you, and thank you for leading the delegation of members of Congress to this important summit. I also want to express my appreciation to our co-chair, Mr. Aureescu, for leading this discussion.

If Mr. Putin's goal was to weaken NATO, he has been sorely disappointed. If his goal was to divide NATO, he has to be sorely disappointed. If his goal was to keep a member of NATO off of his western border, he will be sorely disappointed.

But there have been, really, a twofold attack on the people of Ukraine, and not just the people of Ukraine, the people of Europe and even Africa. While the rockets and missiles and artillery land on innocent civilians in Ukraine, the Russian war against the global food supply threatens the lives of many more people beyond the territory of Ukraine, who are innocent noncombatants.

Of course, we know Ukraine has defended its port of Odesa by putting mines there, which will – which make it difficult, if not impossible, for Russia to occupy that critical port. But Russia is threatening the ability of Ukraine to export its grains to Europe and Africa and the rest of the world and, in the process, it has become the predominant exporter of grain just as it has the predominant exporter of oil and gas in Europe, and this is really no surprise.

Putin is weaponizing food like he has weaponized energy, and by making so much of Europe dependent on Russian oil and gas, something that is now being transitioned out of but we know takes time and is very difficult, Mr. Putin is now threatening to use the food supply of Ukraine, the breadbasket of Europe, in order to threaten many innocent lives.

Now, since we're here talking about the Black Sea's security issue, we know that our NATO ally in Turkey is in a unique role as the gatekeeper to the Black Sea, and I was encouraged to hear the ambassador's comments about the importance of making sure that this food supply – this supply of grain – is safely escorted out of the ports in Ukraine and through the Black Sea and to its eventual stomachs and mouths of those who need this food.

While we know that Turkey has played a critical role in working with Finland and Sweden to their accession to NATO, another reason I would compliment our friends from Turkey, I do believe that Turkey represents a unique opportunity and one that we would like to work with in providing safe escort for this global food supply out of Ukraine through the Black Sea and to its intended beneficiaries, and I'm sure that if Turkey would do so that the United States and other governments represented here today would work hand in glove with Turkey to make that happen.

I can't think of any more important role for us to play beyond supplying the weapons and the munitions and the airframes, the artillery, and everything that the Ukrainians need in order to defend their sovereignty.

I can't think of anything more important beyond that than making sure that Russia does not benefit from weaponizing the food supply in Ukraine and in Russia and committing atrocities, really, on innocent civilians throughout Europe and Africa.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

WICKER: Thank you, Senator Cornyn.

We are about to take a 15-minute break. At this point, it is – let's do this. Secretary General Geoață will have to leave momentarily. He's going to be recognized for a few remarks.

Again, those of you who wish to speak after the break can notify staff and then after the break my distinguished colleague, His Excellency Bogdan Aurescu, will preside over the second segment. So, Mr. Deputy Secretary General, you're recognized to close this session.

GEOANĂ: Listen, I want to express my appreciation for the intense, emotional, and lucid words of Alex, our Ukrainian colleague, and in NATO and all of us, especially our region – Black Sea countries – we know and we feel the pain and huge sadness and devastation that Russia has inflicted on your nation.

We speak about losses in the Donbas. We speak about military impacts. We see missiles flying over malls and kindergartens. We are also witnessing something which is more profound and even more barbaric, if there is something more barbarian than war itself, is the ethnic cleansing, the deportations of almost 1 million Ukrainians. It's like the gulag memory of Imperial Russia has never disappeared, trying to destroy cultural identity, trying to, basically, wipe off from the occupied territories the memory of Ukrainian national identity.

Sexual violence – rape – is happening on a massive scale, and it's to no surprise to anyone that in The Hague – and Minister Aurescu, who's probably the best professional in terms of international law, will look into that – there is no way in which such atrocious war crimes will ever be forgotten and go unpunished.

Look at the former Yugoslavia. It took years but it happened, in the end.

Now, on a practical side, we fully understand and recognize the need of Ukraine to have even more support from us. We hear that. President Zelensky was, like, always very convincing in the summit. My friend, Oleksii Reznikov, was very convincing in person at the NATO defense ministerial just a few weeks back.

But we decided – and I want to make this clear for our Ukrainian friends – we decided inside NATO, which is an organization that works by consensus, to have, I think, a logical division of labor between NATO – what NATO does as an organization and the package – comprehensive assistance package for Ukraine that we adopted – our leaders adopted is useful to you.

It's about fuel. It's about fighting drones. It's about cyber. It's about resilience, fighting disinformation and the quick transition that NATO is very good at from Soviet-era equipment to NATO Western style equipment. This is not a small feat.

Also on purpose allies decided – it is not Jens Stoltenberg and myself who decide everything in NATO. Allies have the final say. That's how a multinational organization works. That under the U.S. leadership in the Rammstein process, the support – technical support group

for Ukraine that met in NATO HQ just two weeks back will continue to support the speed, the relevance. Secretary Austin speaks of the speed of war, and we know and we are part of that thing, but we are trying to make sure that there is a very fine line. I understand the frustration, I share the frustration, and I know that you mean well because you're fighting for your survival. You're fighting for your land.

But I just wanted to clarify this thing. The fact that NATO is now doing everything as an organization doesn't mean that NATO allies – and 47 – we are now 32, to be, with the great support of Turkey in these last days. But we have 47. There are more than others – Australia, Japan, many others; Switzerland, Israel – many countries that are not NATO members are supporting Ukraine on the military side.

So I just wanted to say that we are with you for the long haul, my dear friend. We are here for you to succeed. And I will need – I'm a Romanian. Nothing will make me happier than to see Ukraine and Republic of Moldova and Georgia part of our European family. Nothing will make me more happy. Nothing will make Europe more complete. Nothing will make the idea of a Europe whole and free a reality and not a slogan. We are with you for the long haul, my dear friend, and thank you for the determination and the talent that you display and you're true – you're speaking truth.

So I just wanted to – not to clarify but just to give this broader vision of what you do. Keep up the good work. We are fully behind you.

WICKER: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary General.

Mr. Foreign Minister, you now have the gavel after our break. When shall we return, sir?

AURESCU: Well, thank you so much, Senator, for co-chairing – for mastering the whole exercise by now, and because we are a quarter to three I suggest that we should reconvene at three sharp and we will continue our very interesting debate on the importance – on the relevance of the Black Sea for the Euro-Atlantic security.

So we have a break now and we'll meet in 15 minutes.

Thank you.

(Recess.)

AURESCU: So, dear colleagues and friends, please take your seats. We are about to begin again.

(Pause.) So dear colleagues, dear friends, please take your – (speaks in a foreign language).

(Pause.) OK. Mr. Chair – (off mic) – moderate the second session of this event, which is dedicated to the relevance of the Black Sea to the Euro-Atlantic security.

But before that, let me acknowledge the fact that the first session was really interesting, and we had a lot of very valid, pertinent points expressed by the various participants. And I think it – I think they also covered, to a large extent, not only the need to respond and the ways to respond to the Russian aggression, which is – which is using the Black Sea as a launch pad, but they have also reflected to a large extent the relevance of the Black Sea for the Euro-Atlantic security.

And I think we cannot really make the difference between, on one hand, the need and the way – the ways and means to respond, and on the other hand the relevance of the Black Sea region. And I think this response, if I – if I can try to summarize it, what I heard – on one hand, can be done by maintaining the European and transatlantic unity, which, together with Ukraine's resistance, as we have heard from our Ukrainian colleagues, has been the major strategic surprise, because the maintainers of transatlantic unity remains crucial in order to ensure that the Russian war ends in a failure for Russia's objectives.

Second, I think it's very important to acknowledge the fact that the challenges in the Black Sea region cannot be met only through cooperation at regional level. It's quite clear that since the effects of the war are not limited to the region, then, of course, the response should not be limited to regional tools. I used to say that what happens in the Black Sea does not stay in the Black Sea. To the contrary, there are major effects worldwide.

So our cooperation should continue in a larger framework of the transatlantic partnership, that includes, of course, on the one hand, NATO. And we have discussed quite a lot already about the NATO summit's deliverables, but also the U.S.-EU partnership. Regional structures like the Bucharest Nine Platform and the Three Seas Initiative and, of course, the bilateral relations between the United States and various other regional allies and partners, including, of course, the Romanian-United States strategic partnership.

Third, I think it's also important in order to respond effectively, to increase the scale and visibility of the U.S. presence in the region. And I'm talking about, of course, military presence. And I welcome once again the announcements which were made during the NATO summit. But it's not just about the military presence, because I think integrating strategy and action across different mutually influencing areas is very important. Russia started a war, which prompted a security crisis.

But at the same time, we have witnessed an energy crisis, an economic crisis, a social crisis, humanitarian crisis, a food crisis. So there are a lot of dimensions. That means that our response should be also cross-cutting, covering the whole spectrum. We are not only speaking about a response which is limited to the security of the response, which is very important. And we have to continue to support Ukraine with all means we have available in that respect. But also, we have to respond to the other effects of this crisis, which I have just mentioned.

And of course, we are – when we are talking about this, we have to take into account also the risks and threats arising from corruption, from authoritarianism, from illiberalism, from disinformation, fake news, and other disruptive forces. And, last but not least, we need to take a

look at the larger picture. Not just the littoral states or riparian states, but also other countries from this region which are very much connected and dependent to what happens in the Black Sea.

I'm talking about the Republic of Moldova, for instance, which deserves and needs our support. And I'm very glad once again to stress the fact that the decision of the European Council to grant candidate status to Ukraine, but also to Republic of Moldova and to also acknowledge Georgia's European perspective, was a historic decision as well. So we are speaking about historic decisions taken not just by NATO during the NATO summit, but also by the European Union.

So now, if we are talking about all these dimensions, let me mention the U.S.-Black Sea strategy, because we have heard about the preparations of this Black Sea strategy for quite some time. I was discussing with Secretary Blinken last November, when I visited Washington, about the Black Sea strategy of the United States. And I have conveyed Romania's preliminary thoughts, which were quite consistent on that.

We are advocating for a multifaceted strategy based on strategic resilience, covering a lot of areas. Beyond – going beyond the military domain to encompass economic and democratic resilience. And we have seen that – what Russia has started is just a confirmation. Because of the multifaceted effects, we need multifaceted responses. So we support a Black Sea – a United States Black Sea strategy covering more aspects than just the military domain.

For instance, we have been advocating for quite some time for two very important projects in the framework of the Three Seas Initiative, which are called Rail-2-Sea and Via Carpathia. Rail-2-Sea is a speed railway connecting Constanța to Gdansk in Poland, which is very relevant for the economic development of this Three Seas Initiative region, but also for military mobility. If we are to move rapidly forces and equipment on the eastern flank, we need such kind of tools. Via Carpathia is a road connecting the north and the south of this region of central Europe, which we also call the three seas region.

So it's important that, for instance, the United States take into account the support of – the support for this – for this project, which are strategically interconnecting the north and the south of this region, including by financial means. So I will not continue with my – with my intervention, but I would like to give the floor to colleagues to continue their – to continue their very interesting presentations. And the first on my list is Representative Richard Hudson. So, sir, you have the floor.

HUDSON: I didn't know which button to push. Thank you very much. And thank you for those excellent remarks. It's really an honor to be here with my colleagues. This is an historic summit, something that we haven't done before. But I believe this is the start of something very important.

You know, I am the chair of the First Committee of the OSCE PA, with a focus on security and politics in Europe. And as we gather in Birmingham, United Kingdom starting tomorrow, this will also be our focus. And so I would ask my dear colleagues here, as you – as

we continue this dialogue today, I would love to have any advice you have, any recommendations you have of what we, as representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, could be doing to more effectively deal with this crisis in Ukraine in the short term, but also as we look at this issue of the future of the Black Sea region. We would love to have your advice as we begin these important discussions.

I think it's important. And we will say very strongly, as a Parliamentary Assembly, that the Russian aggression against Ukraine is absolutely unacceptable. It's brutal. It's one-sided. This war could stop tomorrow if Russia were to stop its aggression against its sovereign neighbor. The Russian aggression against Ukraine is not just about Ukraine, but its broader imperial designs on this entire region. And I think we can't forget that. No country is safe until Russian forces are stopped. And Russia will not stop until Russia is stopped either by its own people internally or by force, as has been said very well today. Russia's atrocities in Ukraine will not stand, and they will not be forgotten. Its campaign of destruction and genocide in Ukraine will forever be a stain on its history. And it underscores the urgency of Russia's defeat in this region.

I'd like to also take this opportunity to say that we, as a United States delegation, strongly support the role that NATO plays in this region and the enhanced presence of NATO forces here. Just yesterday, we visited our Romanian allies, NATO forces, and U.S. personnel based in Constanța. And we can see their high level of readiness and understanding of the growing threat environment here. NATO, frankly, stands ready. The United States and Congress is committed to NATO and Article 5. And we will continue to work with our allies to ensure that no effort is spared to maintain our collective security. In addition, we support Georgia and Ukraine's continued integration into the Euro-Atlantic space. And we will support their NATO membership aspirations.

Thank you, and with that I will yield back.

AURESCU: Thank you so much, Representative, for your very sharp and focused intervention. I cannot but agree with all your remarks, and especially the ones regarding the fact that this crisis is not – is not just about Ukraine. It's about the parameters of the Euro-Atlantic security. And they have also global projections. It is not by accident that we have invited partners across the globe to attend the NATO summit, with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and other likeminded partners sharing the same objectives and concerns, and also sharing the same will to succeed in defending the rules-based international order. And I think we have to do our most and best to make Russia stop this aggression.

And of course, the atrocities need to be punished. And that's why we should support the efforts by international justice to bring to accountability all those who have committed crimes. It is quite clear that Russia is responsible for these atrocities committed on the Ukrainian soil, while those parts of the Ukrainian soil were occupied by Russian troops. But we also have to bring those persons who are responsible for that before justice.

The next speaker on my list is Representative Joe Wilson. Sir, you have the floor.

WILSON: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Director. It's just an honor to be here with you. And I am so grateful that this meeting truly has been an inspiration to me. It's an inspiration to see the unity of the countries of the Black Sea region supporting Ukraine. I've had the opportunity to visit all the countries of the region. My beginning was an election observer in June 1990 in Bulgaria. And to see the dynamic country of Bulgaria come to life. And then it's one on one. That is, that Plovdiv is the sister city of my hometown, Columbia, South Carolina. So one on one, whether – and every way we work together. And then Romania. I'm grateful that we have the – a sister city relationship with Cluj-Napoca. And so it's – Americans are just so pleased to have an opportunity to work with Black Sea countries.

And then I've had the opportunity with Turkey to visit Ankara and Istanbul. I'm grateful to be the co-chair of the Turkish Caucus in Congress, as we work together with the significance of Turkey having been a member of NATO from the beginning, and what a great ally exists. And then Georgia, it was exciting to me to be there to see a joint parachute jump between the troops of the state of Georgia and the Republic of Georgia coming together. And what an extraordinary country. And then Ukraine, I was grateful to be with Congressman Gallego in Kyiv in December. I'd been there previously, but to see the courage of the people of Ukraine, and now people around the world can understand why the Ukrainians deserve support.

Now, sadly, the country I've visited the most of the Black Sea region is Russia, having visited St. Petersburg, Moscow. I am grateful that I've been to Novosibirsk, to Tomsk, to Omsk. Chelyabinsk is the sister city of my hometown. The American people had such high hopes for a positive Russian Federation. And it's just horrifying to see, indeed, the congressman is correct, that – Richard Hudson – that this is a stain on the history of Russia. It needs to be addressed, because the affection that the American people have had for Russia is just inconceivably being impacted by the war criminal Putin and the mass atrocities, even today. I mean, who would imagine? This is the 21st century. And so much should be done better. I yield back. Thank you.

AURESCU: Well, thank you so much for your intervention. Indeed, we all – all of us, we had hoped for a better relationship with Russia. And let me remind you that in the Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon more than 10 years ago, 12 years ago actually, Russia is described as a strategic partner of NATO. But of course, the reality on the ground has forced us to review that assessment.

And that is why, during the negotiations for the new Strategic Concept, which was adopted the day before yesterday in Madrid, we have advocated – and this is what is in the text – that Russia should be described as the most direct threat to the Euro-Atlantic security. And we are saying very clearly that Russia is no longer a partner, and that we will come back to normal relations with Russia only when Russia will fully respect international law. So this is where we are, unfortunately. And I hope that the future will bring us pooling our concerted efforts to real peace and security in this region, and in the world.

My next speaker on my list is Representative August Pfluger. Sir, you have the floor.

PFLUGER: Thank you, to the chairman and the co-chairman for convening this very important and historic summit, to our Romanian friends and colleagues for your incredible hospitality while we visited here, and to our partners and allies for the strength that I believe this summit brings to us. I think that everyone's comments have been right on point with the atrocities and the chaos that Russia has shown the world, and their attempt – and I say it's an attempt – to change the rules-based order – the international order. But I don't think it will be successful in the end.

And I think we have an opportunity that what happens from the Black Sea Summit today, what has happened from the NATO summit recently, what will happen with the OSCE meeting this forthcoming week, will show us the opportunity for partners and allies to come together and to strengthen each other through all of the different instruments of power that we have, whether they be diplomatic or economic, militarily. But as we focus on the Black Sea today, I believe that one of the opportunities that we have is to look – it's been mentioned, the Three Seas Initiative. And to look at how our countries and our partnerships can come together.

And I would just like to say that, as somebody who's served in NATO and recognizes the importance of energy security to our region, that the Black Sea offers an enormous potential for resources to replace those of Russia, to rebuild in a way that uses the resources not just in the Black Sea, but also in Ukraine. My colleague Alex and myself also represent the cities of Odesa – Odesa, Ukraine and Odessa, Texas. As we look forward and balance the priorities that energy security has with it, I think that this is an opportunity for us to show other malign actors, such as China, obviously we're doing the same with Russia, that the rules-based international order will withstand, that it will be strong. And energy security has the potential to do that.

And so I hope that we can come together in this – as a result of this summit to use those resources in a way that provides energy not just to this region, but also to the rest of Europe. And our hearts and our prayers, our thoughts are with Odesa today. And we continue to use these opportunities to learn from each other, but also to support our Ukrainian colleagues and the entire country of Ukraine. And with that, I'll yield back.

AURESCU: Thank you so much, Representative, for your remarks. Indeed, energy security is an issue of the utmost importance for the region. And that is due to the fact that most of the countries in the region are quite dependent on external sources of gas, of oil, of electricity. And I'm glad that Romania is one of the less-dependent countries in the region. And I'm also very glad to see that we are progressing, although with quite some delay, as far as our projects regarding the exploitation of the Black Sea continental shelf of Romania. And from that moment, when we will start the real exploitation – we have already started this year, but – with an American company. But in a few years we will start the substantial exploitation. Then we will be able also to help other countries in the region.

Then I'm very glad that one of the most important dimensions of our strategic partnership with the United States is the civil-nuclear energy component. And out of this cooperation, as you know perhaps, we are working together with the United States to refurbish the two existing reactors that we have and to build two new reactors. So the Cernavoda, the nuclear power plant which is quite close from Constanța, and then to build a small-medium reactor power plant at the

end of this decade. And that would be the first of such kind in Europe. And we are glad that very recently President Biden announced during the G-7 summit \$14 billion U.S. support for developing this project. So indeed, energy is extremely important for the whole region if we take a look at the countries which are very much affected by this dependence on foreign sources.

Then the next speaker on my list is Madam Ana Cătăuță, member of the Romanian Parliament. Madam, you have the floor.

CĂȚĂUȚĂ: Thank you so much, Minister. As a host – as a (certainly ?) informal host, it's very nice to have the Helsinki community here in Romania, and especially in Constanța. I am a member of the Romanian parliament delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and I salute Mr. Wilson. We have met in Vilnius. But I am also the deputy chair of the Pro-America Group in the Romanian Parliament.

And there are three points I want to make, first about the Black Sea security. I think that one important aspect among everything that was discussed here is the fact that we have indeed to see these as a long-term project. I know that now the Black Sea is in the middle of everything, of this turmoil, unfortunately, due to the illegal invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, but we all have to consider and to see the Black Sea as a gateway between multiple regions, and to see Romania as a friend and ally – stable friend and ally of the United States and the region.

My second comment is about Ukraine. We are deeply sorry about what has happened. If there is one good thing out of this is that we saw the Romanian citizens and the Romanian society mobilizing itself, and they have given us an example of solidarity and love for our neighbor. And if there is, let's see, one semi-good part that we should learn from this, it's that our people and our citizens do know how to get together in complicated moments.

My third comment is about the strategic partnership between Romania and the United States. Three days ago we had a declaration in the Romanian Parliament marking this moment, and I am very happy that, with the energy projects and other projects, we are entering in a new stage; in a stage where security is important, continues to be important, but we also focus on the prosperity side. And I think that us, as members of all our parliaments, as representatives of our citizens, we have to work together and make sure that the prosperity side of the strategic partnership is also – is also strengthened.

I am happy that in a couple of days there will be a resolution in the U.S. Congress on this. I think even though it's a symbolic moment, it is a sign that the friendship between our people is growing, and this is very important.

And once again, we are very happy that we have you here in Romania and hope that you will come again. Thank you so much.

AURESCU: Well, thank you so much, Madam. I think the unfortunate events which led to the wave of more than 1.4 million Ukrainian refugees who crossed our borders – which is in fact, really unfortunate – it also brought some good perception about each other. It allowed more people-to-people contacts, and it allowed the Ukrainian friends to see that we have full

understanding for their very unfortunate situation, but at the same – at that same time full support for their needs in time of distress.

The next speaker on – sorry? (Pause.) Yes, the next speaker on my list is Representative Ruben Gallego. So please, you have the floor, sir.

GALLEGO: Thank you. Thank you to my colleagues for being here, and everyone else.

For background, I serve on the Armed Services Committee – my eighth year on the Armed Services Committee. Also I'm the chairman of the Baltic Security Initiative and have traveled to Ukraine, I think, in December right before the war kicked off.

I do want to – just because we have this group called Baltic Security here – I'm sorry, the Black Sea Security Summit, that when we're talking about that, we should also look at the failures of what happened in Ukraine.

What happened in Ukraine is that we – as in the Western world – we were so afraid of escalation that we actually did not arm Ukraine to the point where it could defend itself. And we thought that diplomacy would somehow create deterrence when, in fact, we all should have known better. Certainly, a lot of my colleagues here actually did know better. You cannot trust Russia when it comes to issues of diplomacy because they use that as a tool. And so since we were afraid of escalation, we didn't actually arm Ukraine. And so we were hoping that somehow there would be some de facto trip-wire deterrence which obviously was never going to happen because they are not part of NATO.

And the reason I think we have to continue thinking about that is because now we're talking about how we're going to have a Black Sea security between our NATO partners that are on the Black Sea and the rest of the countries. And the most important thing I think we have to focus on is moving from kind of trip-wire deterrence where we don't believe Russia would invade Bulgaria, Romania, or Turkey because they are part of NATO to where we should assume that they may do a miscalculation and they will do it, largely first by hybrid methods to soften our will to fight or all of our wills to fight, or soften their own country's will to fight.

And the way to do that in my opinion, again, is by deterrence by denial. And when we're thinking about how to arm ourselves and how to work ourselves, we should focus on deterrence by denial so the point where the invader feels that it so harmful for them to make that move that they make the correct calculation that it's not worth it.

Right now, the way that we are postured, it's not deterrence by denial; it's deterrence by trip wire, hoping that, you know, we're going to – hoping that they understand that there are severe consequences if they do that. That opens up way too much miscalculation, and I think it actually puts us in a more likely path to warfare.

And then lastly, I think, now that we have – we see the true scope of the enemy, when we're actually thinking about armaments, and arming ourselves, and arming our allies, we really need to think about this in terms of integrated defense. I mean, not everyone has to have a tank

division, not everyone has to have, you know, good anti-air capabilities. The question is how does that fit into the whole scope of security and the Black Sea. And I think, you know, in the future, our policy makers, our military leaders really should be thinking about that, especially when it comes to how we help each other through our funding mechanisms.

One of the things that I've been working with in terms of the Baltics is trying to help them really have a good concept of what integrated defense works because they're – you know, they're one bump away from being overrun, and I just think that that's something that we really should really think. You want to have depth to our defensive capabilities, and I think one of the things that we made the mistake in Ukraine is we never gave them that depth. They were able to survive because of their ingenuity. They were able to fight back because of their patriotism. But we can't depend on every country being that way, so let's give them that defensive capability to either, A, create the deterrence mechanism to stop Russia, but also, B, should they get into it, they have the depth to actually defend and push back.

So that's – just want to make sure we kind of keep that in mind. Thank you.

AURESCU: Well, thank you so much. I fully agree with your views on deterrence by denial. I think the measures decided during the Madrid Summit are moving in that direction. I think we are making steps towards consolidating the posture on the eastern flank, and the fact that we have, on one hand, balanced the presence with the creation of the battle groups on the whole eastern flank is one step forward. And now we have the perspective of transforming these battle groups into brigade-sized battle groups. This is also very important. Also the fact that these battle groups will have reinforcement forces precisely allotted to each and every country or battle group on the eastern flank. This is also very important to step forward.

And last but not least, the fact that in all these countries we will have prepositioned equipment and ammunition. So this is creating the premises for moving from forward presence to forward defense, which is already mentioned in the summit declaration. So that's why I think this Madrid Summit has taken transformative decisions which will influence the concept, but also the practical approach on the deterrence and defense on the eastern flank for at least the next decade.

So this is the path on which we have to follow, but this of course will require more and more thorough planning, and also a lot of resources that we are willing to allocate, as far as Romania is concerned, and I am glad also that we have a decision on increasing the common budget of the alliance. This is also very important as far as these measures are concerned. But of course we need more resources and more presence on the eastern flank.

So thank you once again, and the next speaker on my list is Ambassador Vlaikov from Bulgaria. Sir, you have the floor.

RADKO: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

It's not prepared speech; it's just reaction on the discussion. I am very, very satisfied because all the arguments which are here are for me very acceptable and very important. In the same time, I want to raise one issue which is for me very important: to learn some lessons.

In year 2013, 2014, the countries from the – the former socialist countries, we warn a lot in this period that Russia will not stop just with Crimea. And now we have excellent reaction in NATO, and the meeting yesterday in Madrid is very important, also in EU with sanctions, et cetera. But we have to learn this lesson that if we started with such approach seven, eight years ago, now Russia will be – could be in absolutely other situation, and we could not come to this war in Ukraine. That's why I rely a lot that our partners in EU and our allies in NATO on first place, they will understand that this format, for example – we nine, which are the countries from the socialist – from former socialist countries – is very important because we have experience. We have very bad experience, and this our experience could be very useful for NATO and for our allies.

And speaking about the lessons we have to learn, the other lesson is that we have more than 10 years a very huge hybrid war from Russia to us, to member states of NATO, and they want first to divide us. And second, in countries which are not so strong like the former socialist countries, they use their traditional activities to destroy these societies, to make chaos, to disappoint the people, for – NATO, for example, I am speaking here also about EU That's why we have to be more united in the reaction for this hybrid war.

You know very well that now we have in Bulgaria a situation from two days ago that we want to expel 70 Russian diplomats – or 70 members of the staff of Russian Embassy and Russian General Consulate, and this is because of their influence in Bulgaria as member state of NATO and EU and of their activities which are not diplomatic activities.

And now you know the reaction of Russia is very strong. We are now in these hours – I'm speaking about today and about these hours – we are on the border that Russia can announce that we don't have more diplomatic relations. And you can understand this is also very important lesson on the example of Bulgaria, but it is lesson for all of us and for countries which are – traditionally they were in Russian sphere, and now when we want to be really independent, really to have our freedom, and to be loyal and active members in NATO, they react on this way. That's why we have to be more involved in that.

Speaking about Black Sea, I fully agree here with the arguments really Black Sea now is one of the most dangerous places in the world – now in this moment and eventually in this future. I fully agree with your concern – absolutely – about this scenario, Odesa and then the connection with Pridnestrovie and so on.

That's why we have to have these lessons in mind from the future – from the past. And now, here on this conference, really to learn that with Russia we have to be united in the relation and approach with them. And I am sure that Bulgaria, together with Turkey and Romania, as member states of NATO, we are absolutely ready for our own support, and in the same time, countries like Ukraine and Georgia, like our future allies, will have to work with you to present

you our solidarity, our support. And I wish the Ukrainian people a lot of success. In the same time, very important to support Moldova and Georgia.

Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

AURESCU: Thank you so much. I am very glad that Bulgaria is such a strong ally and a very good partner of Romania, including in this Black Sea context. And I admire you for the courage displayed while episode that you are, well, going through now with the expulsion of a number of Russian diplomats. I wish you good luck with that. We are standing by you.

The next speaker on my list is Representative Robert Aderholt. Sir, you have the floor.

ADERHOLT: Thank you, Minister. It's great to be here and for this security summit. And as a member of the OSCE I want you to know how much the OSCE is in support of security in this region. But also, to our Ukrainian friends, I want to say how much the support that Ukraine has back in the United States of America. But not only Ukraine, but also this entire region, knowing that it's a very volatile area right now, and I am reminded when I'm back in my constituency, the people who have a great love and a great, just, sympathy for what – a love for Ukraine and this region, and also a great sympathy for what you're currently going through in Ukraine right now with the aggression of Russia.

I'm grateful to be, Mr. Minister, here in Romania. It's great to be here. I've been a friend of Romania for many years, and honored to have received the Order of the Star of Romania from the president. And so that's been an honor for me to have that decoration.

And I was saying earlier that your ambassadors that you send to Washington always do a tremendous job in representing Romania. But we look forward to working with you and the other countries in the region from Bulgaria to Turkey, from all the other – in this entire region – Georgia.

It's so important that the United States do everything we can, and I just want to let you know it's my, really, message here is that the United States of America supports, and not with just the leadership, but the rank-and-file members – rank-and-file people of the United States of America very much are with you during this time and are keeping you in their prayers.

So thank you, and I yield back.

AURESCU: Thank you so much, Representative, for your words of support, and we very much appreciate what you are doing and the support that you are extending in practical terms. We need that support. I think one of the most important issues that we will have to support – and we count very much on you and the colleagues – well, these measures regarding the further reinforcing of the deterrence and defense on the eastern flank should be financed, and then we very much count on you and the other colleagues.

I remember the moment when President Iohannis visited Washington and conferred decorations, including to you. I was accompanying him as his presidential advisor on foreign policy, so it's a very good memory of that moment. Thank you so much.

I don't have now any other colleague on my list, but I would like to once again ask you whether you have any other questions or interventions – any other colleague attending this summit willing to take the floor and address the audience on these very important topics? This is the last chance for doing so.

WICKER: Mr. Chairman, if you would give me a chance to close before you make your final remarks.

AURESCU: So if there is no one else to take the floor from the audience, please, Mr. Chairman, you have the floor.

WICKER: Thank you so much. And I cannot tell you how much this means to the American delegation – the cooperation that we've had from our host nation, from nations around the area. I must salute our U.S. military, not only the Air Force, General, but the Navy who has escorted us, and the Air Force pilots that got us over here. The State Department has been instrumental in coordinating this, and there are a lot of things going on in Europe at the same time, not to mention the NATO summit that just now ended, but also the celebration of our Independence Day, which will be attended by our European friends all over the continent. So I'm acknowledging the help of so many in making this a success.

Before I turn it back to my co-chair – my new, good friend from Romania – let me just emphasize what I think we've known but what we have stressed and perhaps conveyed to other people within the sound of our voices today. The Black Sea area is a pivotal area for the security and the avoidance of war for the next decade or so. It is not only soldiers that are dying now because of the war crimes of Vladimir Putin and his regime, but also civilians. And we now know that, in the very near future, millions of people who are already hungry will move from hunger to starvation because of these actions. And so it's vitally, vitally important that the Black Sea be reopened, at least to this humanitarian effort. And so to the extent that we can work together with our friends around the area and our friends around the Bosphorus to prevent this massive, massive starvation, we need to do that.

Our friend, Alex, has spoken from the heart, and I think pierced our understanding today. This war is hanging in the balance for Ukraine today and for the rest of the world. John Dunne said, if a clod be washed into the sea, Europe is the less. Do not ask – do not send, for the bell tolls. It tolls for Ukraine, but the bell tolls also for the freedom loving democracies that are represented around this table. This war could go either way. Snake Island is good news. There's not so good news from other parts of this conflict.

We have made mistakes in the past by not – as has been pointed out by my dear friend from Arizona – by not allowing Ukraine to defend itself and give them the tools that they needed, and also by not acting on the warnings of those of you around the table who are most affected by the aggression of Russia. Let us decide today that we will join hands, work shoulder

to shoulder together to listen to those warnings and do our best to make sure that these sorts of acts of aggression will not be repeated and that this issue ends successfully, not only for the people of Ukraine, but for all freedom loving nations around the world.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

AURESCU: Well, thank you so much, Senator. Thank you for co-chairing with me this very important event organized here at the Black Sea, which speaks volumes about the importance that we give to this very important region.

And I would like to thank all the participants, for their relevant, substantial contributions to this discussion. And I think this debate and the substance of our discussions brought their own contribution in emphasizing the strategic importance of the Black Sea as it is now already emphasized in the new strategic concept of the alliance. And I think we may conclude that our discussions have emphasized and put into focus, first, of course, the importance of the Black Sea region for the Euro-Atlantic, but also for the global security. This is one of the few geopolitical spots or pivots where the future of the rules-based international order is being determined. And we are speaking here about an importance in practical terms, pragmatic terms which are determined by the reality we are living and we are facing – the challenges and the threats that we are facing. And we have to bring responses which are comprehensive and effective to these challenges.

Second, how important it is to shape and put into practice these responses as part of and in coordination with transatlantic formats, with European Union, with regional formats which are all integrated within the transatlantic framework. We need to enhance the resilience of states, of organizations, of all domains which are affected by this crisis. And we are speaking about security in classical term, but we are speaking about energy, about infrastructure, about economy, about food security, and many other social and economic implications of this war and of the effects which are prompted by the Russian aggression.

We need to speak more with our friends from across the globe, with our friends from North Africa, from Latin America, from other countries which are directly affected, for instance, by the food insecurity, which was created by Russia. We need to explain what is the reality and to help them cope with this challenge. We have to help them build their own resilience to this challenge. This crisis, after the pandemic – which also allowed us to understand better how important it is to sever dependence on third actors which are not like-minded. Well, this emphasized once again how important it is to be, well, not really independent, but at least autonomous from such – from such actors and their malign behavior.

And last but not least, I think it's very important that a dedicated U.S.-Black Sea strategy be shaped, and I think there is a regional expectation in that regard. As far as Romania is concerned, we expect it, and we support it, and we are ready to contribute to it further. We have already contributed, but we need to continue this exercise.

And last but not least, let me make a proposal to you, members of the U.S. Congress. Please think of the possibility of creating a Black Sea caucus in the Congress as a sign of, well,

importance for the Black Sea, which was so, well, eloquently emphasized by this debate that have hosted here very close to the Black Sea.

So once again, let me express my deep appreciation for the way Senator Wicker has chaired, co-chaired this event, and for all the members of the commission for their dedication to our common security and, for course, for their support for the Black Sea region.

Thank you so much.

And we will have one last administrative announcement. It is the press engagement. We will have press statements in a couple of minutes, I think – five to 10 minutes probably. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 4:00 p.m. (UTC+3), the roundtable ended.]