

Speaker: **Lazar Comanescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs**

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*Your excellencies,  
Dear guests and friends,  
Ladies and gentlemen,*

It is a special honor for me to open this Forum of Non Governmental Organizations in the Black Sea region, alongside with the European Commissioner, Mr. Leonard Orban, and the distinguished representative of the United Nations Development Program in Romania, Mr. Jan Sorensen. It is not a simple coincidence that we have organized this Forum today the Black Sea Day.

Please allow me to start by congratulating the civil society in the Black Sea region for its remarkable solidarity and capacity to bring its forces together, at a time when the global geopolitical climate is defined by political turbulences and economic risks that raise serious concerns among leaders and experts alike.

The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has supported and will continue to support any initiative of the civil society that aims at promoting openness, inclusivity and pragmatism, fostering therefore direct benefits for the Black Sea region.

I would also like to salute the involvement of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, an organization that has been active for more than a year in Romania and which, I am convinced, is an already well-known partner of the civil society in the region.

The Black Sea region remains a constant priority for the Romanian foreign policy, in a context where this area, a crossroad between the European, Asian and Middle East cultures, increasingly reveals its strategic value for all regional actors, among which we count, starting with 2007, the European Union as well.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as coordinator of Romania's policies in international cooperation for development, has identified the areas where Romania can share with its partners not only assistance, but also its experience in economic reforms, democratic consolidation, good governance and the rule of law, education, healthcare, infrastructure and environment protection.

Convinced that the states with similar historical evolution trends can benefit from our experience, we have allotted, in 2007 and 2008, a great part of our development assistance budget to beneficiaries from Eastern Europe, Western Balkans and South Caucasus, especially Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Georgia. Building on the substantial bilateral cooperation that we've already developed, we are now looking for new targets in financing regional projects. The Forum being inaugurated today is an excellent opportunity in this respect.

This Forum has been organized in a difficult political context. For the past few months, we have witnessed unwanted regional developments, showing that when not met with appropriate solutions, instability can spread, putting at test the capacities for reaction of the international community.

We are aware of the fact that the East-European countries' motivation for Euro-Atlantic integration should be supported by an extended, deeper EU involvement. Romania has advocated, even before its accession, in favor of an increased EU attention towards the Black Sea region. This has been motivated by EU's direct proximity to this region, whose strategic value, as well as problems related to protracted conflicts, energy transport routes, migration, environment and infrastructure require a more clean-cut approach and enhanced regional cooperation.

EU's response to all these challenges was the formulation of a document of political vision, the Black Sea Synergy, to which I am convinced the EU Commissioner, Mr. Orban will refer in greater detail.

For Romania, the Black Sea Synergy is strongly relevant and promising. Romania supports the Synergy because it is the only format which includes all important actors, both national and multilateral organizations. Civil society was the only dimension included among the objectives of the Synergy, not yet implemented. I express my hope that the high level participation of the European Commission at this forum is the signal of a strong EU contribution to the efforts of the civil society organizations for regional development. The nongovernmental dimension constitutes a major opportunity for the Black Sea Synergy to prove its openness and pragmatism.

That is why I believe in your will and capacity to contribute, as representatives of the civil society, with concrete projects, to the implementation of the Black Sea Synergy.

Civil society in the Black Sea region faces a whole range of problems related to limited funds to a still weak capacity for a decisive push of projects in the present economic and political context. Difficulties also stem in part from the differences in political outlines and interests between the states in the region, or from their varying degrees of cooperation with the European Union and NATO. In certain countries political stability and democratic consolidation still remain aspirations.

We believe civil society is an essential link between governmental policies and social reality. It should be capable to bring strength in dealing with the risks and challenges that each country encounters. Brain drain affects all the countries in the region. Besides the security repercussions, migration also has complex consequences in the field of social and human rights. Protracted conflicts in the region cause problems related to internally displaced persons, especially for the states in the South Caucasus. All these difficult issues confirm our view that we have a shared, strong interest in focusing on security as a key concern of the regional agenda.

It's hard to give a clear assessment of present economic realities or to offer solutions for improving the living standards and for bridging the gap between the EU and the Eastern neighborhood states, especially now, when international financial crises puts at risk the exceptional economic growth, that the region has enjoyed throughout the last decade.

Nevertheless, the economic growth and social development of the Black Sea countries and their European ambitions will, in time, mean less illegal trafficking and organized crime, controlled migration and expanding economic cooperation. Although still remote, such objectives can't be ignored, just as social injustices should not and cannot be ignored.

Actively involved non-governmental organizations need to encourage the implementation of reforms on the way towards market economy, including free initiative and public-private partnerships. We are convinced that promoting European values, protection of human rights, democratic societies, tolerance and inter-cultural dialogue, requires dedicated, massive efforts from the NGOs sector.

I hope that the Forum launched today, bringing together representatives of civic organizations with governmental and private donors, will give us the opportunity to take stock of all the problems of the countries and civil society in the region. This will enable us to make best use of the existing resources and the possibilities of financing offered by the donors.

I wish you good luck in achieving your objectives and I assure you that Romania will further support your regional cooperation projects.

Thank you!

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