

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF NATIONAL SECURITY: YOUTH POLICY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIETAL RESILIENCE IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Abstract. The article examines the social dimension of national security through the prism of youth policy as an instrument for societal resilience in the Black Sea region. Drawing upon NATO's Strategic Concept (2022), the EU Global Strategy (2016), the Strategic Compass (2022) and the youth policy framework of the Council of Europe, the study argues that long term regional stability cannot be ensured solely through military deterrence, but requires resilient societies, characterized by democratic legitimacy, social cohesion and active civic participation. Empirical data on demographic and social trends among young people in Bulgaria are analyzed as structural factors, affecting national resilience. The paper further discusses the strategic implications of establishing a third European Youth Centre in the Black Sea region and outlines policy directions linking youth engagement with broader security architecture.

Keywords: national security; societal resilience; youth policy; Council of Europe; Black Sea region; hybrid threats

Background

The dynamic transformations in the security environment of the wider Black Sea region, accelerated by the war in Ukraine, have brought to the forefront the necessity of 360-degree approach to security. This approach transcends traditional military dimensions and integrates political, economic, energy and social components. This study advances the argument that sustainable regional stability cannot be achieved solely through military deterrence. Rather, it requires the development of resilient societies characterized by democratic legitimacy, institutional trust, social cohesion, and active civic participation.

Drawing upon NATO's Strategic Concept (2022), the European Union's Global Strategy (2016), the Strategic Compass (2022), and the youth policy principles of Council of Europe, including the Declaration of the 10th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth (2025), the paper argues that strategic investments in youth represent a long-term instrument for preventing hybrid interference, democratic erosion, and social fragmentation.

The concept of hybrid threats has become central to contemporary security studies because it reflects the increasingly blurred boundaries between military and non-military forms of conflict.

Rather than relying exclusively on conventional military force, hybrid threats involve the coordinated use of diplomatic, informational, military, economic, cyber and other instruments designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of target states or society while remaining below the threshold of open armed conflict (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016). Within this broader understanding, Hoffman (2010, p.433) defines a hybrid threat as an adversary that "simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular

tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the battlespace to obtain political objectives.”. These approaches are characterized not only by the combination of different instruments of influence but also by their coordinated and adaptive application in pursuit of strategic goals.

From this perspective, the effectiveness of hybrid threats depends not only on the capabilities of the hostile actors but also on the existence of societal vulnerabilities that can be exploited. Structural challenges such as demographic decline, population ageing, emigration, regional disparities, economic insecurity and household indebtedness may weaken social cohesion, reduce public trust in institutions and diminish societal resilience. Consequently, these factors should be understood not only as socio-economic problems but also as potential vectors through which external actors may amplify existing tensions manipulate public perceptions and undermine national security. This perspective provides the theoretical basis for examining demographic and socio-economic processes as elements of Bulgaria’s resilience against hybrid threats.

Within this context, the potential establishment of a European Youth Centre in the Black Sea region is examined as part of a broader architecture of societal resilience and as a strategic opportunity for positioning Bulgaria within the Euro-Atlantic security framework.

1. The Transformed Security Environment and the 360-Degree Approach

The contemporary security environment in the wider Black Sea region is characterized by a disrupted balance of power, transformation of energy and transport corridors, hybrid interference, and intensified geopolitical competition. The war in Ukraine has not only triggered military escalation but has fundamentally reshaped the conceptual frameworks of collective defense and regional security. In response, NATO consolidated the so-called 360-degree approach to security, implying protection against threats from all geographic directions and across all domains – military, cyber, informational, and societal. This approach is embedded within the broader logic of the comprehensive approach, as well as the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, which emphasize institutional coordination and active societal participation.

NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept emphasizes that resilience constitutes both a national and collective responsibility and serves as a foundation of deterrence and defense (NATO, 2022). The document underscores the importance of civic preparedness, the protection of critical infrastructure, and societal resilience as core components of collective security, recognizing that the Alliance’s military capabilities are sustainable only insofar as they are underpinned by resilient institutions, functioning public systems, and cohesive societies capable of withstanding and recovering from multidimensional crisis.

Parallel to this, the European Union has elevated resilience to a central foreign policy principle in the EU Global Strategy (2016), defining it as the capacity of states and societies to withstand and recover from crisis. The Strategic Compass (2022) further develops this perspective through the concept of whole-of-society resilience, emphasizing the importance of democratic institutions, social cohesion, and countering hybrid threats.

Resilient societies, characterized by institutional trust, social integration, and civic engagement, thus emerge as system-forming components of national security. Without them, military capabilities lack long-term sustainability. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of the social dimension into national security thinking reflects the gradual shift from state-centric and predominantly military understanding of security towards broader

human-centered and societal approaches. The evolution from traditional defense paradigms to concepts such as human security and societal security highlights that threats to stability increasingly emerge from internal fragilities as much as from external aggression. In this regard, demographic decline, social inequality, institutional distrust and civic disengagement represent structural vulnerabilities that may be exploited by hostile actor.

The 360-degree approach therefore should not be interpreted solely as a geographical concept, but as a multidimensional governance framework integrating deterrence, crisis management and preventive resilience-building. In the Black Sea context, where kinetic warfare, frozen conflicts, energy dependence and disinformation campaigns intersect, the societal component becomes not supplementary, but foundational.

2. Demographic and Social Trends in Bulgaria as a Security Factor

The National Youth Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 identifies a number of demographic and socio-economic trends that bear direct relevance to societal resilience and long-term national security. Data presented in the Strategy indicate a demographic decline: between 2010 and 2020, the number of young people in Bulgaria decreased by more than 435, 000 (NSI, 2020). The risk of poverty among young people aged 18-24 reaches 27,8% at EU level, while Bulgaria remains among the Member States with the highest risk of social exclusion (Eurostat, 2020). The share of early school leavers in Bulgaria remains around 12-13%, exceeding the EU average (Eurostat, 2021). Among the Roma community, this proportion reaches 67% (FRA, 2016). Young people classified as NEET (not in employment, education, or training) account between 19% and 21% in certain years (NSI, 2021). This group is particularly vulnerable to marginalization, deviant behavior, and external manipulative influences. Social fragmentation, low institutional trust, 73% of young people declare a lack of interest in politics (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2020), and limited participation in volunteering (only 15% through labor-based volunteering) further outline challenges to democratic resilience.

Empirical data from the third wave of the Youth Study Southeast Europe conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2024) in Bulgaria among a representative sample of 750 young people aged 14-29 (IPSOS, CAWI method) confirm the deepening of several concerning tendencies in the context of heightened geopolitical and domestic instability.

Although the survey was not designed to measure susceptibility to hybrid threats or disinformation directly, its findings provide valuable insights into several structural vulnerabilities among young people that may be relevant from the perspective of societal resilience and national security. The following analysis therefore interprets these empirical findings within the broader theoretical framework of hybrid threats outlined above.

Particularly indicative is the sharp increase in emigration intentions. In 2024, 74% of young respondents stated that they consider emigrating to varying degrees, while only 26% declared that they do not intend to leave the country – compared to 61% in 2018 who had no such intentions (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024). The growing proportion of highly qualified young people among potential emigrants intensifies the risk of brain drain and long-term strategic weakening of the country's human capital base.

Problems in the field of education and the labor market also have direct implications for societal resilience. Although 56% of young people consider completing higher education

important, only 21% express satisfaction with the quality of education in Bulgaria. Furthermore, 57% perceive the existence of corruption practices within the education system (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024). Nearly half (48%) of employed young people report that they do not work in their field of specialization, an alarming increase compared to 18% in 2018. These data reveal a structural mismatch between the education system and the labor market, generating frustration, low institutional trust, and economic insecurity.

The study also registers a growing sense of insecurity. Among the leading concerns of young people are the condition of the healthcare system (47%), the risk of war (44%), and climate change (42%). Although 70% believe in a better personal future, only 29% are optimistic about the future of Bulgarian society. This gap between personal optimism and collective pessimism indicates erosion of collective perspective and public trust.

A recent analysis by the Center for the Study of Democracy (2026) further deepens the understanding of institutional vulnerability in Bulgaria by shifting the focus from isolated corruption indicators to systemic patterns of state capture and weakened accountability mechanisms. The report highlights a structural paradox: despite the formal completion of EU-required institutional and regulatory frameworks, governance outcomes remain constrained by entrenched informal networks, limited high-level accountability, and persistent deficits in public trust.

In this context, the concept of state capture is particularly relevant, as it captures the persistence of institutional environments in which formal compliance with democratic and market governance standards coexist with informal concentration of power and influence. The empirical findings of the report indicate that the most critical weakness of the system is not the absence of anti-corruption institution, but the lack of effective sanctioning mechanism at the highest levels of governance, resulting in a sustained erosion of public trust.

This erosion of trust has direct implications for societal resilience. Low institutional confidence, combined with perceptions of systemic corruption and limited accountability, creates fertile ground for the amplification of disinformation narratives and external cognitive influence. In such environments, young people, particularly those exposed to socio economic precarity, educational mismatch, or limited civic participation, become more vulnerable to hybrid influence mechanisms that exploit existing grievances and institutional skepticism.

Therefore, the findings of the Center for the Study of Democracy (2026) provide an important empirical bridge between institutional governance failures and societal-level security vulnerabilities. They reinforce the argument that low institutional trust should not be interpreted solely as a governance issue, but as a structural security factor with direct relevance for cognitive resilience and the broader framework of hybrid threats.

The young people are particularly affected by these dynamics because political socialization trust formation and civic identities are developed precisely during adolescence and early adulthood. In environments characterized by low institutional trust exposure to manipulative narratives may have a stronger long-term impact on democratic attitudes and civic engagement.

An increase in political interest is observed (21% in 2024 compared to 7% in 2018), yet trust in major institutions, including the European Union, has declined (approximately 24

%). Only 15% of young Bulgarians fully identify as Europeans, while 16% do not identify as such at all (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024). Such attitudes may be instrumentalized in the context of external disinformation strategies and hybrid interference.

An additional indicator of social vulnerability is youth indebtedness. In 2025, the Chamber of Private Enforcement Agents reported approximately 120 000 young people subject to debt enforcement procedures related to fast consumer loans. This reflects financial instability and limited economic autonomy during the early stages of the life cycle.

These trends cannot be reduced to purely social problems. They create preconditions for marginalization, institutional erosion, reduced social cohesion, and increased vulnerability to radicalization, populism, and external manipulative campaigns. In this sense, demographic and social processes have direct implications for national security, as they weaken society's capacity to respond sustainably to internal and external crises and constrain the long-term strategic capacity of the state.

The demographic dimension further amplifies these security implications. Bulgaria remains among the fastest shrinking population in the European Union, characterized by negative natural growth and accelerating population aging. The contraction of the working-age population reduces economic productivity, limits fiscal sustainability and constrains defense and public sector recruitment capacities. In long-term strategic terms, demographic decline translates into reduced adaptive capacity of the state.

Youth emigration intensifies this structural challenge. When a significant share of mobile, educated and economically active young citizens consider leaving, the state faces not only labor market shortages, but also a weakening of civic participation, innovation ecosystems and democratic renewal. The security implications are therefore indirect but profound: demographic erosion narrows the pool of societal actors capable of sustaining democratic institutions and national resilience.

Consequently, youth policy must be understood not only as a social integration instrument, but as a demographic and democratic stabilization mechanism contributing to strategic continuity and national sustainability.

3.Social Cohesion and Youth Policy as Determinants of Societal Resilience

In NATO and EU strategic documents, resilience extends beyond infrastructure protection to encompass the capacity of societies to preserve democratic structures and social integrity during crises. This presupposes democratic culture, civic competencies, and institutionalized forms of participation.

Youth policy, in this context, is not a peripheral social sector but a strategic instrument for building long-term societal resilience. The Council of Europe defines youth policy as a strategy implemented by public authorities to provide young people with opportunities and experiences that facilitate their successful integration into society and enable them to be active, responsible citizens and agents of change (Council of Europe, 2015).

A distinctive feature of the Council of Europe model is the co-management system, whereby government representatives and youth organizations participate on an equal footing in policymaking processes (Council of Europe, 2023). This institutionalized participation fosters trust, political legitimacy, and democratic resilience.

The National Youth Strategy similarly emphasizes that young people are not passive recipients of policy but leaders, innovators, and solution-creators at local, national, and global levels. Their vision and competencies are indispensable for building more resilient, just, and modern communities.

In the context of hybrid threats, including disinformation and political polarization, young people constitute both a vulnerable group and a strategic potential and resource. Investments in civic education, media literacy, and democratic engagement function as preventive mechanisms against external interference and internal fragmentation.

Hybrid strategies frequently target cognitive and informational domains, aiming to polarize societies, delegitimize institutions and weaken Euro-Atlantic orientation. Young people, as intensive users of digital platforms and social media environments, are particularly exposed to algorithm-driven disinformation ecosystems. At the same time, they represent a strategic line of defense when equipped with critical thinking skills, media literacy and democratic competencies. Young people should not, however, be regarded as a homogeneous category in terms of societal vulnerability. Findings from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2024) indicate that susceptibility to different forms of external influence varies across socio-economic status, educational background, political engagement and territorial context. Structural vulnerabilities appear particularly pronounced among socially marginalized young people, including those outside employment, education or training (NEETs); politically disengaged youth characterized by low institutional trust and limited civic participation; highly qualified young people expressing strong intentions to emigrate; and respondents from smaller settlements and lower educational backgrounds, who tend to place greater emphasis on security than on individual freedoms. While these findings do not constitute direct evidence of susceptibility to disinformation, they identify structural conditions that may be exploited by external actors through targeted disinformation campaigns, algorithmic amplification and identity-based narratives. These findings should therefore be interpreted as indicators of structural vulnerability rather than as evidence that these groups are inherently more susceptible to disinformation.

Empirical evidence from the Southeast. Europe demonstrates that disinformation narratives often capitalize on social frustration, economic precarity and distrust in institutions. Therefore, strengthening youth participation and institutional dialogue reduces the social resonance of hostile narratives. Civic empowerment operates as a security multiplier, transforming potential vulnerability into resilience capital.

Low institutional trust should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of susceptibility to disinformation. Nevertheless, NATO and EU resilience frameworks identify institutional distrust, political disengagement and weak civic participation as important structural vulnerabilities that may increase the effectiveness of hostile information operation. In this respect, the findings of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2024) survey illustrate how declining confidence in democratic institutions may create favourable conditions for external actors seeking to amplify polarization and undermine democratic resilience.

4.The Black Sea Region and the Strategic Rationale for European Youth Centre

The Black Sea region represents both a zone of intense geopolitical rivalry and a space of potential connectivity. It serves as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, a key component

of energy and transport corridors linking the Caspian basin with European markets, and a region of increased military presence following the war in Ukraine.

In this context, the initiative to establish a third European Youth Centre in Black Sea region acquires clear strategic significance. Paragraph 15 of the Declaration of the 10th Conference of Ministers responsible of Youth (2025), “Young People for Democracy: Youth Perspectives in Action”, invites the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to explore the possibility of establishing such a centre in the region in order to provide space for youth cooperation, capacity building, and democratic engagement.

Currently, the two existing European Youth Centres are located in Strasbourg and Budapest. While they play a crucial role in training and networking youth organizations, they are situated in Central Europe and outside immediate proximity to zones of active conflict or heightened geopolitical tension. A centre in the Black Sea region would expand the geographic and strategic scope of the Council of Europe’s institutional infrastructure while strengthening democratic resilience near a conflict zone.

Bulgaria possesses specific strategic capital in this regard. In 2017, Varna was designated European Youth Capital, mobilizing significant institutional and civic resources and establishing a sustainable youth ecosystem with international visibility. A vision for an international youth centre with regional scope was formulated during that period.

Until June 2026, Varna Municipality is implementing a project to establish a municipal youth centre under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. This national investment creates material and institutional foundations that could be integrated into a broader European architecture. Linking this initiative to the Council of Europe framework would enhance regional youth cooperation and position Bulgaria as a stabilizing factor and bridge within the Black Sea region.

In the context of prolonged regional instability, such an initiative should not be perceived merely as a sectoral youth policy measure, but rather as an integral element of a broader architecture of societal resilience.

Strategically, the establishment of a European Youth Centre in the Black Sea region would institutionalize a permanent platform for democratic capacity-building in proximity to an active conflict zone. Such positioning carries symbolic and geopolitical significance: it would signal the Council of Europe’s long-term commitment to democratic resilience in Southeastern Europe and the wider Black Sea area.

Beyond training activities, the Centre could function as a regional hub for research, early warning on youth radicalization trends, cross-border civil society cooperation, and structured dialogue between policymakers and youth representatives from both EU and non-EU Black Sea region. This would contribute to confidence-building and soft-security stabilization in region marked by fragmented political trajectories.

From a strategic communication perspective, locating such an institution in Bulgaria would strengthen the country’s profile as a normative actor and democratic facilitator within the region, complementing its NATO and EU membership with visible societal engagement leadership.

5. Policy Implications and Strategic Directions

The analysis of the relationship between youth policy, societal resilience, and regional security in the Black Sea region allows for the formulation of several strategic directions derived from the empirical data and institutional frameworks examined in this study.

First, youth policy should be more clearly integrated into national security and resilience strategies. In light of the recognized role of societal resilience in NATO and EU strategic documents, investments in civic education, participation, and youth capacity-building cannot be treated as secondary social expenditures but must be understood as long-term preventive measures against hybrid interference and institutional erosion.

Second, there is a need for a structured framework for youth cooperation in the Black Sea region that combines training, exchange, and joint initiatives in the fields of democratic participation, civic education, media literacy and others. Such a framework could be institutionalized through a potential European Youth Centre in the region.

Third, institutionalized forms of youth participation in strategic planning processes should be strengthened, including consultative mechanisms, joint formats, and the application of the co-management principle developed within the practice of the Council of Europe.

Next, targeted measures addressing youth socio-economic precarity should be incorporated into resilience planning. Reducing NEET rates, improving school-to-work transition mechanism, strengthening vocational training and addressing youth indebtedness are not solely labor market objectives, but strategic investments in social stability. Economic insecurity constitutes fertile ground for radicalization, populist mobilization and external manipulation. Therefore, social policy instruments and security strategy must be coordinated rather than compartmentalized.

Finally, closer interaction between educational, youth, and defense institutions is necessary in the fields of civic resilience, civic education, media literacy, and critical thinking, which constitute essential components of the contemporary whole-of-society approach. Particular attention should be paid to those categories of young people whose structural vulnerabilities increase their exposure to hybrid influence, including socially marginalized youth, politically disengaged young people and communities experiencing low levels of institutional trust. Tailored resilience-building measures are likely to be more effective than universal approaches, given the heterogeneous nature of youth vulnerabilities.

Conclusions and recapitulations

The study demonstrates that the social dimension of national security is gaining increasing strategic relevance within the transformed security environment of the Black Sea region. Within the 360-degree security framework, societal resilience functions as a system-forming factor that complements and reinforces military capabilities.

Empirical evidence reveals both risk and potential among young people in Bulgaria. Emigration intentions, institutional distrust, and social insecurity generate vulnerabilities to hybrid interference. Simultaneously, personal optimism and rising political interest indicate potential for democratic renewal.

Investments in youth policy therefore represent a strategic instrument for strengthening democratic resilience and reducing vulnerability to external influence. In this context the establishment of a European Youth Centre in the Black Sea region should be

understood as a part of a broader architecture of societal resilience and as a strategic opportunity for Bulgaria. The Black Sea region remains a space of geopolitical tensions but also of potential cooperation. Integrating the social dimension into the strategic security framework through youth engagement would contribute to sustainable regional stability.

The empirical findings presented in this study identify structural conditions that may increase societal vulnerability and therefore require targeted resilience-building policies. The findings of the study confirm that resilience is not an abstract policy concept, but a measurable societal capacity rooted in demographic sustainability, institutional trust and civic engagement. The Bulgarian case illustrates how social trends may either erode or reinforce national security architecture, depending on policy responses.

In the Black Sea region, where hard security dynamics dominate strategic discourse, incorporating youth policy into security planning broadens the analytical lens and introduces a preventive time horizon. Sustainable deterrence in the twenty-first century requires not only military preparedness but socially cohesive, democratically confident and civically active generations capable of resisting polarization and manipulation.

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