

VOLUNTARY RESERVE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR SOCIAL COHESION AND EXTENDED NATIONAL RESILIENCE IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Abstract: *In the contemporary security environment of the Black Sea region, characterised by extreme volatility, hybrid warfare and the persistent threat of a high-intensity conflict, the traditional paradigms of national defence are undergoing a fundamental transformation. As the Euro-Atlantic community navigates the complex geopolitical landscape of 2026, the concept of resilience has gone beyond military reinforcement to adopt a comprehensive “Whole-of-Society” approach. This article provides an exhaustive analysis of the voluntary reserve as an essential tool for promoting social cohesion and improving Extended National Resilience capabilities. Anchored in the legislative progress of Law no. 5/2026 of Romania and aligned with the strategic imperatives of NATO’s policy MC 0441/3 and the European Union Strategy for Preparedness, the research argues that a modernised voluntary reserve serves as a critical link between the armed forces and the civilian population. Through a multidimensional examination of threat vectors – from cognitive subversion to critical infrastructure sabotage – and a comparative analysis of reserve models in Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria, this report demonstrates that voluntary reserve is not just a force multiplier for combat operations, but a strategic necessity for democratic stability. By transforming citizens from passive consumers of security into active producers of defence, the voluntary reserve mitigates the vulnerabilities of societal polarisation and infrastructural fragility, thereby strengthening the “Extended National Resilience” (also known in NATO terminology as “multi-layered resilience”) needed to withstand the systemic shocks of the 21st century.*

Keywords: *Voluntary Reserve; Social cohesion; Civil Defence; Black Sea Security; Resilience; Law 5/2026; Hybrid Warfare; The whole society; NATO MC 0441/3.*

Introduction

The geopolitical architecture of the Black Sea region has evolved into a strategic melting pot, serving as the main fault line between Euro-Atlantic stability and revisionist aggression. As we move into 2026, the security environment is defined not only by the threat of a conventional confrontation, but also by a pervasive conflict, in several areas, in the “grey zone”, which targets the cognitive, economic and infrastructural fabric of democratic societies.

Lessons identified from the protracted conflict in Ukraine and growing hybrid threats along the Pontic coastline have catalysed a doctrinal renaissance within NATO and the EU. It is important to note that a lesson is considered “learned” only when it is implemented into doctrine or operationalised into a specific capability. This renaissance recognises that national security can no longer be the exclusive remit of permanent professional armies. The magnitude of modern threats calls for a radical expansion of the defence paradigm toward “Extended National Resilience”. The research methodology employed in this article involves the evaluation of available databases and information, followed by a multidimensional analysis of legislative influence on political and military

mentalities. A limitation of this research is the reliance on early-stage implementation data for Law 5/2026, which may evolve as the program matures.

In this context, the voluntary reserve becomes an indispensable strategic asset.

Reimagined as the essential bridge between the military establishment and civil society, the voluntary reserve provides surge capacity for national defence while acting as a mechanism for social cohesion. By integrating citizens with diverse expertise, the state effectively “deputizes” the resilience of the private sector to counter hybrid warfare. This analysis explores how these instruments operationalise the voluntary reserve as a pillar of Extended National Resilience in the 21st century.

1. Geostrategic imperative: Black Sea security environment in 2026

To understand the need for a robust voluntary reserve, we must first look at the threat landscape of 2026. The distinction between peace and war has eroded, as adversaries use all instruments of national power, including conventional and unconventional methods of struggle. Intelligence assessments from 2024-2025 indicate a four-fold increase in sabotage incidents targeting logistics hubs and energy networks across Europe.

The most insidious vector is information. Opponents use cognitive warfare to target the population’s “will to resist”. In this environment, an isolated army in the barracks is structurally disadvantaged. The voluntary reserve, composed of trusted community members, serves as a credible intermediary capable of dismantling disinformation at the local level. Furthermore, modern defence depends on privately owned infrastructure. NATO documents show that 90% of military transport depends on commercial assets. Protecting distributed assets, such as port facilities in Constanța, requires a ubiquitous security presence (CCDCOE 2025).

Regarding maritime insecurity and the “grey zone”, the maritime domain remains disputed. Floating sea mines and electronic warfare continue to pose lethal threats to navigation and economic stability. A reserve with specialised maritime capabilities is essential for expanding maritime awareness without diverting high-value ships from deterrence missions. Euro-Atlantic doctrine has shifted to “Extended National Resilience”, a proactive ability to anticipate and absorb shocks. This is aligned with NATO’s Article 3 and the EU’s “Preparedness Union”. The voluntary reserve is the structural embodiment of this permeability, transforming resilience from rhetoric into a deployable capability.

2. Theoretical frameworks: social cohesion and civil-military relations

The voluntary reserve force is not just a *labour* buffer, but a sociological tool that renegotiates the social contract. In defining social cohesion in a security context, it is critical to recognise that social cohesion – trust and solidarity within a community – is a critical variable of national power. Research indicates that participation in collective action increases social trust (Journal of International Affairs 2025). Voluntary military service amplifies this; a voluntary reserve unit that brings together diverse professionals creates a microcosm of national unity (“emerging social cohesion”) that transcends class divisions and strengthens resistance to subversion (Royal Society 2024).

The perspective of the reservist as “twice the citizen”, a concept famously attributed to Winston Churchill, highlights their dual identity (Leatherneck 1968). Occupying a liminal space between military discipline and civilian expertise, the reservist acts as a binder between these worlds. This liaison function is vital for bridging the “civil-military gap”, making defence visible in everyday life and reinforcing the principle that citizens are the ultimate guardians of freedom.

Acting as a “*whole-of-society*” interface, the voluntary reserve allows the military to access the “*cognitive surplus*” of the civilian sector – expertise in cyber, logistics, or the medical field – without the prohibitive costs of permanent retention (CIMIC COE 2024). This permeability ensures that the defence establishment can quickly integrate private sector innovations.

3. NATO and EU political landscape: The strategic engine

The revitalisation of reserves is driven by coordinated supranational frameworks that increase collective deterrence. NATO's new reserve policy (MC 0441/3), approved at the end of 2024, MC 0441/3 represents a paradigm shift, recognising reserves as a critical component of combat capability. Key principles include: Deterrence and Defence – Reserves provide the strategic depth needed for Article 5 operations; Social value – Explicitly links reserves to strengthening the military-population bond and Total Force Concept – Requires the seamless integration of active and spare components into the planning.

In the context of the Union Strategy for EU Preparedness, the EU strategy converges with NATO's Seven Core Requirements for National Resilience, particularly in managing casualties and ensuring resilient transport. Voluntary reserve units are uniquely positioned to respond locally to these requirements, ensuring that populations can sustain themselves for at least 72 hours during crises (European Commission 2025).

4. Legislative evolution in Romania: The impact of Law 5/2026

Apart from the existing Law No. 270/2015 for the Voluntary Reserve Corps, Romania has put these concepts into practice through Law No. 5/2026. Through the “Soldier/Volunteer Rank in Term” Program, the basic innovation is the newly established program in peacetime (Art. 13[^]1), targeting citizens aged 18 to 35.

- Structure: A fixed period of basic military training of up to four months, designed to minimise career disruption.
- Incentives: A completion bonus of three average national gross salaries acting as a strong economic “pull factor”.
- Result: Graduates are automatically enrolled in the Operational Reserve, creating a young and dynamic group of trained citizens.

Furthermore, regarding mobilisation protocols and the diaspora, Law 5/2026 affirms extraterritorial influence. Article 8[^]1 provides that volunteer reservists temporarily abroad must report within 15 calendar days from notification during mobilisation. Although a logistical challenge, this reinforces the universality of the obligation to defend.

By redefining the reserve structure, the law divides the reserve into the Operational Reserve (highly trained volunteers) and the General Reserve (for mass mobilisation). This structure allows for scalable responses without the political cost of general mobilisation.

5. Voluntary reserve as a social instrument

The social impact of the voluntary reserve depends on its operational culture.

The social impact depends on operational culture. The “Volunteer Reservist Guide” adopts a modular training approach (Module 1 – Basic knowledge; Module 2 – Preparation and conduct of actions). This efficiency allows for the recognition of civilian abilities, maximising the usefulness of the “Whole-of-Society” approach. Volunteer reservists act as ambassadors, normalising military presence. By applying job protection (Art. 46 of Law 5/2026), the state aligns private sector interests with national security.

6. Regional benchmarking

Models of reserve forces in the Black Sea region (see Table no. 1) provide key lessons for operationalisation.

Table no. 1: Comparative analysis of reserve force models in the Black Sea region
Source: Adapted from comparative regional data (2026).

Feature	Ukraine (TDF)	Turkey (Yedek Subay)	Bulgaria (mixed)	Romania (Law 5/2026)
Structure	Regional Brigades; decentralised ordering.	Centralised; The “Reserve Officer” route for graduates.	Mixed volunteer/mobilisation; demographic difficulties.	Hybrid: “Soldier/Volunteer Rank in term” (4 months) + Contracted Reserve.
Recruitment	A high volunteering driven by existential threats.	On a recruitment basis; High social prestige.	Reduced number of volunteers; weak stimulant.	Incentive-based (3 salaries); targets young people (18-35).
Integration	Total: Units defend their own communities.	Disaster Response Integration (AFAD).	Limited; separate from civil society.	Increasing the synergy of the “whole-of-society” through a new law.
Key lesson	Location: The house defence is a force multiplier.	Scale: Mass is essential for disaster response.	Adaptability: Rigid systems fail; flexibility is key.	Stimulation: Economic realism is necessary in peacetime.

7. Operational scenarios: Reserve forces in action

To visualise the usefulness of the reserve forces in 2026, we analyse three scenarios:

- Hybrid infrastructure sabotage: Specialised IT reservists assist in restoring the system while operational units secure physical stations.
- Mass casualty response: Medical and logistics reservists manage triage within a military command framework (NATO Basic Requirement 5).
- Support for host nations: Reservists secure transit routes for the NATO Response Force, ensuring Allied mobility while minimising friction with the local population.

Conclusions

The trajectory of the Black Sea region indicates that challenges will be defined by ambiguity and hybridity. In this context, the voluntary reserve is a structural necessity. The introduction of Law 5/2026 marks a significant evolution over the previous Law 270/2015 on the Status of Voluntary Reservists, which faced limitations in attractiveness and mass mobilisation capacity. Law 5/2026 addresses these gaps by providing robust financial incentives and a younger, more agile Operational Reserve pool.

Critical conclusions include: Legislative agility – Incentives demonstrate that patriotism must be backed by economic reality; Social cohesion – Reserves are the engine of the “Whole-of-Society” approach, immunising society against cognitive warfare; Regional synchronisation – Resilience depends on interoperability and common training standards.

The voluntary reserve remains proof of the enduring power of the citizen-soldier, ensuring that society remains united and resilient in the face of all challenges.

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