



With the contribution of



Scientific Advisor



Balkans and Black Sea Perspectives 2026

Democratic Resilience, AI, and Cognitive Security

High-Level Conference

*Organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation (NDCF),
in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (D.G.U.E.), International Council on
Environmental Economics and Development (ICEED), Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo,
Fondazione CSF, and the NATO Defense College (NDC)*

Rome, 26 May 2026

Venue: Starhotels Metropole (Via Principe Amedeo, 3, 00185)

The **Western Balkans and the wider Black Sea region** remain at the centre of geopolitical attention, as Russia's war in Ukraine and shifting global dynamics reshape the European security landscape, exposing persistent political and institutional fragilities. At the same time, the information space has become a growing battleground for influence, with disinformation campaigns, hybrid threats and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) placing increasing pressure on democratic institutions and public trust across the region.

These activities are often amplified through coordinated narratives, digital platforms and influence networks. The rapid advancement of AI is accelerating these trends, enabling large-scale, sophisticated content that is cheaper to produce and harder to detect. NATO and the EU are increasingly recognising the scale of the challenge, stepping up coordination and resilience efforts

across the cyber and information domains. As NATO's top military commander recently warned, the Alliance must be prepared to respond to a growing number of hybrid threats.

Against this backdrop, the High-Level Conference “*Balkans and Black Sea Perspectives 2026*” will bring together 20 international experts at the Starhotels Metropole Hotel in Rome to explore how AI, disinformation and hybrid threats are reshaping regional security dynamics in the region.

The event will open with welcome remarks by **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo** (President, NATO Defense College Foundation), **Catherine Bourdès** (Director, Academic Plans, Policy and Engagement, NATO Defense College), **Nicolò Russo Perez** (Director, Fondazione CSF), **Divya Gupta** (Chief of Executive Board and Committee, ICEED), and **Sara Minucci** (Senior Programme Officer, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo).

The afternoon session will be introduced by **Bojana Zorić** (Policy Analyst for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood, EU Institute for Security Studies), who will share key takeaways from a closed-door morning workshop that brought together young professionals, working across information and cyber security, in a discussion led by senior experts.

The first session, chaired by **Tatjana Đorđević** (Journalist and Writer, former Al Jazeera Balkans), will explore the evolving strategic approaches of NATO and the European Union in the region. The discussion will feature contributions from **Christian Schmidt** (High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, OHR), **Marco Criscuolo** (Director Strategy and Policy for Cyber, Cyber and Digital Transformation Division, NATO HQ), **Zoran Jolevski** (former Minister of Defence and former Ambassador of North Macedonia), **Elene Kintsurashvili** (Senior Program Coordinator, Transatlantic Security Team, German Marshall Fund), and **Harun Karčić** (Vice-Chairman, Sarajevo Security Conference).

This will be followed by a keynote speech delivered by **Valentina Superti** (Director, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, Western Balkans, European Commission).

The second session, chaired by **Dardan Koçani** (Field Coordinator for Kosovo; Analyst on Organised Crime and Security, GI-TOC), will focus on the impact and risks of emerging technologies on the information environment and regional security. Speakers will include **Edoardo Giglio** (EU Digital & Cyber Policy Leader, Defense, Security & Justice Industry Leader, Deloitte), **Solomon Passy** (Founding President, Atlantic Club of Bulgaria), **Miroslav Sazdovski** (Senior Analyst, Western Balkans, Hybrid CoE), **Katarína Klingová** (Research Lead, Centre for Democracy & Resilience, GLOBSEC), and **Michele Empler** (PhD Candidate, University of Tuscia; Vice-Coordinator, Algo-Freedom Society).

Finally, **Thomas Botzios** (Head of the Adriatic and Balkans Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation) will deliver the closing remarks.

The event will be conducted entirely in **English** and will also be **livestreamed on Youtube**. Further details can be found in the attached programme.

PARTICIPATION: please write to ndcf.balkanperspectives26@gmail.com (Rossella Citro, +39 338 207 4805) specifying whether you wish to attend in person or remotely.

INTERVIEWS: when registering for the event, please indicate any interest in interviewing one or more speakers by **Friday, 22 May**. We will inform the relevant speakers and arrange interviews accordingly.

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