PRESS RELEASE

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BLACK SEA BEYWATCH

Black Sea Blue Economy Youth and Women

On Tuesday 20 October 2026, the **International Centre for Black Sea Studies** (ICBSS) in cooperation with the Department of Shipping, Trade and Transport of the University of the Aegean under the coordination of Dr. Maria B. Lekakou, organised successfully a Webinar with title, **"BLACK SEA BEYWATCH – Black Sea Blue Economy Youth and Women"**.

Organised within the framework of the Hellenic BSEC Chairmanship-in-Office (1.7 - 31.12.2026), and in the context of the European Maritime Day (EMD) in My Country, the webinar built on the results of the SEA (CI)-TIES (Strengthening Economic Alliances in the wider Black Sea region Through International Engagement & Shipping) event that took place in Chios, Greece, in 2025, focusing on women, youth, city diplomacy, skills, and new technologies in the scope of the port cities ecosystems.

More than **60 participants** joined the online event that provided a platform for stakeholders from academia, business, and policy to explore the connection between women, youth, blue skills, technological advancement, and city diplomacy, and their influence, both individual and combined, on the Blue Economy of the EU and the wider Black Sea Region.

The webinar was moderated by **Mr. Stavros Kalognomos**, PhD Candidate, Researcher, Research in Shipping and Ports Laboratory (RE.SHI.P.), Department of Shipping, Trade and Transport, School of Business of the University of the Aegean (Greece) and **Ms. Elpida Besi**, Junior Project Manager at the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS).

On behalf of the organisers, **Dr. Maria B. Lekakou,** Professor in Maritime Economics, Department of Shipping, Trade and Transport, School of Business, University of the Aegean (Greece), opened the webinar sharing the outcomes of ECONSHIP 2026, an event co-organised by the University of the Aegean in Chios (Greece). She stressed that in an increasingly complex maritime landscape, the demand for efficient and effective strategies has never been greater and that ECONSHIP 2026 served as a premier European forum for researchers, academics, and practitioners to address the regulatory, economic, and technological shifts currently transforming the industry. Dr. Lekakou linked the event to the Regional Partnership for Blue Skills in EUSAIR, in which both the University of the Aegean and the ICBSS participate, and how both organisations could act as a bridge to bring in the Adriatic-Ionian expertise and best practices to the wider Black Sea region. Finally, she stressed the importance of knowledge and

skills that people will need as technologies, expectations and professional roles evolve. Technical expertise remains essential, alongside the ability to collaborate, evaluate information, communicate across disciplines and understand the wider impact of a decision.

ICBSS Director General, **Mr. Georgios Mitrakos** in his opening speech highlighted the pivotal roles that shipping and maritime transport continue to play in the economies of the coastal and insular states of the wider Black Sea region and the European Union. He noted that the long-term value of the Blue Economy will be determined by its impact on the economy, the opportunities it creates, the empowerment it develops and the sustainability it delivers for future generations. Mr. Mitrakos underlined the role of cooperation between the University of the Aegean and the ICBSS in providing a valuable opportunity to bring together institutional and academic perspectives and facilitate exchanges focusing on the significant potential and contributions of women and youth to local governance and entrepreneurship for sustainable port cities in the wider Black Sea region.

The first panel on **'The Importance of City Diplomacy in Blue Economy and the Added Value of Women in Multilevel Governance'** consisted of lead project experts that shared insights on women's participation in Blue Economy sectors, women's role in decision-making processes and the potential of port cities in Blue Economy development.

Keynote speech was delivered by **Ms. Teona Dzneladze**, Head of International Relations and Students Services Center, Batumi State Maritime Academy (Georgia), representing **Women in Maritime Association (WIMA) Europe**, who provided insights into how maritime education and the recently established WIMA Europe can contribute to city diplomacy, focusing on port cities.

Dr. Eudokia Balamou, Lead Partner, Larnaca and Famagusta Districts Development Agency (Cyprus), and **Dr. Madalina Davidescu**, Professor at the "Ion Ionescu de la Brad" University of Life Sciences (IULS), Iasi (Romania), presented **Women on Board**, a project under the Interreg Europe Programme, which aims to enhance women's representation in the Blue Economy. Dr. Balamou presented the key findings of the 'Gender Parity in the Blue Economy Synthesis Report', developed under Women on Board, and Dr. Davidescu analysed the benefits of the Blue Economy to inland areas by presenting the case of the Municipality of Iasi.

Ms. Io CHATZIVARYTI, Senior EU Project Expert for the Mayor of Kavala (Greece), URBACT Lead Expert, Urban Development & Territorial Cooperation Specialist, Founder of URBAN SPARK Consulting Firm, shared her insights on how the port city of Kavala serves as a space for active citizen engagement, as well as on relevant initiatives promoting the role of women in multilevel governance and decision-making processes.

Ms. Laurence MARTIN, Secretary General, Federazione del Mare, Lead Partner of the WINBLUE Project, presented WINBLUE and WIN-BIG, two projects focused on mainstreaming gender equality in the blue economy.

The second panel on **'Emerging Skills for Students and Young Professionals Interested in Blue Economy Sectors in the Port Cities of the Wider Black Sea Region'** consisted of academic experts and institutional representatives, who argued on the importance of involvement of youth, communities, institutions and businesses in developing blue skills, as well as its benefits to Blue Economy.

On behalf of the European Commission, keynote speaker **Ms. Andreea Strachinescu-Olteanu**, Head of Unit, Maritime innovation, Marine Knowledge and Investment (MARE.A.1), Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE), highlighted the challenges that Blue Economy is currently facing, and presented EU initiatives for blue skills, encompassing both policy and project aspects. She also underlined the means and opportunities that various stakeholders could benefit from engaging.

Prof. Dr. Theocharis Tsoutsos, Project Coordinator, Renewable and Sustainable Energy Systems Lab, Technical University of Crete (Greece) noted the existence of a significant gap between academic education/training and real industry needs and stressed that certification is key for new qualifications in maritime and future green jobs.

Dr. Natasa Vaidianu, Associate Professor, Ovidius University of Constanta, University of Bucharest (Romania), Co-leader of WG3 (Port cities and coastal communities), RethinkBlue COST Action, emphasised the importance of balancing growth with protection, which can be achieved through green port strategies, MSP, multi-use design, ICZM, and nature-based solutions. She also underlined the lack of experts to implement these strategies, in terms of systems and trade-offs, assess environmental, social and cumulative impacts, negotiate, monitor, and consistently evaluate who benefits and who bears the costs.

Ms. Alexandra Petrova, PhD Student, New Bulgarian University, Department of Administration and Management, Tourism section, Student Board member, European Reform University Alliance (ERUA) underscored the importance of universities and student-driven sustainability initiatives in European Universities Alliances. As an example, she presented Blue Commission, a student-led collaborative group within ERUA that works to share knowledge, address climate challenges, and develop concrete initiatives such as workshops, talks, and sustainability projects on campuses.

Ms. Eirini Apazoglou, Executive Officer at European Marine Research Network (EuroMarine) emphasised the significance of involvement in pan-European networks and coalitions. She noted that collaborating with experts to gain guidance on leveraging blue skills can facilitate the entry of students and young professionals into the Blue Economy.

The third panel titled **'New Technologies at the Service of the Port Cities Ecosystems: How to Embrace Technological Advancement?'** consisted of experts from academia, industry, and administration, who explored the influence of technological advancement in energy transition while connecting new technologies to the service of the port cities' ecosystems.

Keynote speaker **Prof. Carola Hein**, PACT COST Action Chair, Delft University of Technology (The Netherlands), emphasised the necessity of adopting a comprehensive, inclusive strategy for port city development, grounded in ecosystem values, encompassing various forms of capital: natural, cultural, social, human, industrial and creative. She explained that new governance constellations will have to be based on shared mindsets, a deeper understanding of the interests of local communities, and a set of collaborative principles.

Ms. Irina Kircheva, Project Expert at Marine Cluster Bulgaria (MCB), described the role and contribution of Marine Cluster Bulgaria to the unification of the efforts of stakeholders from the sectors of Blue Economy and local authorities to achieve sustainable economic growth, improving the quality of the human and innovation potential, and the promotion and integration of the Bulgarian Blue Economy into the international maritime economic space. Ms. Kircheva explained how the MCB supports the implementation of the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea, shared examples of EU-funded projects relevant to the webinar, and invited all stakeholders participate in the newly launched EIT Water.

Prof. Dr. Gökçe Çiçek Ceyhun, Project Lead Partner, Bursa Technical University (Türkiye), presented the "Blue Port Index for BSEC Countries (Blue for Black)" project, a regional initiative designed to evaluate and improve the environmental and social performance of ports across the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) region, and stressed that the Blue Port Index can benefit BSEC countries differently, by ensuring ecosystem protection, attracting investments, and encouraging ports to comply with national and international environmental regulations.

Dr. Delia Dimitriu, Smarter Mobility Solutions Ltd. (United Kingdom), underlined that a smart port combines connectivity, resilience, and inclusion and that technology succeeds when businesses, citizens and the environment can measure the benefit. Dr. Dimitriu stressed that efficiency, resilience, decarbonisation, and public legitimacy are the four imperative factors that make transformation urgent. Technology must address operational and public outcomes.

Ms. Irina Cozma, Senior Policy Advisor, Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration (Romania) and Co-Coordinator of Priority Area 3 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) reminded that the Danube and the Black Sea are not separate geographical spaces, and when talking about Blue Economy we should not forget the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) perspective. She made a particular reference to the Danube Network for Urban Regeneration, Rural Development and Innovation, a cross-sectoral platform connecting Smart Specialisation, Blue Economy, and place-based development, and invited participants to learn more about the EUSDR and its PA 3 (Culture & Tourism), and join the upcoming 15th EUSDR Annual Forum, in Sofia, on 3-4 November 2026.

Key takeaways:

- Maritime associations can play a significant role in empowering women's representation in multilevel governance.

- Women's participation in the Blue Economy should be promoted both quantitatively and qualitatively. This means not only recruiting more women, but also adopting and implementing gender-sensitive measures.
- The development of the Blue Economy has the potential to generate significant benefits, not only for the local economies of coastal areas, but also for those of inland areas across the wider Black Sea region.
- Port cities should serve as platforms for bottom-up, co-designing decision-making processes within the context of promoting their sustainable transition.
- To achieve effective women's representation in the Blue Economy sectors, it is necessary to identify gaps and challenges, provide reskilling and upskilling opportunities, develop interregional knowledge transfer networks and translate all the gender-sensitive ideas into policy action.
- The Blue Economy represents a transformative approach to managing ocean resources, and fostering sustainable economic growth while ensuring environmental integrity.
- Universities and research centres in the EU should prioritise skills that are aligned with the BlueComp competence framework, the European Union's flagship competence framework for the Blue Economy (marine and maritime sectors).
- Certification is key for new qualifications in maritime and future green jobs.
- The real gaps sit at the interfaces: between port and city, land and sea, economy and nature. The most valuable people are hybrid profiles, combining digital, sustainability and people skills.
- By advancing ocean literacy, skills, and public engagement, through participation in European networks and coalitions, stakeholders can contribute to the implementation of the European Ocean Pact.
- Need to embrace a holistic, inclusive approach to port city development, based on ecosystems values, embedded in various layers of capital: natural, cultural, social, human, industrial, and creative.
- Stimulating career development in the Blue Economy sectors and institutional dialogue are key for sustainable blue economy.
- A smart port combines connectivity, resilience and inclusion. Technology succeeds when businesses, citizens and the environment can measure the benefit.

For more information about the webinar, please visit https://icbss.org/event/webinar-beywatch-black-sea-blue-economy-youth-and-women-watch/

For more information about the ICBSS, please visit https://icbss.org/

About the ICBSS: The International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) was founded in 1998 as a non-profit organisation. It has since fulfilled a dual function. On the one hand, it is an independent research and training institution focusing on the wider Black Sea region. On the other hand, it is a related body of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), and its think-tank. Thus, the ICBSS pursues applied, policy-oriented research, promotes knowledge on the Black Sea region both within and outside its boundaries, and offers policy advice with the aim of fostering multilateral cooperation among the BSEC member states as well as with their international partners.