

Ministers, Governor, Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome. And thank you to our Georgian friends for hosting this event.

Today is about building bridges. Between different levels of government. Between the public and the private sector. Between countries.

It's about sowing the seeds for a bustling, dynamic, *sustainable* blue economy. Right here in Batumi – and all along the Black Sea coast.

In the European Union, we have learned that there are two conditions for success: a spirit of collaboration and a healthy marine environment.

Oil spills or floating islands of waste affect *all* surrounding countries. Everyone will benefit when they are solved.

The European Union is already providing substantial financial aid. And I remain convinced that we can be even more effective by becoming a full Party to the Bucharest Convention.

Because the only effective action is collective action.

This is also true for the many Black Sea fish stocks that are in a critical state. These are *shared* stocks. They require a *shared* international response.

But, ladies and gentlemen, we must be even bolder.

Today, the Black Sea is one of only two sea basins in Europe without an overarching maritime strategy.

This is a wasted opportunity. Especially now that the new, post-2020 EU funds are up for negotiation.

I promise you that I will push for them to include a strong maritime dimension.

But this only makes sense if we use the money wisely. For projects that push the region's blue economy forward. And that have a real, positive impact on the people who live here.

A maritime strategy, shared by *all* Black Sea countries, would help.

It would give a common direction and a clear sense of purpose.

It would signal that you are open for business.

This is already happening in the Baltic, the Atlantic, the Adriatic and Ionian. Why shouldn't it work in the Black Sea as well?

I know that getting started isn't easy. And that is why **I am happy to announce the launch of a new "Facility for blue economy development"**. Worth one million euros, this tool will help you lay the groundwork.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Working across borders is challenging. But as they say: "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with others."

So use today to discuss your needs and ambitions. Imagine the possibilities! It is now up to you – your local knowledge, your experience.

The European Union stands ready to support you. Last year in Odessa we sowed the seeds of a sustainable blue economy. Now let's nurture them so that they may grow and bloom.