



International Conference

Countering WMD Hybrid Threats and Malign Interference in the Black Sea Region

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Opening Remarks by Dr. Ognian Shentov, Chairman, Center for the Study of Democracy

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Black Sea region remains a **critical** (and hopefully not weak) **link** in Russia's ongoing brutal war against Ukraine. Long before this invasion, the Kremlin took steps to use hybrid warfare as its primary foreign policy instrument.

Russia employs **strategic corruption**, exploitation of economic dependencies, **state capture**, and all other instruments of sharp power to advance its geopolitical agenda in the Black Sea region.

This strategy affects multiple domains and merges civil and military spaces across the physical and cyber worlds.

Bulgaria and Romania are among the most frequent targets of the Kremlin Playbook tactics. **Media capture** is a key element of Russia's strategy in the Black Sea region, and the two countries remain vulnerable to the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to expand its media influence.

Countermeasures to address Russia's malign influence must include measures to **enhance institutional capacity** and foster closer cooperation and synergies between national governments and civil society to disrupt hybrid warfare activities.

As we discussed exactly one year ago, such counteraction is necessarily based, first of all, on reforming the **security sector** and the judicial system and also on using a **public-private format**, closely engaging civil society and its institutions, and our international partners from the EU, US and NATO.

I hope that today's discussion will contribute to this process. I would like to thank all of you for joining us today. Special thanks to our distinguished speakers, to our partners at the New Strategy Center, Romania, and to the US Department of State for their support. We are honored to have with us Ambassador Kenneth Merten and Professor Todor Tagarev, Minister of Defence of Bulgaria.