



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY



Operation "Disinformation"

Uncovering Kremlin Influence in
Ex-Military Networks in Bulgaria

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Russia exploits governance gaps across Europe to further its revanchist ambitions, especially in former Soviet states, using disinformation as a key destabilizing tool. Bulgaria, with its historical ties to Moscow, is particularly vulnerable to Kremlin-backed propaganda, which intensified following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Pro-Russian narratives, supported by ex-military and security sector networks, including former military officers holding high-level political positions, are promoted through traditional and social media, despite Bulgaria's NATO membership. These efforts are reinforced by long-standing Russian intelligence networks within Bulgaria's security apparatus, and paramilitary groups aligned with Putin's geopolitical strategies. The influence of these actors on Bulgarian public opinion and policy highlights the need for robust countermeasures.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BNO Shipka	Shipka Bulgarian National Movement
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
CSDPO	Confederation of Civil Organizations for Security and Defence
ICO	International Confederation of Generals, Admirals, and Reserve Officers
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MU	Vasil Levski Military Union
RISS	Russian Institute for Strategic Studies
RONU	Reserve Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers Union

INTRODUCTION

Russia exploits democratic deficits and governance gaps across Europe to further its revanchist ambitions and to bolster its influence, particularly in former Soviet satellite states. Central to this strategy is the spread of disinformation, a key tool employed by the Kremlin to destabilize foreign nations, undermine trust in both local and European institutions and in Euro-Atlantic integration. Bulgaria is especially vulnerable to Russian propaganda due to its deep historical and cultural ties to Moscow, powerful political, economic and security networks with strong links to the Kremlin and the widespread nature of Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns.¹

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a major escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, catalyzed notable support for Russian disinformation within Bulgarian society, particularly among ex-military and military-related circles. The pro-Russian stances of certain high-level Bulgarian politicians with military backgrounds, notably President Rumen Radev, are further bolstered by a group of retired military officers and former security sector officials who are actively engaged in these efforts.² These individuals promote pro-Russian views across both traditional and social media, despite Bulgaria's NATO membership since 2004.

This alignment with Kremlin narratives can be traced to the extensive networks established by Russian intelligence services in Bulgaria's security apparatus since the Cold War. These networks, which include connections within the police, secret services, and the army, have enabled Kremlin access to sensitive NATO information and insights into Bulgaria's institutional dynamics.³ The deep-rooted Russian influence within Bulgaria's security sector stems in part from the consistent political use of these institutions by successive governments, despite the urgent need for structural reform over the past 30 years.⁴

Russia effectively capitalizes on local disinformation amplifiers by exploiting the high level of public trust Bulgarians place in the military.⁵ Although active military personnel are barred from engaging in political activities, the public's increased demand for military expertise following Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war and other military conflicts in Africa and the Middle East – paralleling the demand for medical expertise during the COVID-19 pandemic – has created a window of opportunity. The

¹ Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., and Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

² Parkinson, J., and Kantchev, G., "Document: Russia Uses Rigged Polls, Fake News to Sway Foreign Elections", *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2017.

³ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Countering WMD Hybrid Threats and Malign Interference in the Black Sea Region*, Policy Brief No. 141, November 2023.

⁴ Sabev, M., Georgiev, G., and McLaren, R., *Safeguarding the Foundations: Strengthening Civil Security in Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024.

⁵ European Union, *Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024*, May 2024.

Kremlin has seized this opportunity by utilizing retired military officers and security-sector experts to disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives, amplifying these narratives within the Bulgarian media landscape.

These pro-Kremlin voices extend beyond media appearances as experts and supporters of various nationalist and paramilitary groups. These organizations, which promote anti-immigration, anti-refugee, anti-establishment, and often anti-EU and anti-NATO ideologies while incorporating former Russian military personnel into their training, align closely with Putin's expansive geopolitical strategies.⁶ They endorse the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine and engage in significant national-level political disruptions.⁷ Operating under various guises, these groups often mask their true intentions, presenting themselves as organizations focused on advanced military training for civilians or the preservation of cultural heritage, while engaging in activities such as stockpiling weapons.⁸

This report highlights the influence of pro-Kremlin high-level politicians with military backgrounds, paramilitary organizations, retired military officers, and security sector experts in shaping national policies and public opinion in Bulgaria. Constrained by official military doctrine in their statements, active military personnel refrain from public commentary, leaving such discussions to official figures like the Minister of Defense and cabinet members.

By contrast, former military personnel – and in particular former high-ranking army and security sector officers, as well as members and supporters of paramilitary organizations are not bound by these regulations and are free to express views that differ from official positions. Some, with stark pro-Russian stances, have positioned themselves as public authorities on military and security issues, playing a critical role in shaping public understanding. Moreover, pro-Kremlin narratives are often supported, or even formulated and promoted, by high-level acting politicians with military backgrounds. These individuals use their formal positions to influence public and political debates, presenting themselves as both politicians and military experts, and leveraging their former military experience and expertise for political gain.

Thus, the **pro-Kremlin's extensive reach necessitates strategic policy response** to counter this pervasive influence. This is further complicated by the broader lack of effectively implemented counteractions to foreign influence and disinformation across the EU.⁹

The pro-Kremlin stance of former and current Bulgarian military officers, many of whom have served under NATO for the past two decades, poses significant risks that extend far beyond the dissemination of pro-Russian, anti-NATO, and anti-EU disinformation. These risks include the erosion of Euro-

⁶ Avramov, K., and Trad, R., "Self-Appointed Defenders Of "Fortress Europe": Analyzing Bulgarian Border Patrols", *Bellingcat*, 17 May 2019.

⁷ Mediapool, "Walter Kalashnikov signalled Operation Liberation" [Валтер Калашников даде сигнал за операция "Освобождение"], 20 April 2016.

⁸ Zapryanov, Y., "Vetrino People's Republic: 'Historical Park' arms itself" [Ветринска народна република: "Исторически парк" се въоръжава], *Capital*, 30 April 2024.

⁹ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Building Institutional Capacity Framework for Resilience to Disinformation in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No.131, March 2023.

Atlantic cohesion, the weakening of national security, and the undermining of Bulgaria's military integrity:

- **Erosion of trust in the Bulgarian military and its command structure** among NATO and EU allies: Both NATO and the EU rely on cohesion, trust, and a shared commitment to collective defence policies among member states and their military personnel. Pro-Kremlin stances among former and acting Bulgarian military officers erode this trust and create divisions within the country's allies by sowing doubt about the loyalty and reliability of certain officers or specific command structures. Allies have become hesitant to share sensitive intelligence, cooperate on missions, or provide operational support, fearing possible information leaks or a lack of solidarity.¹⁰
- **Influence over defence policy and strategic decisions:** The covert pro-Kremlin sentiments held by senior military officers can lead to policies more favorable to Russian interests. These include advocating for continued Bulgarian dependency on Russian-standard weapons and systems, opposing defense spending increases and the introduction of new NATO-standard capabilities (e.g., new fighter jets, command, control, and communication systems, infantry vehicles, etc.), reluctance to deploy forces in support of NATO operations, and softening responses to Russian aggression in Ukraine.
- **Espionage and insider threats:** As described below, Pro-Kremlin military officers have already become targets for recruitment by Russian intelligence services, posing a direct insider threat. Given their access to sensitive information, strategies, operational plans, and military assets, these individuals could be leveraged to leak classified information, sabotage operations, or otherwise compromise national and alliance security.
- **Weakening institutional integrity in the military:** Pro-Kremlin attitudes among military personnel can lead to fractures within institutions, undermining their internal integrity and morale. For example, the development and defense of a doctoral dissertation supporting Russian propaganda theses at the Military Academy clearly demonstrates the negative effect that the pro-Kremlin positions of some military officials can have on institutional integrity.
- **Support for anti-democratic or destabilizing movements:** As extensively demonstrated in the current analysis, pro-Kremlin former military personnel, including officers, have been involved with or have supported anti-democratic, extremist, and far-right movements and organizations in Bulgaria. Some of these organizations directly seek to undermine the state's alignment with the EU and NATO, as well as the democratic institutions of the country, thus fuelling internal divisions that Russia exploits.

¹⁰ News.bg., "The military attaché in Moscow, Gen. Sertov has been denied access to classified information" [Одобреният за военен аташе в Москва ген. Сертов е с отнет достъп до класифицирана информация], 26 May 2021.

Pro-Kremlin stances among former and current military personnel represent a complex and multifaceted threat to NATO and EU integration, Bulgaria's national security, military readiness, and public trust. Addressing this challenge requires a **comprehensive set of countermeasures**, including:

- Enhanced vetting: Stricter background checks for military officers to identify potential conflicts of loyalty.
- Counterintelligence measures: Increased monitoring and prevention of insider threats.
- Education and training: Robust programs to educate military personnel on disinformation tactics and promote democratic values.
- Reform of military institutions: Ensuring institutional integrity through oversight, transparency, and accountability mechanisms.

Proactive and sustained efforts are critical to mitigating these risks and safeguarding the trust, cohesion, and effectiveness of Bulgaria's military within NATO and the EU. The topic remains underexplored. The available sources are general and lack detailed insights into the complex networks and relationships among military-related actors involved in disseminating Russian influence and disinformation. This scarcity of credible, verifiable information is likely due to the covert nature of these links and their sensitive, personalized nature. The current analysis is built on the analytical framework for uncovering Russian influence networks in Europe, established by the Center for the Study of Democracy in its milestone *Kremlin Playbook* series.¹¹ The analysis combined open-source investigative techniques with comprehensive monitoring of content published between 2022 and 2024 across online outlets and public Facebook accounts, focusing on pro-Kremlin material either featuring or disseminated by more than 20 retired military officers and security sector experts, using Boolean searches with predefined keywords (Annex 1).

¹¹ Shentov, Stefanov, and Vladimirov (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: CSD, 2020.

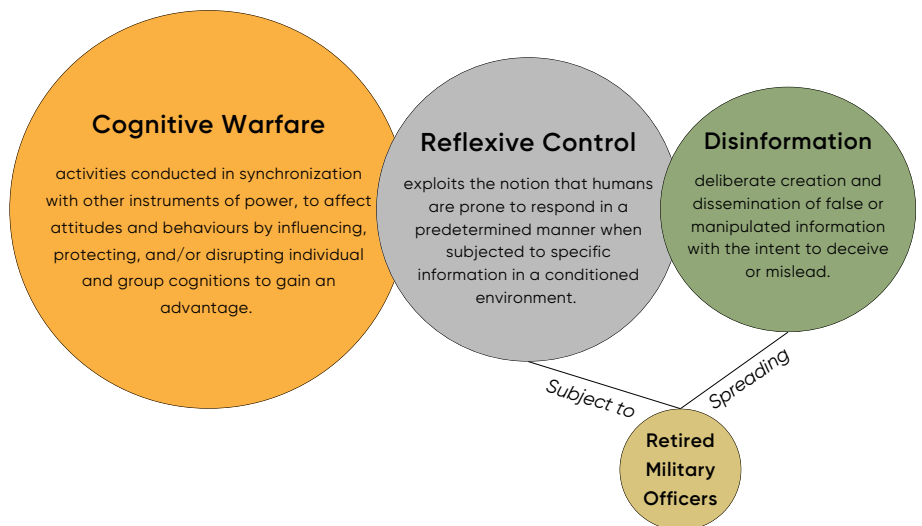
CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Cognitive Warfare and the Path Dependency of Military Disinformation

The Kremlin’s strategic use of retired military officers in Bulgaria has become increasingly apparent. It is a key element of Russia’s broader cognitive warfare, which seeks to manipulate and disrupt individual and collective perceptions to gain a strategic advantage over adversaries.¹² By combining traditional Soviet-era tactics, such as psychological and information operations, with modern cyber and technological capabilities, Russia has developed a comprehensive and far-reaching approach. Cognitive warfare has thus emerged as a distinct and critical operational domain in Russia’s global influence efforts.¹³

By exploiting local vulnerabilities, Russia’s cognitive warfare embeds distorted perceptions of reality within public and policy discussions, targeting both “non-believers” and “believers,” who, in turn, become amplifiers of Russia’s political, economic, and socio-cultural agenda. In Bulgaria, the civil security and military sectors are particularly susceptible to such influence. This vulnerability is deeply entrenched in the country’s political and historical context, rooted in a legacy of Russophilia and the lingering effects of Soviet-era security and military integration. These factors have created fertile ground for disinformation, making Bulgaria’s military particularly prone to cognitive manipulation. Consequently, pro-Kremlin retired officers and their affiliated organizations have destabilized established institutions and processes.

Figure 1. Role of retired military officers in Russian Cognitive Warfare



Source: CSD based on definitions from NATO November 2023, TDHJ 2024, NATO April 2023.¹⁴

¹² NATO, *Cognitive Warfare: Strengthening and Defending the Mind*, April 2023.

¹³ Novosiolova, T., and Georgiev, G., *Countering Hybrid Warfare in the Black Sea Region*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

¹⁴ NATO, *Cognitive Warfare: Strengthening and Defending the Mind*, April 2023; NATO, *NATO’s approach to countering disinformation*, November 2023; Pijpers, P., “On Cognitive Warfare: The Anatomy of Disinformation”, *The Defence Horizon Journal*, 21 March 2024.

Many of the identified retired military officers in Bulgaria, who propagate pro-Kremlin propaganda, were trained in the Soviet Union prior to the fall of communism in 1989 or were agents of Darzhavna Sigurnost (DS), the former state security service.¹⁵ Although Bulgaria's security services were reformed after DS was dismantled, former officers reconstituted their influence through informal networks among Bulgaria's political and economic elites.¹⁶ In the 1990s, Russophilia became intertwined with socialist nostalgia, particularly during Bulgaria's difficult transition to democracy. This sentiment was particularly strong among the military, who felt abandoned and cut off from support, in part because of decades of underfunding. Even after Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, these sentiments persisted and became focal points for Kremlin exploitation, particularly as Bulgaria's open information ecosystem became vulnerable to malign influences aiming to incite discord and sow distrust.¹⁷

Societal Predispositions and Implications

Bulgarians are over seven times more likely to trust the army than their national parliament.¹⁸ This significant trust disparity highlights a societal dynamic where military trustworthiness far exceeds that of political institutions.

Outside of the political sphere, the demand for military expertise in the public domain has surged since 2022. The Kremlin has strategically shifted its long-nurtured local network of retired military officers and security sector experts to meet this demand, leveraging their perceived credibility and expertise.¹⁹ This approach is part of a larger effort by the Kremlin, similar to strategies seen in France, Germany, and the United States.²⁰

Whereas over half of Bulgarians recognize Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a threat to EU security – and since 2023, Russia has been officially named the biggest threat to Bulgaria's national security in the National Defence Strategy²¹ – fewer than 10% support sending military aid, and over 60% fear the war is making them poorer.²² These attitudes indicate that Kremlin-backed narratives have heavily influenced public opinion.

¹⁵ DS is the Bulgarian secret service under the People's Republic of Bulgaria until 1989.

¹⁶ Nehring, C., "Files, Agents, "Deep State," and Russian Influence: The Legacy of the Communist State Security Service in Bulgaria", *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence*, 35:2, 318-338, 2022.

¹⁷ Pijpers, "On Cognitive Warfare", *The Defence Horizon Journal*, 21 March 2024.

¹⁸ EU, *Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024*, May 2024.

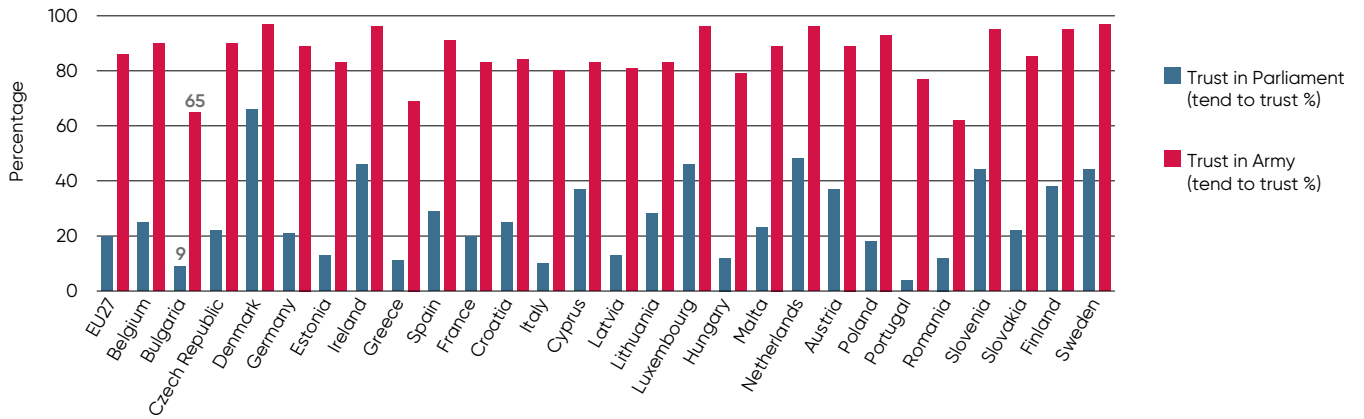
¹⁹ The Law on Defense and Armed Forces in Bulgaria strictly prohibits any political activity by active military personnel. From: Bulgaria, Law on Defence and Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria [Закон за отбраната и въоръжените сили на Република България], 2009, last. amended August 2024, Art. 60.

²⁰ Pervak N., and Mokliak, T., *NATO retired military and intelligence officers in Russian active measures*, Kyiv: Center for Defense Reforms & Guildhall, 2023.

²¹ Bulgaria, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria, *Bulgarian National Defense Strategy [Национална отбранителна стратегия на Република България]*, Sofia, 2023.

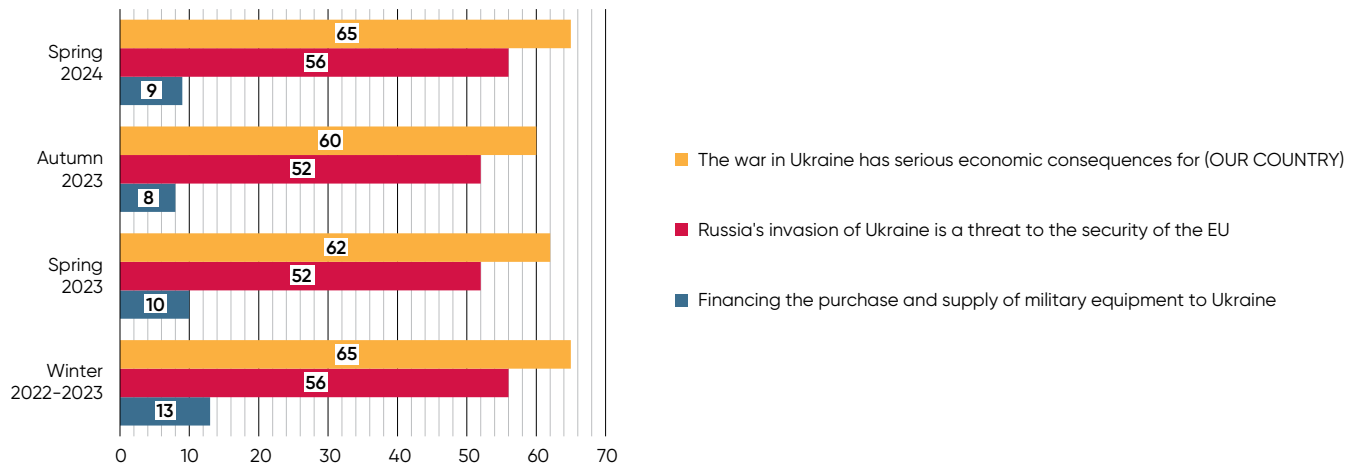
²² Data obtained from EU, *Standard Eurobarometer 98 – Winter 2022 – 2023*, February 2023, *Standard Eurobarometer 99 – Spring 2023*, July 2023, *Standard Eurobarometer 100 – Autumn 2023*, December 2023, *Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024*, May 2024.

Figure 2. Trust in the Army vs. Trust in the Parliament in Bulgaria/EU27



Source: CSD based on data from Eurobarometer 101, Spring 2024.

Figure 3. Attitudes Towards the War in Ukraine (Totally Agree %)



Source: CSD based on data from Eurobarometer 98, 99, 100, 101.

LOCAL ENABLERS

Military Spy Networks

Since the Cold War, the Kremlin's security and intelligence apparatus has developed close ties and exerted influence within Bulgarian security services, including the police, the secret services, and the army. Since 2004, this influence has granted access to NATO information. This network is part of a broader landscape of vulnerabilities in the civil and military security sectors of Balkan countries, shaped by cultural ties, historical grievances, sympathies, and religious affiliations, particularly through the Orthodox Church.²³ These factors shape public sentiment and foreign influence, impacting governance, the judiciary, and law enforcement. Aware of the cultural "capital" Russia holds in these states, the Kremlin aims to exploit these sympathies as part of its cognitive warfare in Europe.

Over the past three decades, despite the critical need for reform, Bulgarian security services have been repeatedly co-opted for political purposes by successive governments. This has left Soviet-era security networks largely unaddressed, enabling them to influence newly established security institutions and maintain connections across the army, defence ministry, police, and secret services. While these connections have weakened over time, key security institutions remain strongholds of pro-Russian sympathies – a situation that has changed little since 1989.²⁴

Evidence of these persistent connections can be found in past espionage cases. On March 18, 2021, six Bulgarian citizens (three acting and one retired military officers among them) were arrested for espionage, accused of obtaining and passing classified defence information about NATO and EU activities in Bulgaria to Russian embassy officials, including details about the capabilities of the Bulgarian army. The group included three Ministry of Defence (MoD) employees and was led by 74-year-old retired Col. Ivan Iliev, "The Resident," a former high-ranking military intelligence officer in the Defense Ministry, whose wife, a Russian citizen, served as the intermediary with the Russian embassy. His task was to recruit an "illegal network of agents" with access to classified information.²⁵ The informants were paid up to 3,000 USD each for their contributions.²⁶ The implicated Russian diplomats were Maxim Ribkin, first secretary in the Russian embassy, and Alexander Zinkin, second secretary, both of whom Bulgaria expelled. This was considered the most significant Russian spy network in the post-socialist countries since 1990.²⁷

Other senior military officials have also been implicated in Russian espionage networks. In March 2022, retired Bulgarian Brig. Gen. Valentin Tsankov was placed under house arrest after it was established that he had collected

²³ Sabev, Georgiev, and McLaren, *Safeguarding the Foundations*, Sofia: CSD, 2024.

²⁴ Sabev, Georgiev, and McLaren, *Safeguarding the Foundations*, Sofia: CSD, 2024.

²⁵ Deutsche Welle, "Bulgaria breaks up 'Russian spy ring'", 19 March 2021.

²⁶ Todorov, S., "Bulgaria Expels Russian Diplomats After Busting Spy Ring", BIRN, 22 March 2021.

²⁷ Voicu, M., and Todorov, S., "Russian Espionage in Bulgaria: "unparalleled" since 1990", *Veridica*, 11 April 2021.

classified information on Bulgaria's internal political affairs and passed it to a Russian diplomat for several years. A Russian diplomat with immunity, serving as counsellor at the Russian Embassy in Sofia, coordinated and transmitted the information. Tsankov, who had held significant positions in the MoD and served as military attaché in London and Washington, was also an adviser to NATO and to a former defence minister. The spy group allegedly provided details on modifications to the American F-16 Block 70 fighter jets ordered by Bulgaria.²⁸

Both cases stand out as part of broader efforts by Bulgarian authorities to expose Russian espionage within both military and civil security sectors. Investigations continue, with the most recent inquiry targeting the Directorate General for Combating Organized Crime (DGCOC) in February 2024 by the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security (SANS).²⁹ The DGCOC itself was previously investigated in 2022 by the now-defunct Special Prosecutors' Office under similar suspicions of espionage activities favouring Russia.³⁰

The Rise of Former Officers in Politics

Former military officers who have transitioned into prominent political roles hold a distinctive position within the broader network. As politicians and parliamentarians, their influence is particularly significant for three key reasons. First, their military careers, rooted in an institution highly trusted by Bulgarians, have bolstered their public popularity. Second, they continue to receive considerable support from former military circles, which reinforces their political standing. Finally, they effectively leverage their military background and expertise to shape discussions on specialized topics and issues, enhancing their impact in areas requiring technical or strategic knowledge.

For instance, Maj. Gen. Rumen Radev's military background was a crucial factor in his successful 2016 presidential campaign, which also garnered Russian support. Leonid Reshetnikov, a retired Lt. Gen. of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the then director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), endorsed Radev following a RISS survey that identified the ideal Bulgarian presidential candidate as a man under 60 – successful, uncorrupted, non-intellectual, and advocating for greater sovereignty within the EU and NATO.³¹ Reshetnikov, who was banned from entering the country in 2019 due to espionage charges,³² believed Radev could

²⁸ Nikolov, K., "Bulgarian ex-general accused of spying for Russia", EURACTIV, 03 March 2022.

²⁹ Svobodna Evropa, "Russian spy diaspora". Special Prosecutor's Office and counterintelligence investigate SANS officials" ["Руска шпионска диаспора". Спецпрокуратурата и контраразузнаването разследват служители на ДАНС], 31 March 2022.

³⁰ Svobodna Evropa, "An employee of the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime is detained for spying for Russia. Prosecutors searched the office" [Служител на ГДБОП е задържан за шпионаж за Русия. Прокуратурата претърси службата], 5 February 2024.

³¹ BROD for Bulgaria, *Political Attitudes of the Bulgarian Society on the Eve of the Presidential Elections* [Политически нагласи на българското общество в навечерието на Президентските избори], July 2016.

³² In 2019, Bulgaria banned Reshetnikov from entering the country for ten years in connection to to espionage and money laundering charges against Nikolay Malinov. From: RFE/RL, "Russian Oligarch Malofeyev Banned From Bulgaria For 10 Years Over Spy Scandal", 11 September 2019.

potentially lead Bulgaria to exit both organizations.³³ Radev's candidacy was backed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), whose leader at the time, Kornelia Ninova, engaged in discussions with Reshetnikov about supporting Radev.³⁴ Simultaneously, a study by RISS suggested that the BSP "plant fake news and promote exaggerated polling data" to ensure their preferred candidate's victory.³⁵ Following Radev's resignation as Air Force Commander, pro-Russian sources claimed he left because he saw joint air policing with NATO as more humiliating than the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine.³⁶ While this claim remains unverified, Radev later acknowledged that disagreements over joint policing contributed to his departure – part of Reshetnikov's broader effort to paint Radev as a NATO opponent.

Radev, as predicted by the RISS survey, won the 2016 election with 59% of the vote. On paper, his U.S. education and military background did not make him an obvious candidate for the socialist party.³⁷ However, his consistent pro-Russian stance on NATO issues and later on the Ukraine war aligned closely with the BSP's agenda, though he ran independently in his second term and distanced himself from the party.

During his two presidential terms, President Radev has frequently echoed pro-Kremlin narratives, especially in his second term following the Ukraine war. In a 2021 presidential debate, he declared that sanctions on Russia over Crimea were ineffective and stated, "Crimea is Russian; whose else could it be?" The following day, his press office clarified his official position, stating that his comment referred to the current context that "at the moment, Crimea is controlled by Russia."³⁸ Although he initially aligned with European condemnation of Russia's invasion in February 2022, Radev quickly criticized the removal of Defense Minister Stefan Yanev, a retired general, who referred to the conflict as a "special operation."³⁹

Over time, Radev positioned himself as Bulgaria's protector from involvement in the war, opposing military aid to Ukraine, rejecting Ukraine's NATO membership, and advocating for peaceful resolutions, arguing that victory over Russia is unattainable. These views align with popular Kremlin narratives. In October 2022, Radev refused to sign a statement supporting

³³ Mediapool, "Rumen Radev could play a role in Bulgaria's exit from the EU and NATO" [Румен Радев може да изиграе роля за излизането на България от ЕС и НАТО], 25 November 2016.

³⁴ Parkinson, and Kantchev, "Document: Russia Uses Rigged Polls, Fake News to Sway Foreign Elections", WSJ, 23 March 2017.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, *GEC Special Report: Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda*, United States Department of State Global Engagement Center, August 2020.

³⁶ The 1919 Treaty is considered one of the major tragedies in Bulgarian collective memory as the country lost about 10 percent of its territory; Milev, M., "The mystery with the anti-NATO "statement" of Gen. Radev to Russian media" [Мистерия с антинаатовско „изказване“ на ген. Радев пред руска медия], *Capital*, 4 August 2016.

³⁷ In 2003, Radev graduated with honors from the Air War College (AWC) of the United States Air Force University with a Master's degree in Strategic Studies. Biography available [here](#).

³⁸ DW, "Rumen Radev clarified his position on Crimea" [Румен Радев изясни позицията си за Крим], 22 November 2021.

³⁹ Ficheva, R., "Radev: Yanev's replacement is now a risk and responsibility of the government" [Радев: Смяната на Янев сега е риск и отговорност на управляващите], *Dnevnik*, 28 February 2022.

Ukraine's NATO bid, citing the risk of war between NATO and Russia.⁴⁰ He also criticized Bulgaria's parliament for approving weapons shipments to Ukraine, labeling supporters as "warmongers."⁴¹

Radev's stance eventually led to a confrontation with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy in July 2023, during which Radev reiterated his belief that continuing the conflict would only prolong the suffering.⁴² By May 2024, Radev declared Ukraine's victory over Russia "impossible," urging for peace talks and criticizing Europe's "militaristic rhetoric."⁴³ He also vetoed agreements to supply heavy military equipment, citing concerns about depleting Bulgaria's resources, despite the equipment being unused.⁴⁴ Most recently, he refused to lead the Bulgarian delegation to the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, D.C., due to disagreements over aid to Ukraine.⁴⁵

Radev has consistently enjoyed support from other retired officers, including those with strong pro-Kremlin views such as retired Gen. Dimitar Shivikov⁴⁶ and retired Brig. Gen. Valentin Tsankov, who has been accused of spying for Russia.⁴⁷ In 2020, these officers publicly endorsed Radev's second presidential bid, highlighting their alignment with his positions.⁴⁸ However, some retired officers, have more nuanced stances, sometimes criticizing pro-Kremlin narratives in favour of prioritizing Bulgarian national interests over Russian strategic goals.

Initially, Radev also had the backing of retired Brig. Gen. Stefan Yanev, who later launched his own political party, "Bulgarian Rise," in 2022. Although Radev distanced himself from this project, both generals remained aligned in opposing military aid to Ukraine. Yanev, who served as Radev's defence advisor, defence minister, and caretaker prime minister, argued that military aid would only "prolong the suffering" in Ukraine.⁴⁹ While Yanev opposed Bulgaria's exit from the EU and NATO, he was also critical of

⁴⁰ RFE/RL, "Bulgarian President Didn't Sign Document Backing Ukraine Because of Wording On NATO Membership", 3 October 2022.

⁴¹ Bulgarian National Television, "Radev: The warmongers in the National Assembly decided on military aid for Ukraine" [Радев: Войнолюбците в Народното събрание взеха решение за военна помощ за Украйна], 23 December 2022.

⁴² Simeonova, E., and Ruzhin, I., "The war is on our soil." Radev called the war a "conflict" and Zelensky corrected him" ["Войната е на нашата земя". Радев нарече войната "конфликт", а Зеленски го поправи], *Svobodna Evropa*, 6 July 2023.

⁴³ Mediapool, "Rumen Radev: Impossible victory over Russia cannot be the only way out of the war in Ukraine" [Румен Радев: Не може невъзможната победа над Русия да е единствен изход от войната в Украйна], 18 May 2024.

⁴⁴ Svobodna Evropa, "Radev vetoes sending BTRs unnecessary for Bulgaria to Ukraine" [Радев наложи вето върху изпращането на ненужни за България БТР-и в Украйна], 4 December 2023.

⁴⁵ NOVA, "Radev refused to lead Bulgarian delegation to NATO summit" [Радев отказа да води българската делегация за Срещата на върха на НАТО], 27 June 2024.

⁴⁶ Pervak and Mokliak, *NATO retired military and intelligence officers in Russian active measures*, Kyiv: CDRG and Guildhall, 2023.

⁴⁷ RFE/RL Free Europe, "Reserve general accused as Russian spy remains under house arrest" [Обвиненият като руски шпионин генерал от резерва остава под домашен арест], 10 March 2022.

⁴⁸ Otbrana.com, "Reserve generals and colonels support the President" [Генерали и полковници от запаса подкрепят президента], 31 August 2020.

⁴⁹ BTV, "Stefan Yanev: Sending military aid to Ukraine will prolong the agony of the people there" [Стефан Янев: Изпращането на военна помощ за Украйна ще удължи агонията на хората там], 20 April 2022.

“global liberalism” and pro-Western politicians.⁵⁰ He advocated against the deployment of NATO troops in Bulgaria⁵¹ and opposed the termination of Russian gas supplies, favouring continued cooperation with Gazprom.⁵²

In 2022, “Bulgarian Rise” entered parliament with 12 representatives. However, after reversing its position on military aid to Ukraine – from strong opposition to support – the party likely lost voter trust and failed to secure seats in subsequent elections. The party explained this shift by claiming it was protecting Bulgaria’s military interests.⁵³ More broadly, Yanev’s positions have been inconsistent. He has acknowledged that Russia’s “special military operation” transitioned into a war and that Russia is the aggressor, yet later opposed sending heavy military equipment to Ukraine.⁵⁴ His predominantly pro-Russian stance contrasts with his extensive NATO-related experience, having worked as an analysis officer in Belgium (1998 – 2000), attended the National Defence University in Washington, D.C. (2004 – 2005), headed the “Transformations” Department at the NATO Center in Ankara (2005 – 2007), and served as a military attaché in the U.S. (2011 – 2014).⁵⁵

The alignment of statements by retired generals who have held top military positions in Bulgaria, in particular the President as Commander-in-Chief of the Bulgarian Army and the Minister of Defence, with widespread pro-Kremlin narratives, raise serious concerns. Both Radev and Yanev received their education abroad after the fall of the Iron Curtain, yet their actions suggest a broader trend among active and retired officers who sympathize with the Kremlin’s authoritarian regime. NATO identifies Russia as a major threat to the alliance’s security, and these officers may actively resist the further modernization of Bulgaria’s army and its integration into NATO structures, under a misguided notion of sovereignty. Such resistance ultimately serves Russian strategic interests in the region.

Paramilitaries’ Ties to the Kremlin

Another local enabler of Russian malign influence is the rise of paramilitary groups. The resurgence of paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a complex phenomenon rooted in historical legacies, sociocultural dynamics, and recent security challenges.⁵⁶ The migration crisis and the

⁵⁰ Dimitrova, D., and Bedrov, I., “Fifteen tulips. More than half the parties in the elections speak the language of the Kremlin” [Петнадесет лалета. Над половината партии на изборите говорят с езика на Кремъл], *Svobodna Evropa*, 23 September 2022.

⁵¹ Svobodna Evropa, “The war minister is against new NATO troops in Bulgaria. Russia welcomes it” [Военият министър е против нови войски на НАТО в България. Русия го приветства], 21 December 2021.

⁵² Smilov, D., “Bulgaria and the whole truth about Russian gas” [България и цялата истина за руския газ], *Deutsche Welle*, 25 August 2022.

⁵³ Actualno.com, “A twist: “Bulgarian Rise” supports sending arms to Ukraine” [Обрат: „Български възход“ подкрепя изпращането на оръжие на Украйна], 3 November 2022.

⁵⁴ BTV, “Stefan Yanev on Ukraine: There is a demand for war, it remains to be seen when and if it will start”, [Стефан Янев за Украйна: Има заявка за война, предстои да видим кога и дали ще започне] 21 December 2022; Nikolova, V., “Stefan Yanev is against armored personnel carriers for Ukraine, although he “has not heard” of their use” [Стефан Янев е против бронетранспортъри за Украйна, макар да „не е чувал“ да се ползват], *Dnevnik*, 4 December 2023.

⁵⁵ Full biography available on the MoD website.

⁵⁶ Kandrik, M., *The Challenge of Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020.

war in Ukraine have given decentralized, often extremist groups a renewed sense of purpose, enabling them to intensify their activities and expand their membership. These groups frequently target young individuals interested in military-style activities, who, amid declining military recruitment, the absence of conscription, and limited defence-oriented education, find few legitimate outlets for their aspirations.⁵⁷ Such individuals are particularly vulnerable to radicalization in the current European political climate, where populism is on the rise, and former military operatives are exploiting this shift to gain influence. In many European states, there is a notable link between extremist sympathies and their influence within military and police forces, a phenomenon particularly evident in Germany and the United Kingdom.⁵⁸

In Bulgaria, the lack of robust internal controls and the pervasive influence of Kremlin-aligned networks exacerbate the situation.⁵⁹ The country's comparatively lenient stance toward Russia, even after the war in Ukraine, coupled with political instability, has created conditions that undermine support for the European Union and NATO.⁶⁰ The prevailing populist momentum, combined with situational triggers from both local and international conflicts, contributes significantly to the persistence and emergence of paramilitary groups.

The Shipka Bulgarian National Movement and the Vasil Levski Military Union

The most prominent actors in this sphere are the Vasil Levski Military Union (MU) and the Shipka Bulgarian National Movement (BNO Shipka).⁶¹ These groups gained notoriety during the 2015 European migrant crisis for conducting unlawful arrests along the border.⁶² Since then, they have continued to serve as amplifiers of Kremlin propaganda in Bulgaria, promoting anti-EU, anti-NATO narratives, conspiracy theories, and a broader anti-establishment agenda.⁶³

Their positions closely mirror Kremlin narratives, particularly in their dissemination of disinformation related to Western influence, historical revisionism, and calls for the abolition of Bulgaria's constitutional order. Their websites have republished Russian-language propaganda materials, including disinformation about the "forced imposition of the West's new

⁵⁷ Kandrík, *The Challenge of Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe*, GMF, 2020.

⁵⁸ Sabev, Georgiev, and McLaren, *Safeguarding the Foundations*, Sofia: CSD, 2024.

⁵⁹ Georgiev, G., Petrova, V., and Tsabala, K., *Breaking the Code: Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

⁶⁰ Hadju, M., et. al, *Trends 2023: United we (still) stand*, GLOBSEC, 2023, p.11; Mateeva-Kazakova, M., *The resurgence of the Russian dilemma on the Bulgarian political scene*, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2024.

⁶¹ While appearing as distinct entities united by a common cause, their public appearances and activities strongly suggest they function as a cohesive entity guided by BNO Shipka's leadership.

⁶² Spasov, S., "The Bulgarian Military Union to "Dnevnik": do not quarrel with organizations that you cannot handle", *Dnevnik*, 23 February 2017; Mediapool, "Scottish far-right extremist came to catch migrants in Bulgaria" [Шотландски крайнодесен екстремист дойде да лови мигранти в България], 25 October 2016.

⁶³ Barker, N., "Petar Nizamov: Vigilante "migrant hunter" of Bulgaria", *Aljazeera*, 5 November 2016.

world order” and widely circulated narratives such as Holocaust denial.⁶⁴ They espouse strong anti-establishment views, citing political corruption and international human rights documents, and advocate for replacing Bulgaria’s parliamentary democracy with direct democracy through referenda, enforced by an interim government led by their governing body. They promote peaceful means if the government complies but justify violence if it does not.⁶⁵

BNO Shipka and the MU also spread disinformation portraying NATO, the EU, and the West as ineffective and fragile.⁶⁶ During the migrant crisis and subsequent years, their main narrative focused on protecting Bulgarians from a so-called “migrant invasion” or the enduring “Turkish threat.” This narrative resonates strongly with older Bulgarians, given the country’s history under Ottoman rule until 1878.⁶⁷ The tactic seeks to mobilize and militarize civilians in Bulgaria, reflecting strategies used by Russia and ethnic Russian communities in neighbouring countries to create a “mobilization state.” Additionally, some disinformation narratives are tailored to a Bulgarian audience, emphasizing anti-Turkish sentiment and fostering Islamophobia. These narratives use alarmist rhetoric, urging Bulgarians to prepare mentally and physically to counter an alleged invasion orchestrated by the West and its perceived agents, including the CIA, MI6, and Mossad.⁶⁸ The MU’s Telegram channel is its primary online tool for disseminating propaganda, although they also use YouTube, Facebook, and their website.⁶⁹

Both organisations have also forged overt and covert international partnerships, uniting prominent European far-right figures with local recruits trained by former Russian special forces operatives, demonstrating their pro-Russian sympathies.⁷⁰ Some members are current or former Russian citizens with specialized military backgrounds and connections to Russian special forces,⁷¹ as well as Kremlin-aligned organizations like the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club.^{72,73} Their membership is concentrated along Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast,

⁶⁴ BNO Shipka, “90% болгар настроены пророссийски”, 10 March 2017; BNO Shipka, “They continue to push the new world order ??? [evidence]” [Продължават да прокарват Новият Световен Ред ??? [Доказателства], 20 March 2022; BNO Shipka, Евреи Таки Признали, Что Холокоста Не Было, 23 April 2015.

⁶⁵ BNO Shipka manifesto available [here](#).

⁶⁶ Avramov, K., and Trad, R., *Self-Appointed Defenders Of “Fortress Europe”: Analyzing Bulgarian Border Patrols*, Bellingcat, May, 2019.

⁶⁷ Barker, N., *Petar Nizamov: Vigilante “migrant hunter” of Bulgaria*, Aljazeera, November 2016.

⁶⁸ Barker, N., *Petar Nizamov: Vigilante “migrant hunter” of Bulgaria*, Aljazeera, November 2016.

⁶⁹ Telegram, Bulgarian Military Union “Vasil Levski”; As of July 2024, the channel has 14.1k subscribers, with 11.8k photos and 14.7k videos shared.

⁷⁰ Papakochev, G., “Do “Vasil Levski” and “Shipka” have a place in Bulgaria?” [Имат ли “Васил Левски” и “Шипка” място в България?], *Deutsche Welle Bulgaria*, 6 July 2016.

⁷¹ Russians living abroad are a key Kremlin amplification tool in far-right/extremist circles abroad. From: Rekawek, K., Renard, T., and Molas, B. (eds.), *Russia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European Countries*, The Hague: ICCT Press, 2024.

⁷² The Night Wolves Motorcycle Club (NWMC), originally similar to Western outlaw motorcycle clubs like the Hells Angels, has evolved into a proxy of the Russian state, using its non-governmental organization for soft propaganda and embedding military tactics within Russian diasporas through its corporate entity. From: Harris, K., “Russia’s Fifth Column: The Influence of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, March 2018, 43(4), 259–273.

⁷³ Shikerova, G., and Wesolowsky, T., “In Bulgaria, An Open Road For Putin’s Favorite Biker Gang, The Night Wolves”, RFE/RL, 4 September 2022.

particularly in Varna and Burgas, where pro-Kremlin sentiments are strong.⁷⁴ Far-right extremists from various European countries travel to Bulgaria to meet with BNO Shipka and MU members and participate in multi-day training sessions, sometimes involving automatic weapons.

Ex-Military Leadership in Paramilitary Networks

Among the prominent figures in these organizations are Vladimir Rusev (pseudonym Valter Kalashnikov),⁷⁵ national coordinator Ivo Borisov,⁷⁶ and Krasimir Simeonov,⁷⁷ the organizational secretary of the MU.

Their profiles closely resemble those of pro-Russian groups in occupied Eastern Ukraine, comprising ex-military personnel, gun fanatics, ultra-nationalists, and mixed martial arts enthusiasts. Rusev, reportedly a retired military officer, briefly served as a monk in the early 1990s. In recent years, his ventures into cryptocurrency have been controversial.⁷⁸ He actively promotes these investments on one of his Facebook pages, which also serves as a key platform for the far-right "Revival" [Vazrazhdane] party's election campaigns.⁷⁹

There have also been ongoing allegations that, under his pseudonym, Rusev has embezzled funds from donations to the MU and BNO Shipka. A dedicated Facebook page accuses him of using these funds to construct a multimillion-dollar palace in Varna, diverting resources intended for the paramilitary groups.⁸⁰ Historically, legal investigations into these organizations have been few and largely ineffective, but recent efforts have gained momentum.⁸¹ Since May 2024, the District Prosecutor's Office in Varna has actively pursued legal action, filing requests to dissolve both paramilitary organizations, accusing them of undermining Bulgaria's unity, promoting ethnic and religious discord, and threatening territorial integrity.⁸² These recent investigations may have prompted the groups to shift to Telegram, as they no longer maintain a consistent presence on Facebook.

The activities of organizations like the MU and BNO Shipka highlight the dangers posed by paramilitary entities aligned with external powers like the Kremlin. By exploiting local vulnerabilities, including populism, weak institutional controls, and societal discontent, they pose a significant threat to national unity and democratic institutions. As these groups continue to

⁷⁴ Actualno, "Why were "Will", "Revival" and "Greatness" born in Varna" [Защо трите "В-та – "Воля", "Възраждане" и "Величие" се родиха точно във Варна?], 22 June 2024.

⁷⁵ The Facebook profile of Vladimir Rusev is taken down, [this is a photo of him](#) from a BNO Shipka related page.

⁷⁶ Facebook Profile of [Ivo Borisov](#).

⁷⁷ Facebook Profile of [Krasimir Simeonov](#).

⁷⁸ LinkedIn Profile of Vladimir Rusev ([Valter Kalashnikov](#)).

⁷⁹ Facebook Public Group [БЪЛГАРИЯ и РУСИЯ – Една История, Един Език, Една Вярa. ЕДНА ДЪРЖАВА!!!](#).

⁸⁰ Facebook Public Group [Къде потъват даренията за Войнски съюз „Васил Левски“ и БНО „Шипка“](#).

⁸¹ RFE/RL, "Bulgarian Prosecutor Seeks Closure Of 2 Pro-Russian Paramilitary Groups", 22 May 2024.

⁸² Novinite, "Bulgarian Prosecutor Moves to Dissolve Controversial Nationalist Groups", 22 May 2024.

adapt, moving to platforms like Telegram to evade scrutiny, their potential for destabilizing Bulgaria's security remains high. Recent legal actions against them are a crucial first step, but sustained vigilance and comprehensive strategies are necessary to address the root causes of their appeal and safeguard Bulgaria's national security.

Militarization of the Historical Park and the Emergence of Bulgarian Yunak

Another local paramilitary group is the recently established Bulgarian Yunak, which has connections to the political party "Greatness" [Velichie]. This group's involvement in the broader militarization of the Historical Park near the Bulgarian seaside raises serious security concerns. The Historical Park, located in Neofit Rilski village and developed between 2019 and 2021, was ostensibly created as a cultural attraction aimed at fostering national pride and "resisting Western influence." However, the park has become embroiled in financial and legal challenges, with growing concerns about its militaristic orientation and private policing practices.⁸³ Reports suggest that Ivelin Mihaylov, a key figure in the project, has allegedly sanctioned the procurement of weapons and has been attempting to militarize the park's staff, intensifying the controversy surrounding this establishment.⁸⁴

Neofit Rilski village is monitored by surveillance cameras owned by The Guardians, a private security company ostensibly guarding the Historical Park.⁸⁵ Within the same municipality, Bulgarian Yunak engages in military training for numerous individuals.⁸⁶ Although it presents itself as a sports club, the organization's activities appear to diverge significantly from traditional sports. Members, including Mihaylov, don military attire and insignia. Training sessions, as described in the park's online newspaper Beautiful Vetrino, cover urban survival tactics, such as seizing buildings and executing strategic withdrawals under covering fire to fortified positions.⁸⁷

Moreover, in 2020, the Historical Park hosted AK-47 shooting seminars for citizens.⁸⁸ These bi-weekly courses were part of a broader initiative that claims modern society lacks authenticity, and that there are fewer "warriors" in Bulgaria and Europe. This militaristic focus, combined with the private policing conducted by The Guardians, raises questions about the park's true intentions as a cultural tourist attraction. The Provadia Police Department, under whose jurisdiction the community falls, has issued a total of 106 firearms permits over the past two years. Additionally, the department has

⁸³ Zapryanov, Y., "The victims of "Historical Park"" [Жертвите на "Исторически парк"], *Capital*, 21 July 2023.

⁸⁴ Zapryanov, Y., "Khans and pyramids or what is behind the Historical Park near Varna" [Ханове и пирамиди или какво стои зад Историческия парк край Варна], 10 June 2019.

⁸⁵ Mediapool, "The whole country turns a blind eye to the Varna enclave "Historical Park"" [Цялата държава си затваря очите за варненския анклав "Исторически парк"], 10 May 2024.

⁸⁶ Historical Park, Bulgarian Yunak Training Camp Event [Български юнак –обучителен и тренировъчен лагер], 24 November 2023.

⁸⁷ Kapitanova, K., School for men and women, or how to be prepared for crisis situations [Школа за мъже и жени, или как ДА БЪДЕМ ПОДГОТВЕНИ], *Krasivo Vetrino*, 27 February 2024.

⁸⁸ Historical Park, AK-47 Shooting Training Session Event [Обучение по стрелба с АК-47], 7 December 2020.

received at least two reports of illegal citizen arrests by The Guardians. In both cases, the local police sided with The Guardians.

While The Guardians and Bulgarian Yunak represent the visible aspects of the park's militarization, the hidden dimension involves the stockpiling of weapons. According to insider sources, the community operates like a sect, with its own rules and a rejection of state authority.⁸⁹ Following the onset of the Ukraine war in 2022, Mihaylov reportedly mandated that all members obtain firearm permits and initiated extensive purchases of weapons, all-terrain vehicles, communication equipment, and military trucks, ostensibly to defend the territory if threatened.

The Historical Park also maintains partnerships with at least two Russian organizations, including Nevskaya Palitra⁹⁰ and the Historical, Architectural, and Art State Museum & Sanctuary of Yelabuga, Tatarstan.⁹¹ However, after 2022, the park's partnerships with the Russian Kamchia complex, the Union of Artists of Russia, Russia Today, and Rossotrudnichestvo were removed from its website.⁹² Mihaylov has since attended Russian embassy events, sharing his participation on his Telegram channel.

Mihaylov's connections to Russia were further complicated by a TikTok channel named "How to Fix Bulgaria," which released videos in 2023 aimed at recruiting fighters for the Russian private military company Wagner Group, just before its rebellion against Moscow authorities.⁹³ Although Mihaylov denies involvement with the channel, it shares the name of one of his YouTube video series and exclusively features his content.⁹⁴ The channel's profile picture and description were linked to the Historical Park website, but have since been deleted.

In June 2024, the Ministry of Interior conducted at least two inspections of the Historical Park.⁹⁵ In August 2024, Bulgaria's State Agency for National Security (SANS) further investigated the Historical Park, accusing Mihaylov of financial fraud amounting to 70 million BGN and linking him to Russian intelligence services.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Zapryanov, Y., Vetrino People's Republic: 'Historical Park' arms itself, [*Ветринска народна република: "Исторически парк" се въоръжава*], *Capital*, 30 April 2024.

⁹⁰ *Nevskaya Palitra* official website, 2024.

⁹¹ *Historical, Architectural and Art State Museum & Sanctuary of Yelabuga* official website, 2024.

⁹² *Historical Park* official website, 2024.

⁹³ *Historical Park* official website, 2024.

⁹⁴ Youtube, How to fix Bulgaria ourselves [*Как да оправим България?*], 7 March 2022.

⁹⁵ Lisitsov, L., "Interior Ministry checks groups around Historical Park for weapons and economic crimes", [*МВР проверява групи около „Исторически парк“ за струпване на оръжия и икономически престъпления*], *Club-Z*, 22 May 2024.

⁹⁶ Zapryanov, Y., The Historical Park report: fraud for 70 million BGN and links to Russian services [*Докладът за "Исторически парк": измама за 70 млн. лв. и връзки с руските служби*], *Capital*, 12 August 2024.

Box 1. The Pro-Kremlin Narratives of Bulgarian Yunak's Leader

The primary face of Bulgarian Yunak is Darin Georgiev, former military officer, who claims to have served as a mercenary in Iraq and Afghanistan. Georgiev was a parliamentary candidate for the nationalist Bulgarian National Unification (BNO) party in the April 2023 elections.⁹⁷ He has been a Member of Parliament in the 50th National Assembly, representing “Greatness”, the party founded by Mihaylov.^{98,99} “Greatness” surpassed the voting threshold by heavily campaigning on social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube, using these outlets to disseminate pro-Russian propaganda.¹⁰⁰

Georgiev, with years of experience in the 68th Special Forces Brigade of the Bulgarian Army, later transitioned to the security business, conducting training seminars for various international private companies. In a YouTube interview, he explicitly identified himself as a professional contractor rather than a mercenary.¹⁰¹ Georgiev aligns with Mihaylov's stance that only humanitarian aid should be provided to Ukraine, arguing that supplying weapons prolongs the conflict and Ukraine's suffering. This view reflects a popular pro-Russian disinformation narrative, which claims that the U.S. is waging a proxy war against Russia using Ukraine as a pawn.¹⁰² In the same interview, Georgiev claimed that NATO military aid to Ukraine was funnelled through private companies by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, leading to ineffective use due to corruption.¹⁰³ He argued that this misallocation is why the Ukrainian army is inadequately equipped, a narrative aimed at discrediting Ukrainian authorities by portraying them as corrupt and willing to sacrifice national interests and citizens' lives to appease Western sponsors.¹⁰⁴

Expanding the Ex-military Networks: the Rise of a New Party

Ivelin Mihaylov founded the “Greatness” party in the summer of 2023.¹⁰⁵ Shortly afterward, retired Lt. Col. Nikolay Markov emerged as the party's public face. Together, they effectively leveraged substantial online content across platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram, alongside live rallies across the country and abroad, as part of their election campaign. Despite initial underestimations by polling agencies, “Greatness” secured over 4% of the vote, entering Parliament in the June 2024 elections.

⁹⁷ Razkritia, “Darin Georgiev from BNO party – Let's mess up their plans and create a punitive vote”, [Дарин Георгиев от партия БНО – Нека им объркаме сметките и направим наказателен вот], 22 March 2023.

⁹⁸ Razkritia, “Darin Georgiev from BNO party – Let's mess up their plans and create a punitive vote”, 22 March 2023.

⁹⁹ Official Member of Parliament Profile for [Darin Georgiev](#).

¹⁰⁰ BNR, “New party “Greatness” on the verge of collapse, says founder”, 4 July 2024.

¹⁰¹ Youtube, Live: “Greatness” MP Darin Georgiev speaks [На живо: Говори депутатът от Величие Дарин Георгиев!], 15 June 2024.

¹⁰² EUvsDisinfo, *US plans to wage war for as long as possible at the cost of Ukrainian lives*, 3 May 2024.

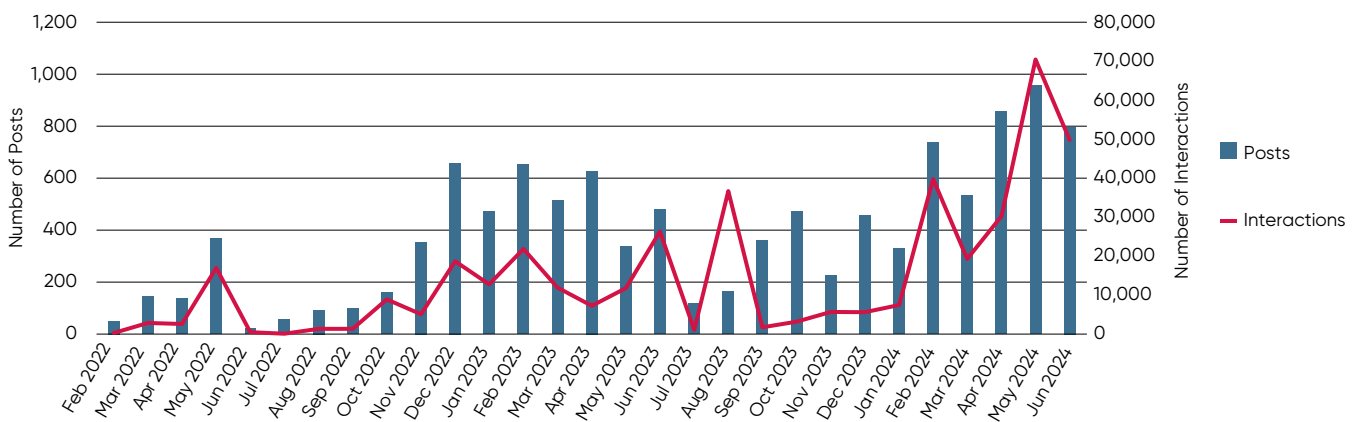
¹⁰³ Razkritia, “Darin Georgiev from BNO party – Let's mess up their plans and create a punitive vote”, 22 March 2023.

¹⁰⁴ EUvsDisinfo, *The Kyiv regime turned Ukraine into a failed state*, 10 January 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Sofia City Court, Register of political parties [Регистър на политическите партии].

Markov, dismissed from the National Security Service in 2007, has become a prominent retired military figure advocating for the Kremlin's agenda. His public profile has grown significantly, particularly through online platforms. Markov frequently presents himself as a national security expert, criticizing NATO and EU policies while opposing Western influence in Bulgaria. His rhetoric aligns closely with Mihaylov's, who previously collaborated with Kostadin Kostadinov of the far-right, pro-Russian "Revival" party. Mihaylov has repeatedly claimed that Nazism exists in Ukraine and advocates for Bulgarian "neutrality," especially through his Facebook group, "Free and Peaceful Bulgaria."¹⁰⁶

Figure 4. Number of Facebook Posts/Interactions Mentioning Nikolay Markov (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD, based on data from CrowdTangle.

Markov and Mihaylov co-founded the Patriots for Bulgaria Foundation, which promotes their anti-Western agenda, urging citizens to donate toward removing what they call the country's "ominous string of criminal or foreign-influenced leaders."¹⁰⁷ This initiative complements Mihaylov's broader efforts, as he is also a key figure in the pro-Kremlin Peace and Sovereignty Initiative, collaborating with retired military officers.

Markov's persistent online media presence contributed significantly to "Greatness"'s electoral success.¹⁰⁸ Notably, he operates independently rather than within a larger organization of former colleagues. On Facebook, he has referred to himself as a Russian spy, boasting about sending materials on weapons in Ukraine "directly to Moscow." He has quoted President Putin, saying, "Nothing can stand between our [Bulgarian and Russian] peoples," and consistently praises Russia's military prowess.¹⁰⁹ Markov exemplifies

¹⁰⁶ The Facebook group has over 30 500 members, hosts the organizational activities around protests calling for the termination of military aid to Ukraine and advocates for members to sign the petition to have the Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty of Bulgaria.

¹⁰⁷ KrasivoVetrinovo.bg, "Foundation "Patriots for Bulgaria" will finance and build Bulgarian governing elite" [Фондация „Родолюбци за България“ ще финансира и изгражда български управленски елит], 3 May 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Soon after their entry into parliament the party split between Markov and Mihaylov. The party did not secure a place in the following 51st National Assembly.

¹⁰⁹ Mediapool, ""Colonel" Markov: Every day I send videos on a secret channel to Moscow" [""Полковник" Марков: Всеки ден пращам клипове по секретен канал на Москва], 12 June 2024.

how social media and pro-Kremlin disinformation enable individuals to gain political power, as seen by “Greatness”’s entry into parliament alongside other pro-Russian parties like “Revival” and BSP. These parties are actively advancing the Kremlin’s agenda, including passing a Russian-style ban on “LGBT propaganda in schools”.¹¹⁰ In the October 2024 parliamentary elections, “Greatness” received nearly 100,000 votes but failed to enter the National Assembly, falling just short of the threshold. The party, along with other political parties, has challenged the election results, citing reports of multiple violations.

Associations, Unions, and Initiatives

While Markov is somewhat of an outlier, many pro-Russian enablers congregate in various organizations within Bulgaria’s former military sector. This sector has seen significant Russian influence, particularly through the activities of various organizations composed of retired military officers, despite their charters often stating support for Bulgaria’s NATO membership.¹¹¹ These organizations are interconnected, frequently sharing members and governance structures, thereby enhancing their collective influence.

Some organizations of former and current military personnel in Bulgaria maintain connections with similar Russian entities. Although these organizations generally express moderate views, a subset of their members aligns with Kremlin support networks. These organizations often publicly endorse political initiatives that are overtly pro-Russian, thereby bolstering Kremlin support among broader segments of Bulgarian society. For instance, the Reserve Officers and Non-commissioned Officers’ Union (RONU), the largest patriotic-military organization in Bulgaria with over 21,000 members,¹¹² has institutional ties with Russian military and veterans’ organizations, including the Russian International Confederation of Generals, Admirals, and Reserve Officers (ICO). Although ICO has largely ceased public activity since 2022, RONU continues its connections.¹¹³ RONU has not issued a formal statement on the Ukraine war, but it has supported Stefan Yanev’s “Bulgarian Rise” party. During a meeting with Yanev, then the Minister of Defence, RONU leadership assured members that “no Bulgarian soldier will be sent to fight in Ukraine,” reiterating support for a “diplomatic” solution to the war.¹¹⁴ RONU also benefits from the patronage of President Radev, who advocates for their involvement in imparting military knowledge to younger generations.¹¹⁵ This focus on youth engagement was also emphasized in a 2019 meeting in Moscow organized by the ICO, where veterans from Bulgaria, Serbia, and Russia met. The working group on

¹¹⁰ Club Z, “135 MPs pass ban on LGBT propaganda in schools – two readings in one day” [[135 депутати приеха забрана на ЛГБТ пропагандата в училище – на две четения в един ден](#)], 7 August 2024.

¹¹¹ For example: Reserve Officers and Non-commissioned Officers’ Union (RONU), Charter [[СОСЗР, Устав](#)].

¹¹² At the moment there are 21 742 members. From: [Otrana.com](#), New Honorary Members of RONU [[Нови почетни членове на СОСЗР](#)], April 2024.

¹¹³ International Confederation of Generals and Admirals and Reserve Officers, [Members](#).

¹¹⁴ Bulgarian Rise, “Gen. Stefan Yanev: We will not allow a single Bulgarian soldier to shed his blood in Ukraine!” [Ген. Стефан Янев: Няма да допуснем нито един български войник да пролее кръвта си в Украйна!](#), Bulgarian Rise: pre-election meetings, 29 May 2024.

¹¹⁵ [Otrana.com](#), “The Reserves held its Fourth National Convention” [[Запасното войнство проведе Четвъртия си национален събор](#)], 14 June 2024.

youth engagement was chaired by Russian Col. Gen. Aleksandr Kolmakov, a member of Putin's "special military operation" working group and former Deputy Minister of Defence.^{116,117}

Similarly, the Union of War Veterans of Bulgaria signed an agreement with the Russian Veterans Union, then led by retired Gen. Mikhail Moiseyev, former Chief of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces.¹¹⁸ The Confederation of Civil Organizations for Security and Defence (CSDPO), the second-largest organization of its kind, consisting of 14 groups uniting reserve officers and former national security personnel, also maintains close collaboration with Russian organizations. Prominent CSDPO members, such as retired Maj. Gen. Stoimen Stoimenov and retired Capt. Lazar Murdzhev, openly express pro-Kremlin views. Some CSDPO members are also associated with the Bulgarian Russophiles National Movement and the political party "Russophiles for the Revival of the Fatherland."^{119,120} CSDPO has joined the "1,000,000 Voices for Peace" initiative, advocating for a "radical change" in Bulgaria's and the EU's stance on the Ukraine war.¹²¹

Both RONU and CSDPO have significant ties to Russian or pro-Russian organizations across different domains, including politics. For example, they are linked to the Bulgarian Russophiles National Movement and the political party "Russophiles for the Revival of the Fatherland", whose leader Nikolai Malinov has been accused of espionage in favor of Russia. Malinov's connections include Reshetnikov, former director of the RISS, and Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, both of whom openly state their goal to "cut Bulgaria off from the West and reorient it towards Russia."¹²²

The non-governmental organization BROD for Bulgaria [Future, Kin, Motherland, State for Bulgaria], co-founded by Murdzhev, serves as an online platform that publishes articles by retired military officers and civil security professionals, often featuring pro-Russian viewpoints.¹²³ In addition to online content, BROD for Bulgaria publishes the journal "Security" [Sigurnost], featuring the same authors and operating a scientific-expert club composed

¹¹⁶ Soszr.bg, "RONU strengthens its international standing" [СОСЗР укрепва международния си авторитет], October 2019.

¹¹⁷ "Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation and Navy of Russia" acts as link between Russian military and society by facilitating the recruitment of young people into the military reserves. From: Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/1218, 23 June 2023.

¹¹⁸ Spiridonov, S., "Signed a cooperation agreement with the Russian Veterans Union" [Подписаха споразумение за сътрудничество с Руския съюз на ветераните], *Otbrana.bg*, 18 June 2019.

¹¹⁹ For example, the 60th birthday party of one of the leaders of the CSDPO Murdzhev was heavily popularised by the Russophile movement (Nikolay Malinov was also pictured in attendance) with Murdzhev also receiving an award from BROD for Bulgaria. From: PPVO.bg, "60 Lazarnika and A Tale of Humanization / Lazar Murdzhev at 60" [60 Лазарника и Приказка за очовечаването /Лазар Мурджев на 60], September 2022.

¹²⁰ The National Russophile Movement Association includes the following retired military officers: Gen. Dimitar Shivikov, Gen. Tihomir Stoychev, Col. Marko Petrov, Capt. Nako Stefanov and Gen. Zlatan Stoikov.

¹²¹ CSDPO.eu, "CSDPO joins the 1 000 000 Voices for Peace initiative" [КООСО се присъединява към инициативата „1 000 000 гласа за мир"], n.d.

¹²² Factor.bg, "Special report sheds light on Russian subversion among Bulgarian officers", 5 June 2024.

¹²³ BROD for Bulgaria, Authors [БРОД за България: Автори].

mainly of former State Security officers. The platform serves¹²⁴ as a unified online space for disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in Bulgaria, covering topics such as the war in Ukraine, NATO, and the EU. Among the prominent figures associated with the platform are retired Gen. Tihomir Stoychev, former head of the Central Service for Combating Organized Crime, and retired Maj. Gen. Stoimen Stoimenov, former Deputy Chief of Intelligence for the Bulgarian Army. BROD for Bulgaria provided extensive coverage of the launch of Stoimenov's pro-Russian book, "Escalation of the War in Ukraine: Bulgaria at a Crossroad", which reportedly featured an unverified letter of support from President Radev.¹²⁵

Stoimenov, along with other prominent former military and security sector officers, is part of the Soldiers for Peace Initiative, which advocates for Bulgarian "neutrality" in Russia's war against Ukraine.¹²⁶ The initiative opposes any military or technical assistance to Ukraine and calls on former military members to join the March for Peace and Sovereignty and to sign the Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty petition.^{127,128,129} Stoimenov noted that the initiative was inspired by a 2021 open letter from a group of French retired military officers to President Macron, threatening to "restore order" if he did not curtail anti-racist movements in France.^{130,131} This example underscores that pro-Russian influence on Bulgaria's retired military officers is not an isolated phenomenon but part of the Kremlin's broader strategy to exploit the former military sector across Europe.

Extending Pro-Kremlin Narratives to Higher Military Schools

Borislav Gutsanov, a prominent BSP member and long-serving MP (2013 – 2014 and 2024)¹³², has supported numerous narratives that align with pro-Kremlin stances. In 2011, his wife acquired the online outlet *Petel.bg*, which has since amplified pro-Russian and anti-Western content in the country.¹³³ This includes Gutsanov's 2022 pre-election videos opposing shale gas and

¹²⁴ BRODbg.com, Club "Security" [Клуб Сигурност].

¹²⁵ ppvo.bg, "The Repressed Lecture, General Stoimenov and "Soldiers for Peace" [Репресираната презентация Генерал Стоименов и „Воини за Мир“], 19 May 2024.

¹²⁶ The initiative is also heavily popularized by BROD for Bulgaria. From: Totomirov, T., "SOLDIERS FOR PEACE" 2024 – the year of destiny! [„ВОИНИ ЗА МИР“ 2024 – година на съдбата!], BRODbg.com.

¹²⁷ Pogled.info, "Address of the Public Initiative Council "Soldiers for Peace"" [Обръщение на Обществения инициативен съвет „Воини за мир“], 18 June 2023.

¹²⁸ *The Peace and sovereignty referendum petition* is also advocated by retired Col. Mikhail Kharlampiev, and Col. Todor Predov, and it aims to collect enough signatures to trigger a referendum over establishing a national policy of neutrality, ceasing the military aid to Ukraine, and forbidding the stationing of foreign soldiers in Bulgaria. Stoimenov also notes that all sizable former military groups around the country have enthusiastically accepted the call to action.

¹²⁹ Many Marches for Peace took place around the country in 2023 with one of the main faces of the marches being retired Gen. Dimitar Shivikov. The last march: Youtube.com, March for Peace – "Let's Save Bulgaria!" – Sofia, 22.10.2023 [Полоход за мир – "Да спасим България!" – София, 22.10.2023 г.].

¹³⁰ Youtube.com, "Why are "Soldiers for Peace" behind President Radev? Will the military oppose Minister Tagarev?" [Защо „Воини за мир“ са зад президента Радев? Ще се противопоставят ли военните на министър Тагарев?], 5 June 2023.

¹³¹ BBC, "Anger as ex-generals warn of 'deadly civil war' in France", 27 April 2021.

¹³² Official Member of Parliament Profile for Borislav Gutsanov.

¹³³ Sabev, Georgiev, and McLaren, *Safeguarding the Foundations*, Sofia: CSD, 2024.

wind turbines, echoing broader pro-Kremlin narratives that attack renewable energy and falsely claim that global warming is a hoax.^{134,135,136}

Gutsanov holds three degrees from the Rakovski National Defence College. His PhD dissertation heavily echoes Kremlin narratives, alleging that a "deep state in the U.S." aims to "impose a neoliberal world order" by artificially increasing military tensions in Eastern Europe and manipulating relations between Europe and Russia.¹³⁷ According to Gutsanov, these actions by the U.S. are intended to create a strategic buffer in the region, influencing Western Europe's policies towards Russia.¹³⁸ The dissertation's reliance on local media outlets known for spreading conspiracy theories, along with several Russian-owned media outlets, some of which have been recently sanctioned internationally, undermines its academic integrity, casting doubt on both the objectivity and scholarly rigor of Gutsanov's research and the credibility of Bulgaria's oldest military institution of higher education.¹³⁹

Prof. Dr. Vladko Ivanov, from the Department of Security and Border Control at the Academy of the Ministry of Interior, commended Gutsanov's work, aligning with his assertion that global leaders are losing control in their transition from pragmatic isolationism to a neoliberal framework of global dominance.¹⁴⁰ Both professors highlight the alleged influence of transnational corporations and the so-called "Deep State," which they claim operates across national borders, exerts control over financial systems, and competes for global resources. The inclusion of pro-Kremlin narratives in Gutsanov's PhD dissertation, coupled with its endorsement by members of the academic jury, raises significant concerns regarding academic integrity and the standards upheld by the Military Academy.

The Network of Pro-Kremlin Voices

This network of pro-Kremlin organisations with connections to Russian counterparts and its activities have detrimental implications for Bulgaria and its national security. One major such implication is related to a very prominent narrative often repeated by the above groups that Bulgarian soldiers will be sent to fight in Ukraine, which was also a focal point at the March for Peace and Sovereignty.¹⁴¹ As reported by the MoD, this supposedly has been one of

¹³⁴ Petel.bg, "Borislav Gutsanov: BSP will not allow to drill for shale gas" [Борислав Гуцанов: БСП няма да позволи да се дупчи земята за шистов газ], 21 September 2022.

¹³⁵ Petel.bg, "My name is Borislav Gutsanov and for me Varna is my whole life" [Казвам се Борислав Гуцанов и за мен Варна е целият ми живот], 22 May 2024.

¹³⁶ EUvsDisinfo, *Green energy is a scam, Gazprom is safer*, 10 October 2021.

¹³⁷ G. S. Rakovski Military Academy, Abstract of Gutsanov's PhD dissertation on *Current Aspects of the Security Environment and Their Impact on the Defence Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria* [Актуални аспекти на средата за сигурност и влиянието им върху отбранителната политика на Република България], Sofia, 2021.

¹³⁸ Gutsanov, B., *Current Aspects of the Security Environment and Their Impact on the Defence Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria*, p. 8.

¹³⁹ Dzhoeva, T., "Prof. Valeri Stefanov: The world is entering a multifaceted clash with unpredictable consequences" [Проф. Валери Стефанов: Светът навлиза в многостранен сблъсък с непредвидими последици], *Epicenter.bg*, 12 February 2017.

¹⁴⁰ G.S. Rakovski Military Academy, *Statement by Professor Dr. Vladko Ivanov, Professor at the Department of Security and Border Control, Academy of the Ministry of the Interior on the dissertation of Borislav Gutsanov Gutsanov* [Становище от професор доктор Владко Мичов Иванов, професор в катедра „Сигурност и граничен контрол“, Академия на МВР], Sofia, 2021.

¹⁴¹ Youtube.com, March for Peace and Sovereignty – NPC, 09.07.2023 [Поход за мир и суверенитет – НДК, 09.07.2023 г.], 10 July 2023.

the main reasons for a major decline (-35%) of applications to the Vasil Levski National Military University in 2023.¹⁴² Furthermore, the lack of significant pushback or scrutiny against these pro-Russian actors within Bulgaria has allowed them to consolidate over time, becoming increasingly more vocal. This complicates Bulgaria's defence posture and exposes the state to more risks posed by Russian hybrid actions in the region.

The pro-Kremlin organizations and individuals described here, while often lacking explicit connections, share implicit ties related to biographical backgrounds, political and economic activities, and shared interests. The overt and covert links between these actors paint a picture of an interconnected network, where visible or traceable links may sometimes be misleading, as the more significant relationships may be more challenging to detect. Despite these complexities, the network of pro-Kremlin voices tied to Bulgaria's military can only be fully understood in its entirety.

Although there is no apparent evidence of coordinated action by the entire network to disseminate specific disinformation campaigns or narratives, analysis of content posted online and on social media shows that individual actors often support, complement, or build on positions expressed by others within the network. This mutual amplification occurs through support for the same "offline" initiatives and narratives, thereby building and sustaining different parts of the network.

The role of former military officers and security sector experts in shaping local and national policies should not be underestimated. Their specific knowledge and expertise grant them credibility in security matters, allowing them to lend legitimacy to pro-Kremlin views, often framed as arguments about national defence or security strategy. This makes their support for pro-Russian positions particularly influential in shaping public opinion and policy. Their involvement is crucial for applying soft power tools, especially in cognitive capture and working with civil society organizations.

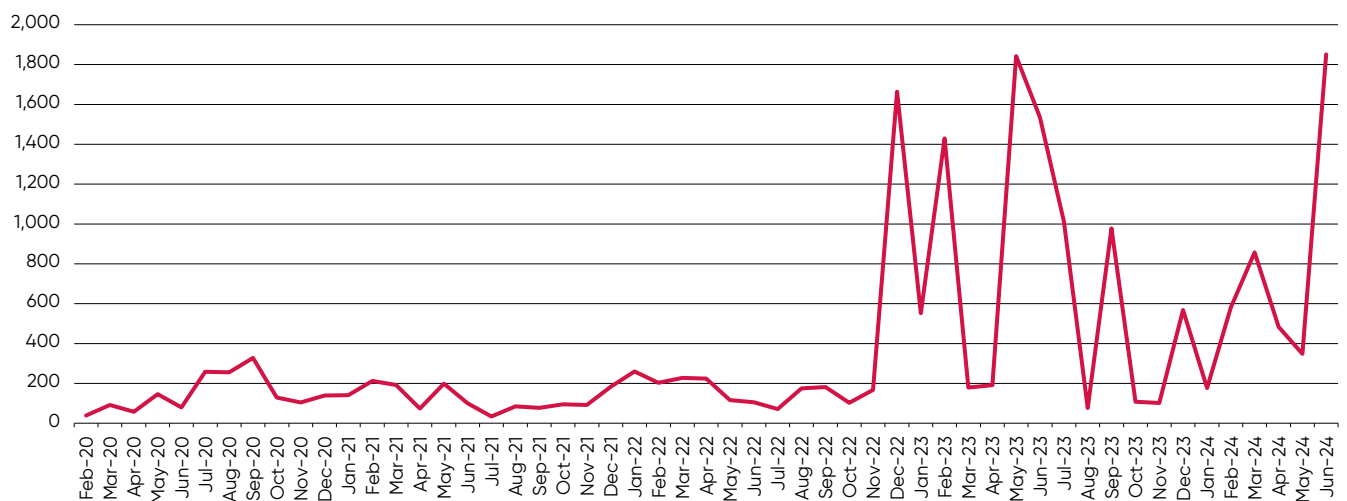
¹⁴² Chavdarov, N., "Disinformation campaign against MoD has led to drop in cadet enrolment" [Дезинформационна кампания срещу МО е довела до спад в приема на курсанти], *Arty Media*, 7 November 2023.

THE CHANNELS OF EX-MILITARY INFLUENCE

Online Media Outlets

The influence of disinformation propagated by retired military officers and disseminated through specific media channels significantly challenges Bulgaria’s political landscape and public opinion, particularly concerning international alignments such as NATO and national security policies. Retired military officers have been particularly active after the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February of 2022 with the volume of online content spiking and entering the mainstream media with thousands of misleading articles being published on some of the country’s most visited websites between October 2022 and October 2023 in particular due to political strife over the decision to send military aid to Ukraine.

Figure 5. Volume in Online Media, Articles Mentioning All Pro-Kremlin Retired Military Officers (Feb 2020 – Jun 2024)



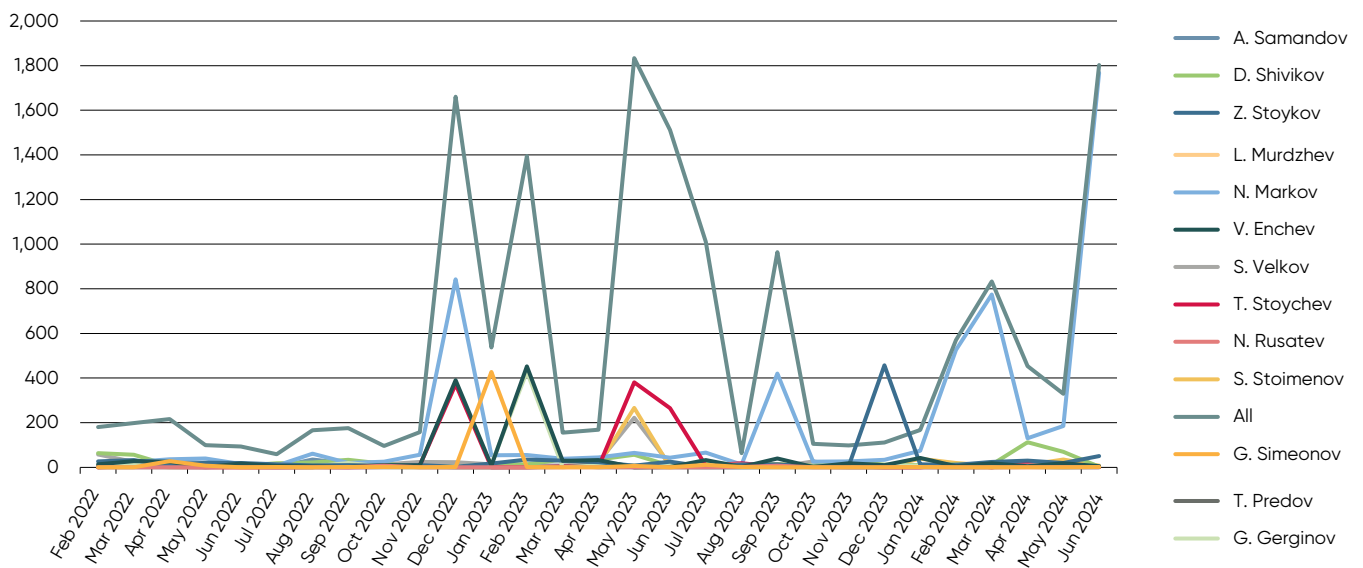
Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

Between February 2022 and June 2024 articles in online news outlets mentioning retired military officers amounted to 16,107 with a potential reach of 10,662,727. Until October 2022 steady low levels of publications are the norm, while after that article numbers began to spike significantly with the onset of the political debate over military aid reaching a peak in the summer of 2023. One explanation for the spikes is the work of the “mushroom site machine” which was first put to full use in Bulgaria in 2023 (see below). Around 74% (11,975 articles) of all collected articles were published by websites belonging to the top 3 in terms of domestic visibility ranking with 40% landing in the top rank category.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Ranking is provided by Sensika, which ranks websites on a scale of 1 to 10. Ranking is based on a mix of estimates of a site’s monthly unique visitors and monthly page views across desktop and mobile web traffic. The more visitors and views, the higher the site’s rank is. Highly visited mainstream websites typically belong in the first two ranks.

Different retired military officers with pro-Kremlin stands in their positions had different levels of exposure. The top mentioned retired officer is Nikolay Markov with 5,468 articles, followed by Velizar Enchev with 1,224, Tihomir Stoychev with 1,106, Zlatan Stoykov with 937 and Dimitar Shivikov with 709 articles. The total potential reach peaked highest in June 2024 with 1,697,614, roughly around 30% of the internet users in Bulgaria, likely due to the highly increased online presence of Markov during his pre-election campaign for the "Greatness" party, which took place predominantly online. Some of them have been active or regular authors in particular news outlets, that are well known to spread pro-Kremlin disinformation in the country. For example, Tihomir Stoychev is a columnist for "Pogled.info" news outlet,¹⁴⁴ which has published regularly content, directly translated from Russian state-owned media and ideological think-tanks such as Katehon or Strategic Culture Foundation. The re-print of such a content is a direct violation of the EU sanctions against Russia,¹⁴⁵ which prohibits the broadcast or publication of any content produced by sanctioned entities.¹⁴⁶

Figure 6. Volume in Online Media, Articles Per Retired Military Officers (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

The sources cluster according to the disinformation proliferation model, identified as the "mushroom site machine".¹⁴⁷ For example, under the BG7.

¹⁴⁴ Pogled.info, Tihomir Stoychev's column.

¹⁴⁵ European Union, Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine, OJ L 229 31.7.2014, p. 1

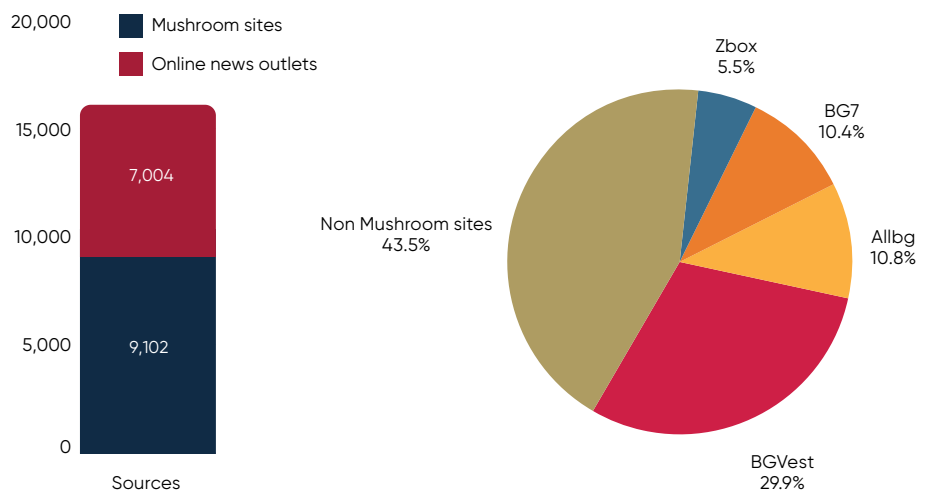
¹⁴⁶ Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014, Article 2f: "It shall be prohibited for operators to broadcast or to enable, facilitate or otherwise contribute to broadcast, any content by the legal persons, entities or bodies listed in Annex XV".

¹⁴⁷ The "mushroom site machine" – these are more than 370 anonymous sites with almost identical design (two basic patterns) and identical content (they publish the same articles). They have four main domains in common (dnes24.eu, zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, allbg.eu), from which subdomains are cloned – for example, novini701.dnes24.eu, novinarbg.dnes24.eu, etc. From: *Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria Online* (January-March 2023) Part I. Newsletter of the Human and Social Studies Foundation, Sofia, 06.06.2023

eu domain, there are multiple custom-tailored websites known for producing a significant volume of identical articles, amplifying diverse disinformation narratives. These platforms are central to the share4Pay network, encouraging individuals to propagate pro-Russian narratives through various personalized websites under the same domain.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, there are ~400 instances of a single article distributed across multiple such mushroom websites. The article featured an unedited version of a Facebook post by Nikolay Markov, critiquing former defence Minister Todor Tagarev’s decision on military aid distribution to Ukraine. The article titled *Tagarev, we know what you did last summer!* is now only available on Blitz.bg.¹⁴⁹

While the clusters are significant, in terms of unique content, some of the most notable sources include: Pogled Info – 224 articles, an outlet that exclusively translates content from think-tanks and ideologues that are close to the Kremlin (e.g. the Strategic Culture Foundation, Katehon, and Alexander Dugin), many of whom have been sanctioned by the EU; Epicenter – 186, Informiran.net – 230, 24 Chasa – 61; Pogled EU (an offshoot of Pogled Info) – 108 and Blitz.bg – 96 articles (often credited as being the most visited local news website). Over 71% of the total visits to the articles are estimated to have originated from direct traffic, meaning users who access a website directly, without clicking on a different link on visiting another website.¹⁵⁰ This indicates that Bulgarian users are very more likely to be actively seeking out this type of problematic content.

Figure 7. Online Source Clusters Mentioning pro-Kremlin Retired Officers (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

¹⁴⁸ By using a cash-for-clicks model, small-time profit-seekers are enlisted in the spread of disinformation by setting up websites known as “mushrooms.” From: Angelov, G., and Heil, A., “I Worked For The ‘Mushroom Machine’: Inside Bulgaria’s Cash-For-Disinformation Network”, RFE/RL, 19 May 2024.

¹⁴⁹ Blitz.bg, “Polk. Markov: Tagarev, we know what you did last summer!” [Полк. Марков: Тагарев, знаем какво направи миналото лято!], 7 February 2024.

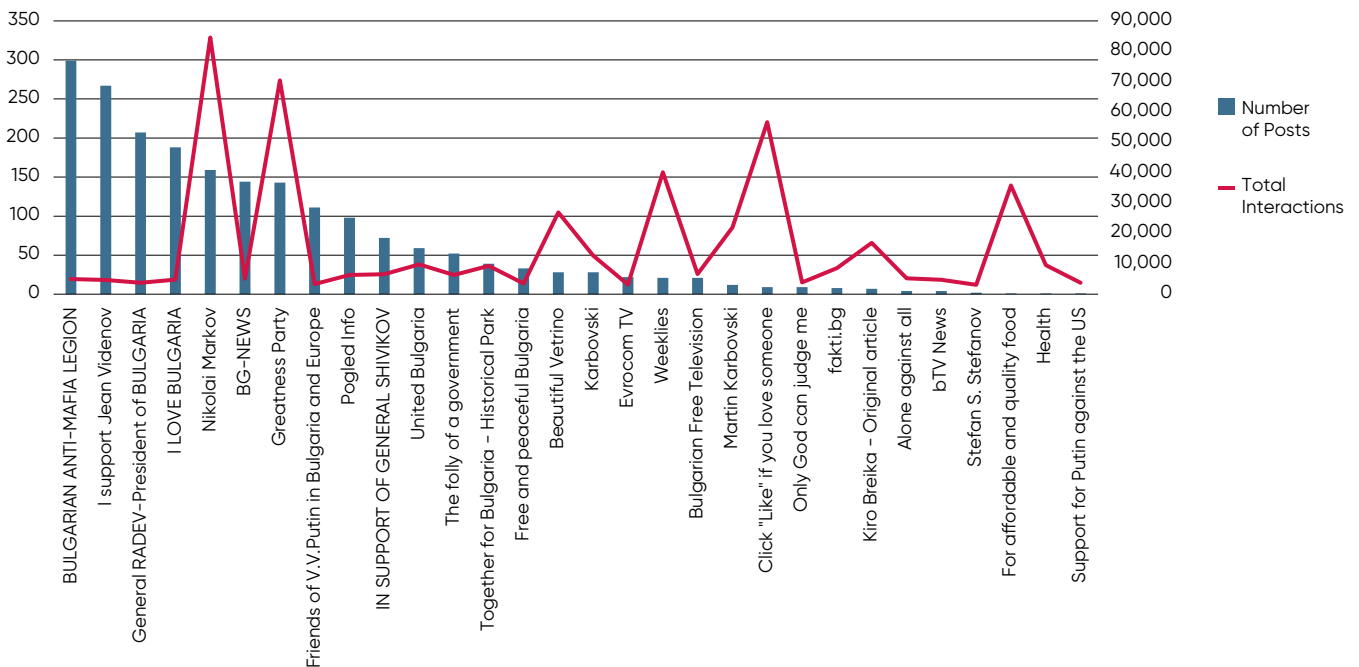
¹⁵⁰ It is important to note, however, that unidentified referring sources are also categorized as direct traffic by search engine optimization (SEO) and website intelligence tools.

A lot of the coverage for these retired military officers also comes via their initiatives as well. For example, the media partners of the Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty petition are numerous and produce predominantly video content, which is more difficult to track – Pogled info’s podcast, Evrocom TV, Alfa TV, Just Bulgaria, Bulgaria 24, Efir info, 7/8’s Krum Savov Live and Studio X, Bulgarian National Radio – Petar Volgin, Martin Karbovski, Mihaylov’s Free and Peaceful Bulgaria group (Facebook and Telegram), Smoke screen with Aleksandar Sivilov, Dobri Bozhilov (influencer), Rational Resistance with Martin Petrushev, TV Zornitsa Canada and Silva Doncheva.¹⁵¹

Facebook¹⁵²

This is reflected in the data collected from Facebook as the top Facebook pages by most interactions include Eurocom TV with 39 posts between its two pages with 43,176 interactions and Martin Karbovski with a total number of interactions between his two pages of 34,667 for just 40 posts. Pogled Info further has 98 posts with 6,351 interactions. However, the largest cluster here is that of the pages related to Mihaylov and Markov’s party “Greatness” – the pages of Markov himself, the party’s, the page Beautiful Vetrinovo and Together for Historical Park collectively have 369 posts and 191,214 interactions, and while this is likely again connected to the election the staggering number of interactions shows a real interest and support on the part of the users.

Figure 8. Top 30 Facebook Pages by Most Interactions per Post Mentioning the Former Military (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from CrowdTangle.

¹⁵¹ Narodna.me, “What actually happened at Shipka – March 3, 2024” [Какво всъщност стана на Шипка – 3 март 2024 г.], 8 March 2024.

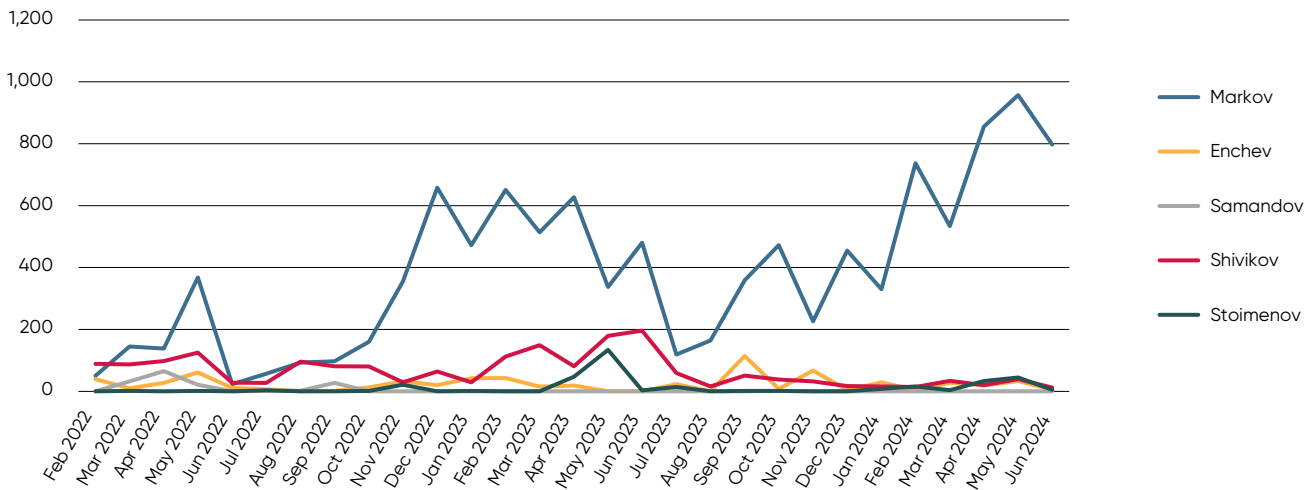
¹⁵² While Facebook remains the most dominant social media platform in Bulgaria, future research should also cover YouTube, as during the process of compiling the data, YouTube emerged as a similarly dominant platform of propagating disinformation by the retired military officers.

The total number of interactions and posts on Facebook amounted to 16,539 posts and 702,512 interactions respectively.

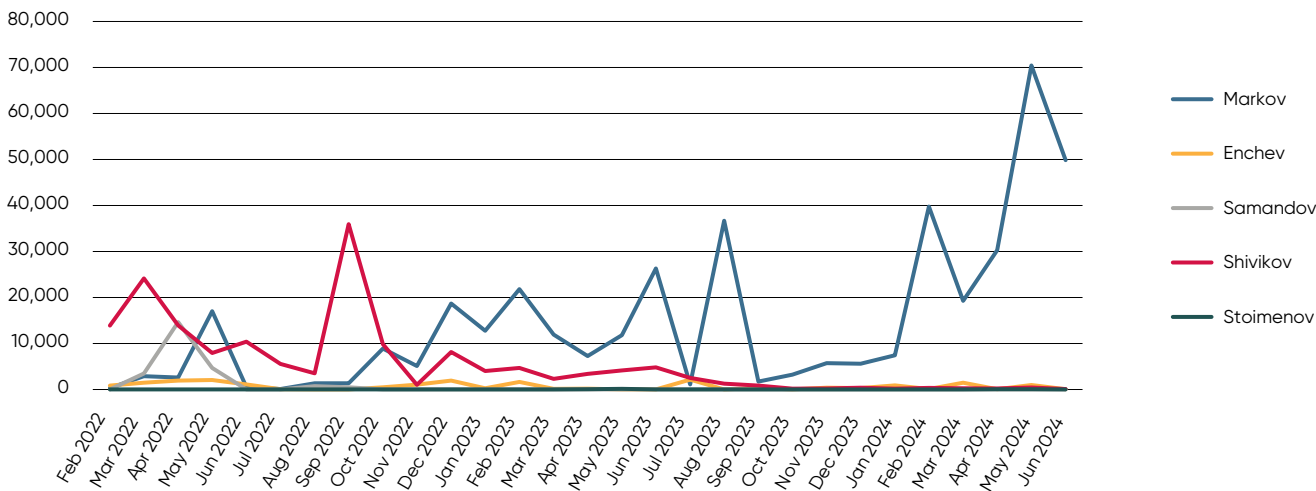
Markov again emerges as the most prominent with 11,230 posts and 421,409 interactions among the retired officers. Markov’s dominance, however, is not only around the 2024 elections, but also prior in 2023 where his posts and interactions surge dramatically, reflecting that he was already garnering a loyal and engaged audience. Additionally, overlapping trends between Markov, Shivikov, and Stoimenov signify also joint initiatives that boost both visibility and engagement.¹⁵³

Figure 9. Number of Posts/Interactions Per Month Per Retired Officer (Top 5 by Interactions) (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)

Number of posts by month



Number of interactions per month



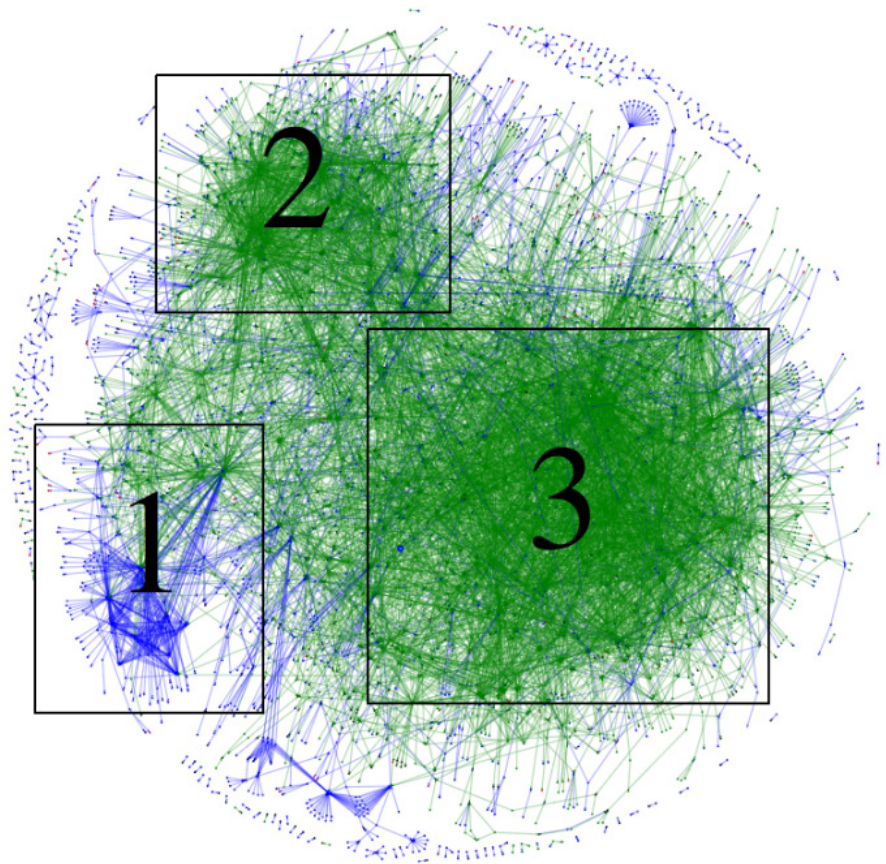
Source: CSD calculations, based on data from CrowdTangle.

¹⁵³ The data excludes the coverage of popular local cases such as the murder of Alexei Petrov and the case involving Martin the Notary, that have been considered as not relevant.

The bubble interacting with these posts over the last two years is roughly made up of 15% of Facebook users in Bulgaria (Around 4 million users estimate).

Overall, the Facebook bubble posting and interacting with posts mentioning retired officers, who proliferate pro-Kremlin disinformation, is quite sizable and grew over time. It is also a part of a larger Facebook cluster, number 3 (Figure 10), which represents nationalist and right-wing political groups and individuals proliferating popular anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-Russian rhetoric on the topic of military aid for Ukraine. Several nodes in this cluster represent Facebook events such as the Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty of Bulgaria and Bulgaria – a zone of peace!, both of which featured retired military officers.¹⁵⁴

Figure 10. Military Aid for Ukraine – Facebook's clusters



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from CrowdTangle.

¹⁵⁴ Nodes represent Facebook accounts (individual profiles, public groups and pages) and external resources (website, including media, YouTube video, Telegram post, etc. or file) shared by users. The relationships between the nodes were weighted by the number of interactions (sum of shares + reactions) between the given Facebook account and the given external resource. The analysis groups the nodes into clusters based on the number of relationships between the nodes.

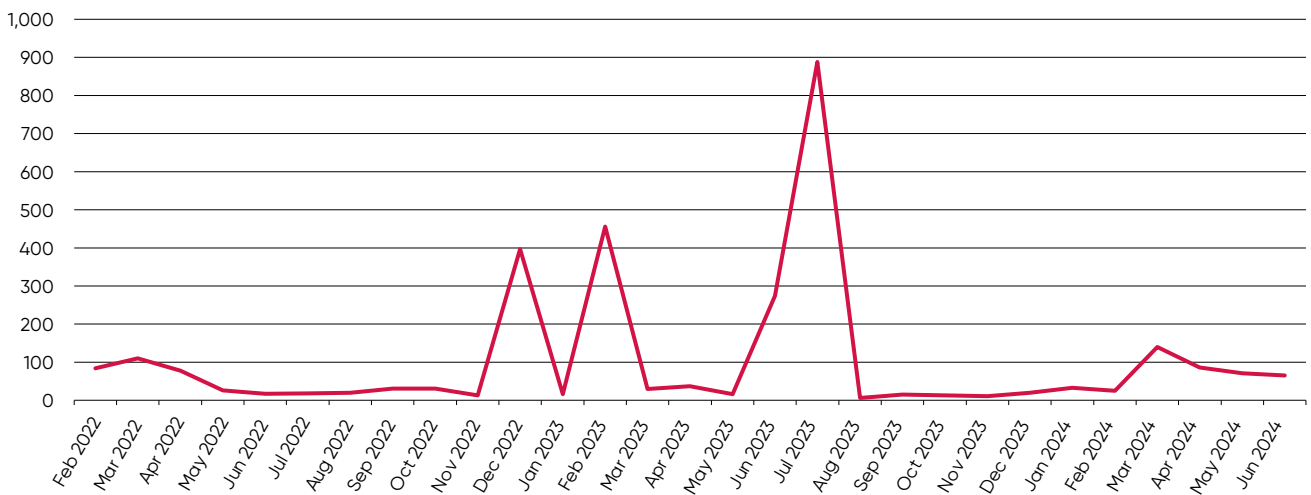
The Narratives

The main narratives proliferated by the retired military officers focus on the war in Ukraine with five main meta-narratives emerging as the most dominant – “Ukraine is losing the war”, “Bulgaria should be neutral”, “Military aid to Ukraine should be stopped as it – 1) prolongs the war, 2) depletes the Bulgarian army, 3) involves Bulgaria in directly in the war”, “Bulgarian politicians are traitors and serve foreign interests because of their support for Ukraine”, “There will be mobilization of Bulgarian of Bulgarian soldiers”.

It’s worth noting that the disinformation narratives often are overlapping and work in symbiosis. For example, most of the narratives carry the underlying suggestion that Ukraine is inevitably going to lose the war. The Pro-Russian propaganda machine in Bulgaria claims that either Russia wins the war, or it leads to a global nuclear disaster. This narrative is often coupled with the prevailing narrative that Bulgarian politicians are traitors and prioritize Ukraine over their citizens’ welfare. Pro-Kremlin media emphasizes that military assistance from Bulgaria to Ukraine – a country deemed to be losing, only prolongs the suffering of innocent individuals, a narrative proliferated by both former Defence Minister Yanev and the President and some of the other retired military officers, e.g. Shivikov.¹⁵⁵ Instead, they advocate for military resources to be utilized domestically, albeit without a clear explanation of how do so as the Bulgarian military has failed to modernise effectively since the 1990s.

The narrative that “Ukraine is losing the war”, the second most popular narrative with 3,027 articles, peaked during the failed Ukrainian counteroffensive in the summer of 2023.

Figure 11. Narrative “Ukraine is Losing the War” Volume in Online Media (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)

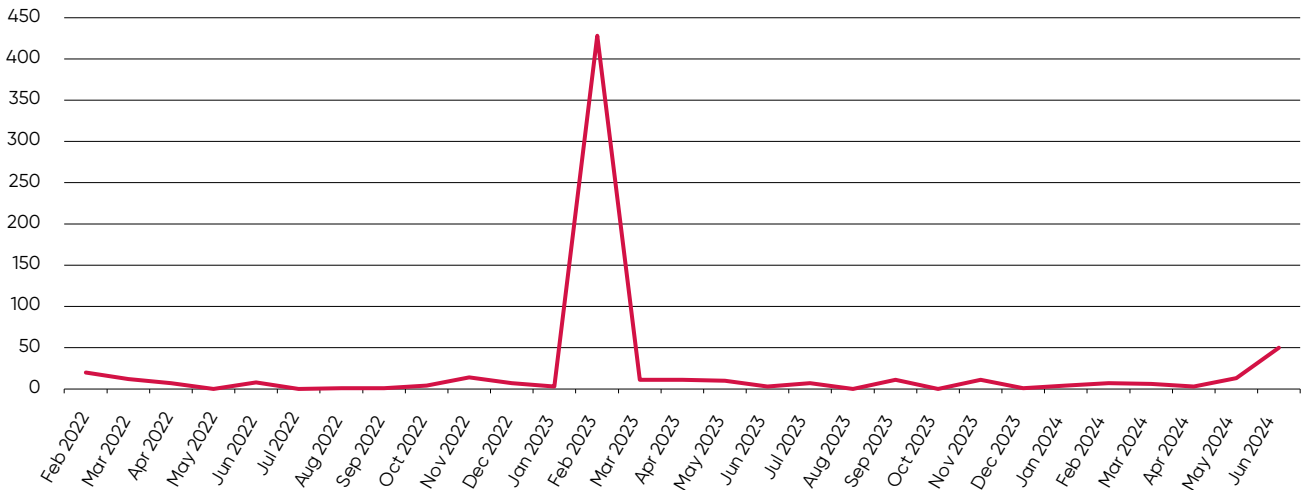


Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

¹⁵⁵ Sabev, Georgiev, and McLaren, *Safeguarding the Foundations*, Sofia: CSD, 2024; Georgiev, Petrova, and Tsabala, *Breaking the Code*, Sofia: CSD, 2023.

The narratives related to Bulgarian political and military decisions have distinct spikes corresponding to specific events. The narrative that “Bulgarian politicians are traitors” saw a significant increase with 653 articles around the time of the Ministry of Defence’s publication of the Report on the State of Defence and Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria, where Bulgaria’s commitment to NATO and support for Ukraine was reiterated.¹⁵⁶

Figure 12. Narrative “Bulgarian Politicians Are Traitors” Volume in Online Media (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

Military support to Ukraine by the EU and U.S. is making a difference on the battlefield every day and its only goal is to help Ukraine to uphold its right of self-defence, which is enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Retired Gen. Shivikov was the primary individual who frequently portrayed the Armed Forces of Ukraine as having no chance of winning during the monitored period.^{157,158} Notable spikes in this narrative came following the caretaker government’s decision in December 2022 to officially approve military aid to Ukraine, as well as the subsequent appeal by BSP and “Revival” to the Constitutional Court to declare this decision unconstitutional.^{159,160} The narrative also peaks with each new package or expansion of military support and represents overall the most popular with 5,455 articles, 33% of the overall volume.

The “Neutrality” narrative, closely tied to efforts such as the Marches for Peace, which took place in 2023, the Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty Initiative and to “Greatness”’s political agenda, sees a rise accordingly and

¹⁵⁶ Zabov, N., “Cabinet Approves 2023 Report on State of Defence and Armed Forces”, BTA, 20 March 2023.

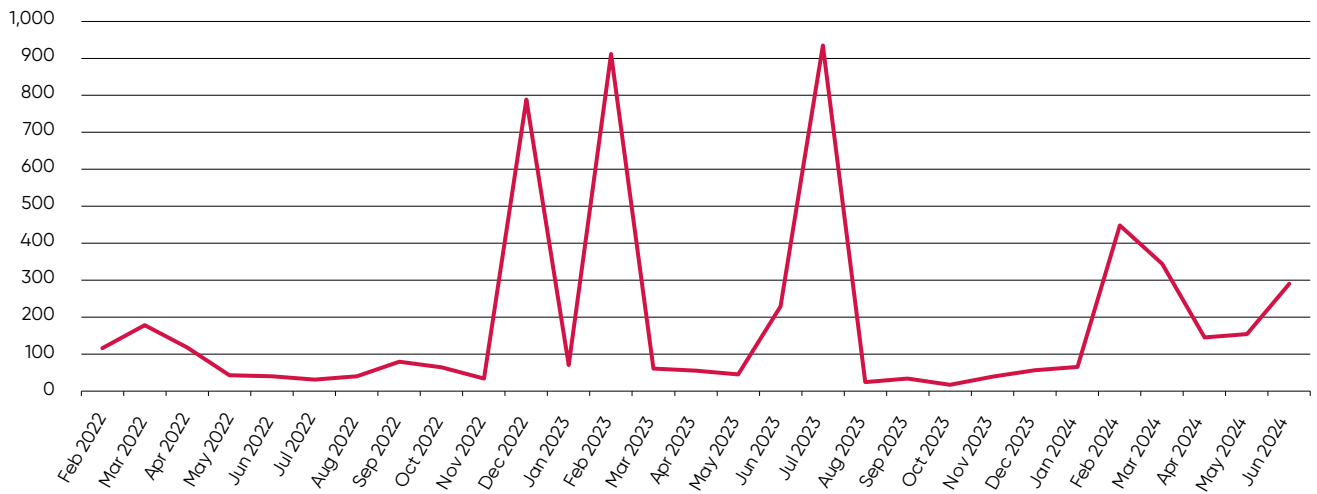
¹⁵⁷ The monitoring period for all of the data is 1st of February 2022 to 16th of June 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Youtube.com, “Gen. Dimitar Shivikov: Ukraine will lose territories and will not enter NATO and EU” [Ген. Димитър Шивиков: Украйна ще загуби територии и няма да влезе в НАТО и ЕС], Maritsa Podcast, 13 February 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Sofia Globe, “Bulgarian weapons in service with Ukrainian territorial forces – report”, 20 December 2022.

¹⁶⁰ BNR, “BSP and Vazrazhdane refer decision to send weaponry to Ukraine to the Constitutional Court”, 23 December 2022.

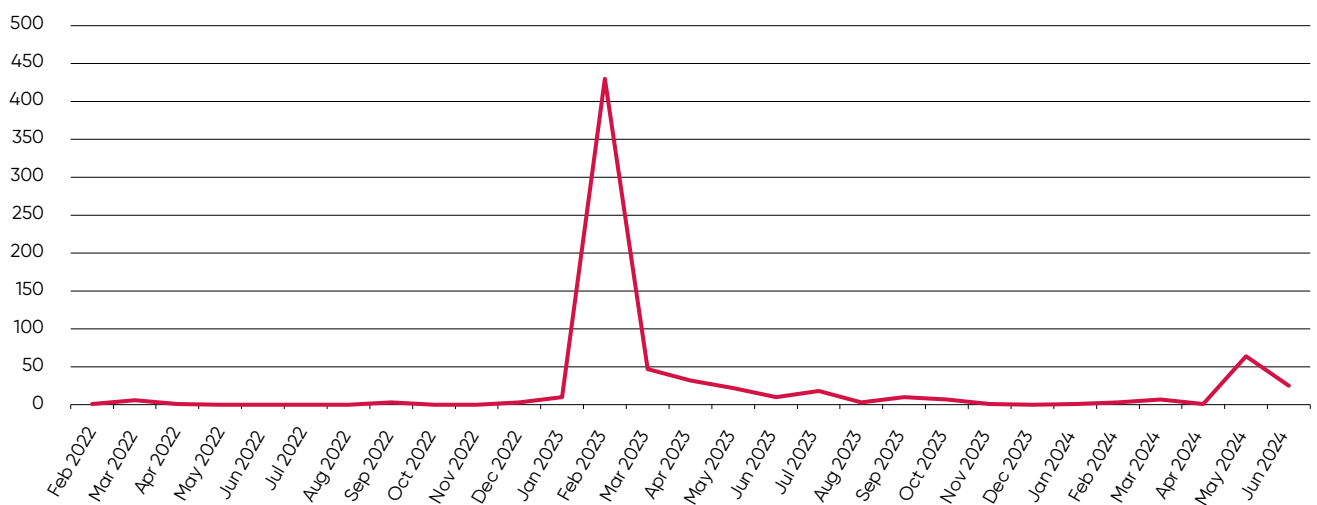
Figure 13. Narrative “Stop the Military Aid” Volume in Online Media (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

constitutes 705 articles.¹⁶¹ “Neutrality” or “Bulgaria should be neutral” has become a catch-all phrase for all Russian supporters. The pre-existing positive association of the term itself has likely managed to also convince many Bulgarians who were initially on the fence about the conflict. Alongside “peace” and “sovereignty”, the pro-Russian section of society in Bulgaria headed by organisations such as National Russophiles Movement have capitalized on the pre-existing biases of people that these terms are positive and worth taking a stand for. The actual contextual meaning of these terms in relation to the war in Ukraine has become a lot more muddled. On the one hand, Bulgaria is already at peace and a sovereign country, so the phrasing of Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty is at the very least misleading.

Figure 14. Narrative “Neutrality” Volume in Online Media (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)

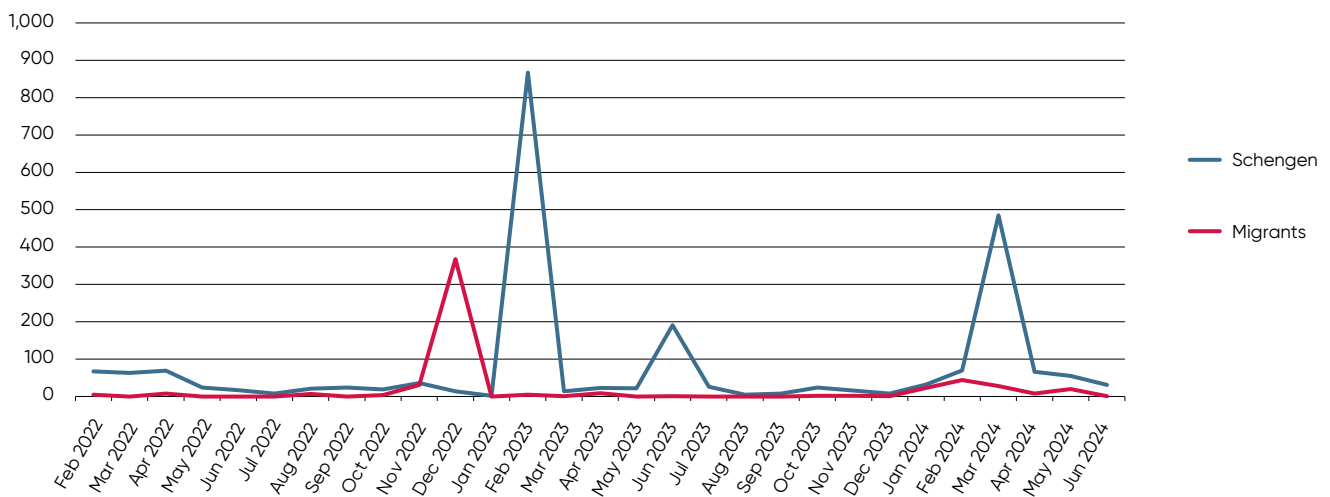


Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

¹⁶¹ Velkova, N., ““Greatness” stands for neutrality and against criminal policies” [*“Величие” е за неутралитет и срещу престъпните политики*], 10 June 2024.

On the other, the current state of neutrality in terms of law has increasingly also become blurred in the context of Russia’s actions in Ukraine.¹⁶² Russia’s classification of its invasion as a “special military operation” has complicated its ability to accuse others of violating neutrality, despite the Kremlin’s cautious attempts to do so in 2023, which correlate with the spike of the narrative in Bulgaria.¹⁶³ There is a growing trend to reconsider or move beyond our traditional understanding of neutrality, particularly in response to blatant violations of international law like Russia’s. Thus, neutrality should not be utilised as a metaphorical bat to beat the Bulgarian government with. Even if the government ceases its efforts towards military aid, private arms dealers will still likely continue to sell weapons to Ukraine as they did prior to the government’s official decision to do so.

Figure 15. Narratives about the Schengen Zone and Migrants Volume in Online Media (Feb 2022 – Jun 2024)



Source: CSD calculations, based on data from Sensika.

Notable other sub-narratives proliferated by the retired military officers focus on the topics of migrants (2,307 articles) and the Schengen zone (568 articles). The one key sub-narrative was that the ruling elite in Bulgaria is supporting the EU in "importing Taliban". Markov notably amplified this, alleging a "secret return" of migrants from Austria to Sofia.¹⁶⁴ He claimed also, that thousands of Afghan and Syrian migrants with combat experience were coming to Bulgaria not to work, but to be dispatched to fight in Ukraine. Both claims spurred protests

¹⁶² Bartolini, G., "The Ukrainian–Russian Armed Conflict and the Law of Neutrality: Continuity, Discontinuity, or Irrelevance?", *Netherlands International Law Review* 71(1), June 2024.

¹⁶³ UNSC, *Overview of Security Council Meeting Records UN Doc. S/PV.9325*, 18 May 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Safe News, "Nikolay Markov: The plan for tens of thousands of Afghans and Syrians in Bulgaria is linked to preparations for war with Russia" [*Николай Марков: Планът за десетки хиляди афганци и сирийци в България е свързан с подготовката за война с Русия*], 28 February 2024.

at Sofia's airport, where Markov was present.¹⁶⁵ However, the "mysterious charter flight" case was debunked.¹⁶⁶ The Council of Ministers and the State Agency for Refugees clarified that the flight involved 18 registered migrants seeking international protection in Bulgaria, part of an agreed transfer under the Dublin Regulation.¹⁶⁷ After Sofia, the plane proceeded to Georgia to return most passengers.

¹⁶⁵ Kuzeva, P., "Protest waiting for the plane with the migrants at Sofia Airport" [Протест чака самолета с мигрантите на Летище София], *Focus News*, 13 February 2024.

¹⁶⁶ Tsoneca, I., "State Agency for Refugees: the charter from Austria is because of the Dublin Regulation" [Държавна агенция за бежанците: Чартърът от Австрия е заради Дъблинския регламент], BNT, 12 February 2024.

¹⁶⁷ European Commission, Migrant and Home Affairs, [Dublin Regulation](#).

WHAT'S NEXT

There is a concerning trend among former military personnel in Bulgaria who actively promote Kremlin-backed narratives, leveraging their credentials as military and security experts across traditional and social media platforms. These individuals extend their influence beyond media, integrating into nationalist political and paramilitary organizations that are deeply intertwined with domestic political tensions and Russia's broader geopolitical strategies, including military and intelligence operations.

Their activities include public demonstrations supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine, anti-EU and anti-NATO campaigns, and involvement in politically significant initiatives such as calling for referendums and pre-election campaigns. These dynamics reveal the extensive penetration of Russian influence into local political and civil domains, illustrating the strategic complexity of the Kremlin's operations in Bulgaria. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive and multi-layered policy response:

- **Full Implementation of EU Sanctions**
 - Prioritize the full and effective enforcement of EU sanctions targeting Kremlin-linked media outlets.
 - Enhance national capacity to identify and regulate media outlets and platforms that republish or amplify Kremlin-controlled narratives.
- **Strengthening Strategic Communications**
 - Expand the capabilities of strategic communication (StratCom) units within the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant authorities, drawing on best practices from EU counterparts, such as the Czech Republic.
 - Introduce specialized training on countering disinformation, hybrid warfare, and psychological influence operations in military high schools.
 - Allocate adequate funding and resources to StratCom units, including access to advanced technology and intelligence tools.
- **Public Awareness and Education Initiatives**
 - Launch public awareness campaigns, led by the MoD and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with civil society organizations.
 - Focus on enhancing media literacy and critical thinking through educational programs targeting both military personnel and the general public.
 - Incorporate media analysis and disinformation identification into the core curricula of military academies and colleges.

- **Promoting Ethical Standards and Civic Education**
 - o Establish regular audits to ensure adherence to ethical standards for military personnel.
 - o Introduce continuous political and civic education programs for officers, emphasizing NATO's importance, EU policies, and Bulgaria's strategic interests.
 - o Mandate exams on democratic principles and national security topics for military cadets prior to graduation.

- **Developing a Strategic Communication Plan**
 - o Formulate a comprehensive national strategy to ensure consistency and coherence in countering pro-Kremlin influence narratives.
 - o Implement ongoing evaluation mechanisms to adapt strategies based on emerging threats and stakeholder feedback.

- **International Cooperation**
 - o Strengthen collaboration with NATO, the EU, and international allies to ensure Bulgaria's efforts are part of a coordinated and unified response to Russian geopolitical maneuvers.

These measures aim to mitigate the pervasive influence of Kremlin-backed actors while building national resilience against foreign information manipulation. Addressing this issue is critical not only for Bulgaria's democratic integrity and national security but also for reinforcing the collective security of NATO and the EU.

ANNEX 1

Media Monitoring Methodology

Data collection utilizes the media intelligence tool [Sensika](#), which provides access to a vast catalog of over 2500 news web-sites in Bulgaria, to gather content from these sources and analyze its volume and reach. Social media content was sourced from public Facebook account types – including pages, verified profiles, and public groups – using [CrowdTangle](#), a Meta-owned tool that offers precise metrics on post volume and reach. The selection of news websites and Facebook was deliberate, given their significant presence in Bulgaria’s information landscape.¹⁶⁸

The individuals included in the analysis were identified through a review of collected misleading and/or false information propagated by Kremlin-controlled and local pro-Kremlin media, as well as through their affiliations with prominent pro-Russian organizations in Bulgaria. Each of these individuals has also been selected to be featured in the media for their particular military expertise. This background research informed the development of specific keywords and terms to create tailored search queries for materials published mentioning these individuals and organisations during the monitoring period. To ensure accuracy, representative samples from each identified website or public Facebook account were manually reviewed, aiming to reduce the rate of false positives to below 10% in each case.

List of former military officers and security sector experts, identified as contributing to the dissemination of pro-Kremlin narratives in Bulgarian online and social media includes: Slavcho Velkov; Atanas Samandov; Nikolay Markov; Gergin Gerginov; Dimitar Shivikov; Tihomir Stoychev; Marko Petrov; Goran Simeonov; Nikolay Rusatev; Stoimen Stoimenov; Dimitar Krastev; Lazar Murdzhev; Tsvetan Totomirov; Nako Stefanov; Boyko Simitchiev; Rumen Ralchev; Tsvetko Donchev; Iliya Mandrov; Velizar Enchev; Mikhail Kharlampiev; Todor Predov; Zlatan Stoykov.

¹⁶⁸ In December 2023, Bulgaria had an internet access rate for households of 88% according to the latest comparative data from [EUROSTAT](#). According to Meta’s [Transparency Report](#), the average monthly active user base between 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023 was 4.4 million for Bulgaria, which equated to approximately 82% of national internet users in 2023.

