



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY



Countering Hybrid Warfare in the Black Sea Region

Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for
Protection and Resilience

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Protection and Resilience**



Disinformation-backed active measures play a pivotal role in Russia's toolkit of influence and are fully integrated within Russia's foreign policy. This report examines Russian disinformation operations in the context of weapons of mass destruction non-proliferation and how it fits within the Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategy in the Black Sea region. The report highlights policy options and practical steps and measures for enhancing institutional resilience against Russian influence operations and mitigating the risk of malign interference.

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's ambition to control the Black Sea region in strategic, political, and economic terms is deeply-rooted in its foreign policy from imperial times. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has systematically sought to assert its status as a global superpower and **maintaining military control** in the Black Sea region has been seen in the Kremlin as a key pillar of that status. Over the past ten years, Moscow has taken increasingly aggressive steps to preserve and consolidate its influence in the Black Sea region. Following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has used a combination of tactics such as military subversion, economic pressure, political coercion, and information manipulation in an attempt to drag Ukraine into its permanent zone of influence. Disruption of energy supplies, amassing of troops and military exercises in close proximity to the Russia-Ukraine border, and persistent support for the insurgent forces in Eastern Ukraine, most notably in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, supported by massive **cyber and information attacks** were some of the elements of the hybrid warfare strategy that the Kremlin pursued before starting a *de facto* full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The Black Sea region remains a critical arena in Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. For years, the Kremlin has relied on a complex arsenal of tools for interference in and destabilization of the countries in the region. Moscow deploys these tools in a concerted manner to advance its agenda by seeking to fracture internal unity and integrity within the EU and NATO through political manipulation and economic bullying. **Strategic corruption**, capturing of key economic assets through regulatory manoeuvres and opaque networks of patronage, and blatant interference using Soviet-style **active measures** such as information manipulation and targeted assassinations are some of the most common tools of influence that make up the Kremlin Playbook.¹ Typically deployed in a concerted manner, such techniques seek to weaken democratic processes and institutions by eroding their very foundations, including the core values of openness, transparency, pluralism, rule of law, accountability, and civil liberties.

Russia's hybrid warfare strategy preys on societal divisions, the rules of fair competition, and the freedom of expression and media freedom. In waging its hybrid warfare, Russia blends overt and covert activities across the physical and cyber-space to **create a state of a permanent confrontation** and blur the distinction between the military and civilian domain. These activities vary in nature and magnitude but are interconnected in a coherent strategy that unfolds following a **trajectory of a gradual escalation**. Russia relies on exploiting economic dependencies and hijacking policy and legislative initiatives in other countries to produce outcomes that favour its priorities and interests. The primary objective of these tactics is to **secure the flow of revenue toward the Kremlin** and Kremlin-backed enterprises

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

and their systematic use enables Russia to gain strategic advantage and expand its influence abroad. Thus, they complement and amplify the effects of other preferred tools in Russia's arsenal, such as the projection of military power and deployment of cyberattacks against critical infrastructure and public institutions which are commonly used as means of intimidation and coercion.

Russia has also leveraged its economic influence to boost its presence and posture in the information space. Russia's tactics on this front focus on turning emotions and historical and cultural legacies and artefacts into instruments for **infiltrating policy and public debates**. The ultimate goal is to assert Russia's supremacy by manipulating the existing shared perceptions of reality to produce patterns of socio-political behaviour that reinforce the Kremlin's worldview and revisionist ambitions. Russia's hybrid warfare strategy has a clearly pronounced cognitive dimension, whereby influence operations at different levels seek to impose a notion of reality that challenges and contradicts the established international rules and aggressively impinges on the principles and processes that are essential for the functioning of democratic systems. Russia's **cognitive warfare** is indiscriminate and unfolds across multiple arenas; it turns the systems for political, diplomatic, and public deliberation into battlefields, in order to weaken and eventually erode their utility and integrity.

Russia's choice of instruments for carrying out its influence operations demonstrates a firm determination to confront and suppress any form of opposition or dissent with unrestrained zeal and ferocity. This is especially the case as regards the Kremlin's influence operations that involve the **misuse of materials and information related to weapons of mass destruction (WMD)**. The trail of Kremlin-sanctioned targeted assassinations involving the use of hard-to-detect toxic chemical, biological, and radioactive agents runs long and signals Russia's blatant disregard for international norms. In particular, Russia carries out these activities fully cognizant of the fact that, if exposed, they would attract sweeping opprobrium and retaliatory measures but this in no way precludes the Kremlin from utilizing hostile means for pursuing its interests. The poisoning of the Bulgarian arms producer, Emilian Gebrev, his son, and production director with a chemical nerve agent, similar to Novichok in 2015 which followed a series of suspicious explosions at Gebrev's company warehouses signals the Kremlin's **attitude of impunity** when engaging in aggressive activities. The storage facilities of Gebrev's company have suffered several acts of sabotage in the recent years and pro-Kremlin media outlets in Bulgaria have flooded the information space with multiple and sometimes **contradictory disinformation narratives** that Gebrev was not deliberately poisoned but felt sick after consuming contaminated food.²

Russia's reliance on and use of disinformation to advance its geopolitical interests is especially pronounced in the Black Sea region where the Kremlin has exploited shared historical and cultural heritage and linguistic

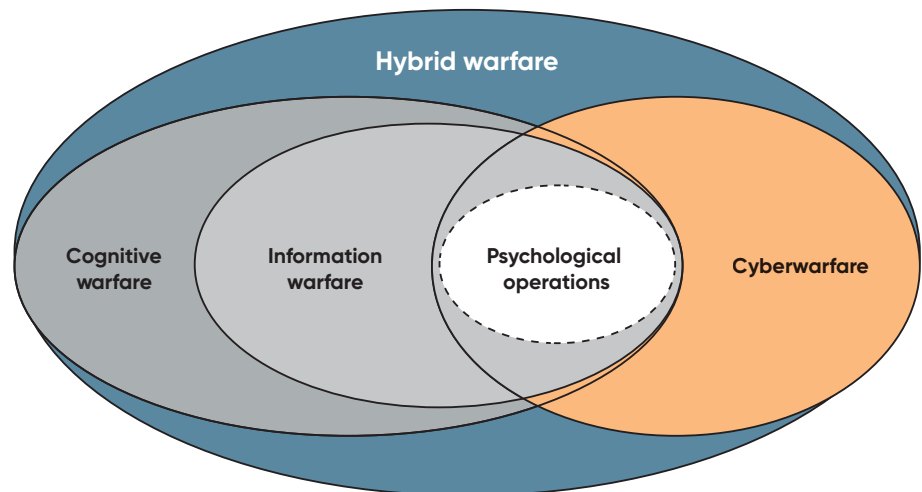
² Novossiolova, T. and Georgiev, G., *Disinformation in the Kremlin's Toolkit of Influence Training Guidance for Scoping the Threat to the Norms and Institutions of Weapons of Mass Destruction Non-proliferation*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2022.

similarities to undermine social cohesion and polarise public debates along geopolitical lines. This report examines Russia's use of disinformation in the context of WMD non-proliferation and how it fits its overall hybrid warfare strategy in the Black Sea region. The report highlights approaches and practical steps for **enhancing institutional resilience** against malign interference.

COGNITIVE WARFARE IN THE KREMLIN PLAYBOOK

Cognitive warfare plays an important role in the Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategy. It encompasses a broad range of activities that seek to produce **self-replicating models of social cognition and behaviours** which promote, amplify, and legitimise Russia's political, economic, and socio-cultural agenda. The Kremlin's cognitive warfare is complex and multifaceted integrating traditional Soviet-time techniques and instruments of influence – e.g. psychological and information operations, social engineering – with cyber and other advanced technological capabilities. Russia uses emerging information and communication technologies to augment its posture on the international stage through the **systematic dissemination of misleading and manipulative content**. Russia's cognitive warfare activities are designed and deployed in ways that target entire populations by exploiting local vulnerabilities, in order to embed distorted images of reality in public and policy deliberations permanently. The Kremlin, Kremlin-sponsored, and pro-Kremlin actors use cognitive warfare tactics to influence and control how beliefs about political, economic, and socio-cultural issues are formed and maintained. This enables Russia to infiltrate democratic systems of rules and practices and compel these systems to produce self-detrimental effects resulting in the **destabilisation of the established institutions and processes**. Because of its broad scope and far-reaching objectives, Russia's cognitive warfare constitutes a distinct operational domain (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Information Domains in Russia's Hybrid Warfare



Source: CSD.

Disinformation plays a pivotal role in Russia's toolkit of influence and is fully integrated within Russia's foreign policy. Russian **disinformation campaigns** are multidimensional and exploit a range of issues across different sectors including economy, security, social welfare, governance, and culture. They are coordinated and structured involving vast networks of government,

state-sponsored, and pro-Kremlin entities and **agents of influence** that are systematically activated whenever a need arises. Over the years, the Kremlin has invested considerable resources and energy to set up, maintain, and permanently embed these networks both domestically and abroad. Russia's disinformation activities evolve quickly as propaganda messaging and fake news are tied up to current events and existing conspiracy theories. Russia uses multiple channels to conduct these activities by involving proxies and incorporating unauthentic online behaviour such as the use of bots and troll factories to give the false impression that it has a significant base of supporters and this base is burgeoning.

Media capture remains by far the most essential element of Russia's disinformation machine, as it enables the emergence of self-perpetuating nodes of economic influence in the information space that guarantee the unhindered exposure of local audiences to the propagation of misleading and manipulative content.³ Media capture comprises a combination of tactics that enable the exercise of control over media broadcasting and news sharing. Kremlin-sponsored and pro-Kremlin networks leverage regulatory, institutional, and procedural arrangements to infiltrate the media space and gradually seize and ensure full control over political decision-making and public agendas.

The Kremlin's media capture strategy is two-fold. It affects both the **material aspects** of the media sector, such as the business arrangements, ownership structures, and financial flows of media companies, and the **ideational aspects**, namely the content and editorial policies of outlets, as well as the overriding perceptions among managers, editors, and journalists. In the context of online media, these two strands of dependencies foster the development of opaque **echo chambers** that spread and augment verifiably inaccurate content. The proliferation of such echo chambers solidifies extreme views and attitudes and challenges the mechanisms and processes for knowledge production and knowledge sharing in democratic societies. This feeds into Russia's overarching objective of weakening the processes and institutions in democratic systems. Media capture also allows Russia to reorganise and re-launch its disinformation efforts in case one or more elements of its propaganda machine become dysfunctional or need to be replaced. Russia has actively leveraged media capture tactics to regroup its local proxies and regain and reinforce its influence in the information space abroad to **mitigate the effects of EU sanctions** against its state-owned media outlets.

Russia's cognitive warfare strategy in the field of WMD non-proliferation blends aggressive political posture and disinformation. From the outset of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated its renewed interest in **unconventional weapons as a means of power projection**. The Kremlin has regularly made explicit references to its nuclear arsenal, and Russia's nuclear forces remain on a higher alert. Pro-Kremlin actors in the Black Sea region have made use of Russia's declarations to discourage the provision of military assistance to Ukraine, weaken public support for the Ukrainian people, and

³ Georgiev, G., Petrova, V., and Tsabala, K., *Breaking the code: tackling the interlocking nexus of Russian and Chinese disinformation and illicit financial flows in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

put pressure on the Ukrainian government to seek a “peaceful resolution of the conflict”. Russia has also exploited the nuclear card to accuse Ukraine of attempting to acquire nuclear weapons or construct and use a “dirty bomb”.⁴ This accusation provided Russian armed forces with a **pretext to occupy** the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the early days of war and enabled the ongoing occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), the largest in Europe. These actions have heightened nuclear safety and security concerns in the Black Sea region, forcing the staff at the occupied facilities to perform their duties under the conditions of utmost military pressure. Most recently, the Russian media hailed the use of tear gas by Russian armed forces in Ukraine as an effective battlefield tactic, even though international law prohibits the deployment of such agents as a means of warfare.

Russia’s disinformation campaigns that exploit topics related to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) risks are **blatantly malign**, as they prey on public fears and anxieties and can result in individuals adopting risk-prone behaviours. During the COVID-19 pandemic, to encourage the uptake of Russian-made vaccines, the Kremlin-sponsored and pro-Kremlin media outlets used disinformation messaging that targeted US- and European-made vaccines as “unsafe” and “unreliable”. Russian disinformation campaigns also focused on the origins of the virus that causes COVID-19 infection claiming that the US created it as a biological weapon. In parallel, Russia and China propagated a set of disinformation narratives that sought to present authoritarian regimes as better suited to cope with a global pandemic and similar large-scale disasters than liberal democracies.

On other occasions, the Kremlin has mobilised its disinformation and propaganda machinery to divert attention from and **cover up state-sponsored belligerent activities** such as targeted assassinations using chemical, biological, or radioactive agents. Russia’s use of targeted assassinations through poisoning undermines the existing concepts of chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological security in the Black Sea region. Such attacks constitute **a significant deterrence challenge**, as they require a drastically altered approach for detection, preparedness, and response in comparison to traditional large-scale WMD attacks. The targets of Kremlin’s poisoning attacks vary, but generally these include individuals who oppose the political leadership or otherwise challenge Russia’s strategic interests.⁵ Pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives regarding the poisoning of Emilian Gebrev that abounded in the Bulgarian media space have sought to muddle the facts of his poisoning and refute the veracity of Western accounts of the incidents. These narratives questioned the nature of the chemical agent that was used in the assassination attempt and painted the incident as an anti-Russian smear campaign by Western forces.

The Kremlin’s cognitive warfare efforts extend well beyond the media space, as Russia uses international decision-making bodies, including the United Nations Security Council as **platforms for legitimising its disinformation**

⁴ See Sinovets, T. et al., “Russia’s disinformation goes nuclear”, *Forum for Ukrainian Studies*, 23 March 2023.

⁵ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Countering WMD Hybrid Threats and Malign Interference in the Black Sea Region*, Policy Brief No. 141, November 2023.

campaigns. Shortly after the invasion against Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin claimed that biomedical research laboratories developed biological weapons with support from the USA. Russia quickly incorporated this narrative in its disinformation messaging that aimed to justify the decision to start a whole-scale invasion. In particular, Russia accused biomedical laboratories in Ukraine of developing genetic weapons to target ethnic Russians. This strategy itself is not new, as the Kremlin has long used the same approach to discredit Georgia's national reference laboratory, the Lugar Center. A Bulgarian journalist, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, has **actively amplified** Russian disinformation regarding the work of Ukrainian biological laboratories. Upon Russia's invitation, she also served as a briefer to a high-level meeting within the framework of the UN Security Council. Pro-Kremlin disinformation messaging in the online media space in Bulgaria and Romania has sought to amplify the allegations of bioweapon development in Ukraine coming from high-level political figures and state-controlled media in Russia. Comparative analysis based on media monitoring regarding the spread of this narrative in the two countries indicates that **Bulgaria remains far more susceptible** to Russian disinformation than Romania.⁶ The institutional response against Russia's information manipulation operations in Bulgaria has been weaker compared to that in Romania and Bulgarian pro-Kremlin media outlets enjoy far greater readership and interest than Romanian ones.

⁶ Georgiev, G. and Novosiolova, T., *Disinformation Storm: WMD Hybrid Threats in Bulgaria and Romania*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

ENHANCING RESILIENCE AGAINST RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE

Crafting an effective strategy to counter Russia's hybrid warfare in the Black Sea region requires action on multiple fronts and across different sectors. The Kremlin's posture as regards CBRN-related issues signals an openly belligerent strategy that defies established international rules and norms and challenges security doctrines and principles. The Black Sea region is particularly vulnerable in this regard, not least because Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine has further **emboldened Moscow to challenge the NATO Eastern Flank**. Enhancing societal resilience against pro-Kremlin disinformation and its modus operandi in the countries in the Black Sea region is an essential prerequisite for confronting the Kremlin's cognitive warfare activities.

An **integrated and comprehensive national strategic framework** for tackling the threat of hybrid warfare is essential for developing synergies among relevant government agencies and civil society stakeholders and mobilising resources and expertise for threat monitoring and capacity building. Any such framework must focus on tackling local vulnerabilities and empowering competent authorities with knowledge, techniques, and tools to mitigate the risk of foreign malign interference. An effective institutional framework for countering hybrid threats must address **four interconnected areas of action** (Figure 2):

- (1) countering disinformation;
- (2) cybersecurity;
- (3) resilience of critical infrastructure and supply chains; and
- (4) crisis and emergency management and defence.⁷

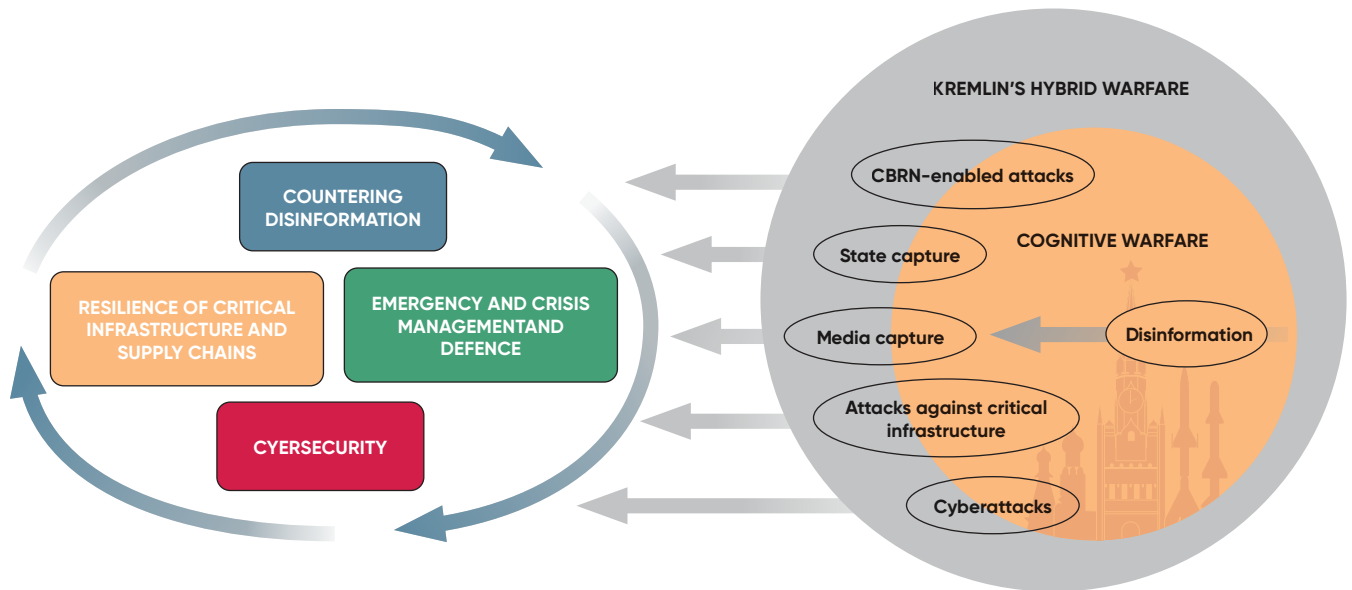
The first two areas – **countering disinformation and cybersecurity** – impact all aspects of social life. Russia and Kremlin-backed actors are increasingly integrating cyber capabilities in its disinformation activities and utilising misleading tactics such as the creation of fake websites of foreign public institutions to carry out cyber-attacks. Securing the digital and information space through inter-agency coordination, **strengthening strategic communications** capabilities, and sensitising the general public to the tools and effects of Russian disinformation activities are essential for detecting and tackling the threat of hybrid warfare.⁸

Critical infrastructure and supply chains provide essential services in key sectors such as health, energy and water supply, transport, manufacturing, public administration, finance, and food production. As part of its hybrid warfare activities, Russia has targeted entities belonging to critical infrastructure and exploited economic dependencies to cause disruption of

⁷ Novosiolova, T. and Georgiev, G., *Countering Hybrid Warfare in Bulgaria: A Strategic Assessment of National Capabilities and Infrastructure*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

⁸ See Center for the Study of Democracy, *Building Institutional Capacity Framework for Resilience to Disinformation in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No 131, March 2023.

Figure 2: Countering Hybrid Warfare: Areas of Action



Source: CSD.

essential supplies and services. Initiatives that promote investment screening,⁹ transparency in public procurement,¹⁰ and diversification of sources, routes, and types of energy supply¹¹ help **mitigate the risk of political coercion**. Russia continues to use its economic influence to evade sanctions and secure access to revenue and defence-related products and items, in order to support its ongoing invasion against Ukraine.¹²

Emergency and crisis management and defence encompasses national capabilities and infrastructure for tackling threats to national security. Hybrid warfare remains below the threshold of an armed attack but can take different forms including the use of unconventional weapons such as materials associated with chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons. Responding to the Kremlin's targeted assassination attacks involving poisoning and CBRN-related disinformation campaigns requires **intelligence and data sharing** and cooperation among competent authorities including law enforcement agencies, as well as enhanced civilian-military interaction (Box 1). **Black Sea regional security cooperation** and strategic engagement with EU and NATO partners is critical for harmonising efforts to deter and counter the Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategy and bolster the region's defence capabilities. Joint training initiatives and exercises, implementation of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems for threat monitoring and early warning, and

⁹ See, for example, Boycheva, I. and Terziev, P., *Investment Screening in Bulgaria: Policy Options, Institutional and Legal Framework*, Sofia: Center for the Study Democracy, 2022; Center for the Study of Democracy, *Investment Screening in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No.123, December 2022.

¹⁰ See Center for the Study Democracy, *The State of Capture: The Risks to Distributive Politics in Southeast Europe*, Policy Brief No. 139, November 2023.

¹¹ See Center for the Study Democracy, *Moving Forward Together: Energy and Climate Security for Ukraine and Europe*, Policy Brief No. 136, July 2023.

¹² See, for example, Center for the Study of Democracy, *Sanctions Evasion and Derogation on Russian Oil*, Policy Brief No. 140, November 2023.

defence modernisation are essential for increasing NATO interoperability and reinforcing its posture in the Black Sea region.

**Box 1: Enhancing Resilience against Disinformation
as a Means of Cognitive Warfare**

In July 2023, the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) delivered a series of lectures and practical exercise on Russia's media capture and disinformation tactics as part of a pilot training course on Cognitive Warfare hosted by the NATO Crisis Management and Disaster Response Center (CMDR) Center of Excellence in Bulgaria. CSD prepared a training package addressing the following topics:

- Foreign influence and media capture.
- Disinformation in the online space.
- Russia's use of CBRN-related disinformation.
- Practical session: Hybrid threats and the role of state institutions.

CSD facilitated a break-out session featuring a scenario-based exercise that focused on the use of disinformation in the context of a CBRN-enabled attack.¹³ This exercise sought to enhance participants' understanding on how disinformation can challenge national security and to provide a platform for identifying strategies and for countering disinformation campaigns and mitigating their effects.

¹³ Novossiolova, T. and Georgiev, G., *Disinformation in the Kremlin's Toolkit of Influence Training Guidance for Scoping the Threat to the Norms and Institutions of Weapons of Mass Destruction Non-proliferation*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2022.

