

Policy Roundtable

Institutional Resilience Against Foreign Malign Influence

25 June 2024

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

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's policy roundtable tackles two interrelated topics:

- What should be done to better deter the Kremlin's aggressive hybrid warfare strategy in the Black Sea region?
- What mechanisms and tools can be leveraged to tackle local vulnerabilities and enhance the capacity of public and private institutions to disrupt foreign malign influence operations?

First, the security context in the Black Sea region is characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty. Long before its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia had modernized and expanded its hybrid warfare strategy to conduct multi-layered influence operations and capture key assets in other countries.

Russia relies on strategic corruption, the exploitation of economic dependencies, and coercion to impose its geopolitical agenda and sow divisions within the EU and NATO. The Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategy blends the physical, informational, and cyber realms to manipulate public opinion, polarize public debates, and ultimately undermine public trust in democratic systems and processes.

Second, our country remains a frequent target of Russia's hybrid warfare. The Kremlin has exploited state capture mechanisms to gain control over critical economic sectors like energy to finance its ongoing war against Ukraine. Russia has also adeptly exploited gaps in EU regulations, including the derogation from the EU import ban on Russian oil.

Russia has invested significant effort in fostering opaque networks of patronage in the Bulgarian media space that can be easily activated when needed.

Digital forensics, cybersecurity, cyber defense, and strategic communications are core capabilities that need to be integrated across public and private sectors to counter Russia's hybrid warfare. Leveraging security cooperation and strategic partnerships with the US, EU, and NATO is key in this respect.

I hope today's discussion will provide fresh insights into enhancing resilience against the Kremlin Playbook. I would like to thank all of you for joining us today, with special thanks to our distinguished speakers and the US Department of State for their support for this event.

We are honored to have with us Mr. Atanas Zapryanov, Minister of Defence, Ambassador Kenneth Merten, and Mr. Matthew Boyse, Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute and former Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs at the US Department of State.