



Baltic Centre for
Media Excellence



Diagnosing and Countering Russian Influence and Media Capture in the Black Sea Countries

On September 4th, Kiev will host an **international policy roundtable** to discuss the main findings from a **new comparative assessment report** on the *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries: Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*. The report has been prepared by an international expert team and covers Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia.

Russian influence in and capture of the media sectors of Black Sea countries has become more visible in recent years and has been established through the deployment of a **diverse set of instruments**. Among them are: ownership and financial ties; political support for pro-Kremlin domestic media; using NGOs, educational and cultural institutions for agenda setting; exploiting the countries' governance deficits to prevent media transparency and freedom; mobilizing large network of overt and covert online individual and institutions supporters; conferring honors and awards on pro-Russian media and their staff; use of hybrid warfare tools such as fake news and internet trolling, etc. For instance, '**diffusion-proofing**' is a preferred Kremlin strategy, whereby Russia does not aim to completely prevent information from reaching the audiences in the Black sea countries and beyond but, rather, counterbalances Western coverage with a pro-Russian twist.

Media propaganda and disinformation have become decisive for Russia to benefit from the **persisting governance deficits** in the Black Sea region countries. Russia has aimed to weaken the credibility and moral authority of the European Union and NATO, particularly among aspiring countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia but also among EU and NATO members. In addition to the operations of official Russian media in these countries, the Kremlin has applied various strategies to infiltrate and influence both international and domestic media. Controlling shares and having representatives in the governing bodies of international media, such as *Euronews*, facilitating links with domestic media groups contracted to produce content for those international media, subcontracting the rights for retransmission of Russian TV channels to domestic companies operating often outside the media sector, and using complex mixture of ownership-networks and political support for formally independent domestic media, makes the Russian influence less obvious but even more potent.

The resilience of the five countries to Russian pressure is different but mostly insufficient. Despite the major distinctions among these Black Sea states regarding the trends in print, electronic and online media, a crucial similarity is the **vulnerability to influences from political and economic interests, especially through ownership and funding streams**. The lack of transparency of media ownership, combined with weak enforcement of legal provisions, has been reinforced by the dependence on large commercial advertisers in small advertisement markets as well as by the oligarchization of the media markets (whereby oligarchic networks exhibit close ties to Russian businesses). In such a way, Russia has sown mistrust in societies by deepening political divides with the ultimate goal of breaking up the functioning of fledgling democratic institutions in the Black Sea region. While the EU and NATO member-states have built some capacity, to withstand the external pressure via media standards and rule of law, the **resilience capacity of post-Soviet countries in the region has remained much lower**. Perhaps the most troubling consequence of the expansion of the Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign in the region is that it has **amplified the ongoing shift in the national political life towards authoritarian and nationalistic discourses**. At the same time, the weakening of

governance standards within the region, and the West's seemingly weak response to it, has contributed to the rise of political and economic forces that seek to undermine the Euro-Atlantic orientation of these countries and foster closer ties to Moscow.

Although in many European countries, including in the Black Sea region (e.g. Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine) the national regulatory framework puts **formal requirements for different degree of transparency of the funding and/or ownership of the media**, the implementation of these requirements is problematic. In many cases, the existing requirements cover only particular types of media or certain features of funding and ownership, which hinder the identification and analysis of tools and channels for covert foreign influence over the media. Pro-Russian media have successfully used the limitations of transparency measures in Black Sea countries to hide their **ownership and funding**. It is most clearly visible in the case of the **online media sector**. This sector **features the highest degree of anonymity and possibilities for hiding ownership and decision-making structures**. At the same time, the possibilities for publishing, aggregating, processing and re-publishing of information, including through the use of automated AI-based systems, have boomed in the last decade and offer practically unlimited opportunities for content creation and dissemination, without considerable initial investment.

The report, which will be presented during the round table reveals that hostile Brezhnev-era propaganda might still be coming around, exposing **two different trends of pro-Russian influence in the media sectors** of the Black Sea countries:

- In countries where the official Russian media are not well present (e.g. Bulgaria) or even banned (e.g. in Ukraine), the media ownership is only one of the less used tools for influence in the media sector. In these countries the Kremlin relies on the engagement of larger communities of content creators and providers loyal to or dependent on Russia - RSS aggregator sites, small and medium online news platforms, independent journalists, individual bloggers and social-media opinion-makers, internet trolls, etc. In addition, indirectly-controlled non-media companies, that are used for influencing media decision-making and agenda-setting through (in)formal links, PR and marketing budgets, topics-setting, support for political, cultural, science and education, and sport activities, business/political relations with external stakeholders, etc. also play an important role.
- In countries, where the official Kremlin media and media, controlled legally through Russian ownership, management or funding (e.g. Armenia, Georgia and partially Moldova), have strong presence, the same tools are used to reinforce the susceptibility to Russian influence.

The analysis of the links between (in)formal ownership and management control on the one side, and the media content – on the other side, reveals that **the degree of consistently reproduced similarities among the media outlets, susceptible to Russian propaganda, are very high** despite differences in the formal editorial policies, claimed financial and management independence and/or formal economic and political links. Even if differences in the pro-Russian narratives exist among the media outlets, they are much weaker than the shared commonalities of narration and style as part of their general pro-Russian tilt.

Organizers: [Center for the Study of Democracy](#) (Bulgaria) in cooperation with Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (Ukraine and Latvia) and the kind support of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine

When: September 04, 2018 (9:00 – 17:00)

Where: Schastiehub, str. Pankivska 14, Kyiv, Ukraine

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Attached: Agenda of the Policy Roundtable “Diagnosing and Countering Russian Influence and Media Capture in the Black Sea Countries”