
ROMANIA EYES COORDINATED DEFENCE AGAINST RUSSIAN HYBRID WAR

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Romania must consolidate the efforts of all security agencies in the NATO country if it is to respond effectively to an intense hybrid war being waged by Russia in the Black Sea region, a senior Romanian general has told BIRN.

General Marian Botea, chief of the Operations Directorate in the Romanian Defence Ministry, said Ukraine, Romania and Moldova were all targets of a campaign of Russian propaganda, misinformation, subversion and cyber attack.

The threat, he said, had grown since Russias 2014 annexation of Ukraines Crimean peninsula and was aimed at ordinary Romanians and the political establishment alike.

In an interview with BIRN, Botea, who previously led Romanian troops within NATOs mission in Afghanistan, said Russia was trying to sow doubt within the minds of Romanians about their place in Europe, about the benefits of the EU and the blocs readiness to allow Bucharest into the borderless Schengen zone.

But Russian propaganda is also targeting leaders, he said.

We also look at what vulnerabilities our leaders have and how we can advise them to protect these vulnerabilities when they present themselves in public.

Botea said the Romanian army, part of NATO since 2004, had the capability to counter such threats, but that the efforts of all agencies should be consolidated.

It is now important to integrate the efforts of all institutions with responsibilities on this topic, like SRI [Romanian Intelligence Service] and the STS [Special Telecommunications Service], so that we can also counteract [the propaganda], Botea told BIRN, adding that the Interior Ministry should also be involved.

Among the most important threats would be, first and foremost, the cyber threats to which we are currently trying to provide a response, including by the establishment of this cyber defence headquarters that we are working on at the Ministry of Defence, he said.

Ukraine and Moldova

Russias strategy was articulated in a 2013 article by General Valery Gerasimov, Russias chief of the General Staff, in the weekly trade paper Military-Industrial Kurier in which he laid out a theory of modern warfare in which non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals had

grown and in many cases exceeded the power of traditional military means.

A study released in April 2018 by the Bucharest-based Global Focus think-tank said Romanian society was vulnerable.

Any active Russian propaganda will probably focus on going from niche to mass, it will seek to reach the middle-aged population and the disaffected youth and will back any initiative which meets the criterion of being simultaneously divisive and popular, the authors wrote.

Botea said neighbouring Moldova was also at risk due to geopolitical divisions among its people, who are split between integration with the West and old ties with Russia. Many Moldovans work abroad, both in Russia and the EU, sending money home to support their families.

In Moldova, these two currents meet and there is probably a struggle which is also reflected at a political level in the evolutions... between the president and the government, he said.

Key to the defence against Russias hybrid war was Ukraine, Botea argued.

Because western Ukraine is strong and oriented towards the West, it is a heavenly blessing for Romania. A strong and friendly Ukraine would help Moldova to move better towards the West, he said. From a security point of view, it would be the first responder to what the Russian threat means to the eastern part of Europe.

Botea said Russias current priority was to tighten its grip on Crimea and the extraction of natural resources from eastern Ukraine.

As far as I understand, eastern Ukraine and the Crimea have been played already, he said. The issue can only be discussed at the political level. On the other hand, it is very unlikely that they will come back [to Ukraine]. The Russians are consolidating the positions they control at the moment.

Ultimately, he said, their strategy is to promote their strategic objectives on a global scale.

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