



Foreign Influence in North Macedonia

Factors, techniques
and recommendations

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Situational background

North Macedonia's ongoing identity issues - fueled by vehement political polarization, corruption, ethnic and religious schisms, as well as unstable political landscape over the last seven years - weaken its already fragile democratic society and provide an easy target for manipulation and make the country vulnerable to foreign malign influence.

The Kremlin has been attempting to reverse the country's pro-democratic Western trajectory through a combination of soft and sharp power¹ strategy. Moscow presents itself as a "viable alternative" to Euro-Atlantic structures, while simultaneously increasing influence in North Macedonia through campaigns that aim to subvert its efforts to join the EU and NATO².

Due to a somewhat traditional perception that remains prevalent among the public (66% consider Russia as North Macedonia's traditional Slavic brother³), this strategy consists of primarily amplifying negative perceptions of the West, promoting narratives about the supposed historical victimization of North Macedonia, and promoting positive perceptions of Moscow.

Based on our research findings, North Macedonia's areas of vulnerability towards foreign influence are most prevalent in:

- a Public perceptions
- b Information landscape
- c State and political actors

information landscape

North Macedonia has shown improvements in areas such as judicial reforms⁴, inclusive and accountable democracy⁵, addressing hybrid and cyber threats in relevant strategic documents⁶, media freedom⁷ and civil society.⁸ Yet problems remain with deep-rooted corruption⁹, weak election regulation and its enforcement¹⁰, and disinformation and conspiracy theories that continue to overflow the unregulated online space¹¹.

The prevalence of COVID-19 vaccine disinformation in both traditional and social media has shown Macedonian society's susceptibility to conspiracies¹². By exploiting vulnerabilities, close relationships with the Kremlin, and negative attitudes against the West and NATO, pro-Kremlin actors have intensified their propaganda and misinformation efforts in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kremlin has successfully used a variety of instruments, including economic power and investment incentives¹³, to win support among vulnerable societal groups that are hopeful of future economic cooperation and partnership with Russia.

A range of factors contribute to North Macedonia's vulnerability towards foreign influence:

- ➔ A society more adherent to traditional values, culture and religion (linked to the region's Slavic and Orthodox heritage) and communities that can be exploited by actors pursuing pro-Kremlin interests while demonizing Euro-Atlantic structures as the bearers of "decadent" Western values
- ➔ Unstable political situation with several early elections, wiretapping scandals, nepotism and corruption, and the issue of the country's name change within the last seven years have contributed to growing mistrust in democratic institutions
- ➔ Insufficient presence of EU and Western powers in the country and a prolonged standoff on Euro-Atlantic integration processes (the prospect of such integration having led the country to accepting its name change) and thereby opening a significant void for other actors to step in
- ➔ Lack of legislative and structural measures to address foreign influence
- ➔ Continuous demands and blocks from neighbouring EU members (exemplified by Bulgaria's recent veto¹⁴) that complicate the EU's image as a bearer of positive change

General distrust and negative perception of the mainstream media, which is further nurtured by a network of actors that spread disinformation and conspiracies on social media.

Tactics used by the Kremlin to exploit these vulnerabilities:

- ➔ Using outlets such as Sputnik Serbia as mouthpieces and the lack of support for quality journalism in the country to provide "free of charge" information and articles in the

Macedonian media. An important channel of Russian soft power and propaganda in North Macedonia were Russian movies and historical documentaries broadcasted by the mainstream media to arouse nostalgia and reinforce positive sentiments, especially among older societal groups.

→ Historical grievances and social divisions connected to Macedonian identity and the name issue represent another avenue for the Kremlin's malign influence. Moscow has not only supported these societal tensions with its disinformation machinery, but also positioned itself as a protector offering aid to North Macedonia.¹⁵ Such position has been supplemented by accusations that the US and EU are attempting to split up the Balkans to re-establish "Greater Albania"¹⁶ by merging part of North Macedonia with Balkan countries.¹⁷ Such disinformation narratives, and the consequent aim to protect North Macedonia against such attempts, resonate among smaller nationalistic parties. These political actors, supported by Kremlin information operations, organized¹⁸ public protests against the name change.^{19, 20} These further polarized an already divided society. Pro-Kremlin actors successfully infiltrated predominantly national groups and pages on social media. By spreading Kremlin propaganda and disinformation, such actors shape social media discussions, and provoke and frame public attitudes.

→ Permanent diplomatic representations of the Russian Federation and its representatives have been building strategic partnerships and cooperation through regular personal meetings with the highest Macedonian officials and political leaders.

Such fostering of political ties went hand-in-hand with the Kremlin's sharp power: thirty North Macedonia-Russia "friendship associations" have been established in the country. Other activities included the establishing of a Russian cultural centre in Skopje²¹, funding for the construction of Orthodox churches, establishment of honorary consulates in Bitola and Ohrid²², and a Slavic University in Sveti Nikole.

Public perceptions

Despite these Kremlin interference tactics, according to the GLOBSEC Trends 2020²³ only 10% of adults living in North Macedonia perceive Russia as a threat, i.e. the vast majority remains blind towards such tactics. North Macedonia's (and other former Yugoslav countries) identity is firmly in Russia's orbit due to cultural affinity, shared communist past, language proximity, and the strong influence of the Orthodox church. With Russia perceived as an economic powerhouse and potential strategic partner, Moscow leverages this advantage by giving North Macedonia the prospect of marketing its agricultural products in Russia. While this may not seem like a point of major importance, GLOBSEC focus group discussions show that this argument resonates among participants who feel that North Macedonia could face more trade barriers if required to follow rigorous EU trade regulations. Macedonians have been more receptive to various pro-Russian narratives as the country edged

closer to joining the Euro-Atlantic family, especially in the wake of Moscow's influence operations²⁴ that sought to exploit divisive subjects (such as the country's name change) in order to turn people against the West²⁵.

Additional causes that underlie these inclinations include the government's persistent neglect of urgent problems in North Macedonia, such as underemployment, brain drain, corruption and hyper-polarization. If such issues are not properly addressed, the country's exposure to foreign malign interference will potentially worsen.²⁶

Political landscape

The Kremlin has created close political links based on shared ideologies with populist and nationalist political parties and organizations. As vulnerable societal groups often want strong leadership, pro-Russian elements take advantage of these patterns by cementing ties with nationalist party leaders and politicians.

Both parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors have had some success in propagating pro-Kremlin narratives.²⁷ The leaders of smaller political parties that seem to steadily gain popularity (such as Janko Batchev (Edinstvena Makedonija), Dimitar Apasiev (Levica) and Ivan Stojiljkovic (Serbian Democratic Party)) openly support Russia's interests in the country. In addition, the issue of foreign malign influence is given little attention in the country's main

strategic documents, fuelled by a remarkable lack of situational awareness or awareness of financial flows, including the financing of political parties.

Social media & information landscape as a vulnerability

Disinformation and conspiracy theories continue to flood North Macedonia's information landscape, and official efforts to resist them are limited. This leaves scope for foreign as well as domestic malign actors, and creates a safe haven for pro-Kremlin narratives and propaganda.

To convey their agenda to vulnerable societal groups, pro-Kremlin actors on social media play on disillusionment, scepticism, and suspicion. According to findings from research with Graphika, pro-Russian and anti-Western Facebook pages are interlinked to domestic disinformation and propaganda websites, as well as patriotic and radical sources from both the far left and far right, as well as anonymous organisations. The Kremlin's engagement with Macedonian society is clearly partisan and accepted only by specific groups according to Graphika findings. The Kremlin's influence is concentrated and funnelled through specialized communities, including nationalists, anti-Western radicals, patriotic VMRO-DPMNE followers, boycott supporters, and proponents of Pan-Slavism.²⁸

While mainstream media appears less vulnerable to Russian influence, all interviewed experts declared that TV Alfa had funding from suspicious sources²⁹, raising questions about whether this TV station is part of a larger Moscow operation to expand influence and spread propaganda in North Macedonia.

→ Policy recommendations for North Macedonia

For state authorities

1

To enhance the information environment, work towards a whole-of-government approach in countering information manipulation, reduce receptivity to problematic outlets and increase trust in quality media:

- When communicating with citizens, focus more on citing credible and quality media, promote openness and transparency, and refrain from attacking any investigative outlets or journalists
- Support both state and civil society projects aimed at enhancing digital literacy
- Increase funding and support for professional standards in journalism and proper journalistic education and training

- Conduct appropriate government-run information campaigns that openly identify disinformation narratives on social media, encourage the checking of information, and highlight trustworthy, respectable, and reliable/credible sources. Such campaigns should specifically focus on counter-narratives, which build societal resilience proactively and use both traditional and social media platforms

- Support and recognize the importance of programs that promote the enhancement of the quality and diversity of local and regional outlets, which suffer from a lack of income due to the digitalization of news

- Develop a political culture of declining interviews to problematic outlets

2

To maintain pro-Western attitudes and support for the EU and NATO in the country, ensure accessible and easy-to-understand information is available for citizens, and support more EU and NATO presence in the country:

- Initiate a positive government-led campaign in partnership with the civic sector to increase trust and improve the EU's image among Macedonians, information, and partnership programs with the EU, and the promotion of the benefits of NATO membership through respectable media outlets that are popular with vulnerable societal groups

3

To enhance legislative and structural resilience against foreign malign influence, focusing on best practices implemented in EU and NATO countries:

- Update electoral laws to include the regulation of political campaigning on social media
- Increase the capacity, effectiveness, independence and transparency of the election monitoring body, especially in terms of political funding and third-party interference
- Invest in building situational awareness and capacity-building of public institutions and intelligence infrastructure, and increasing counterintelligence efficiency and presence to secure better information flow and experience-sharing with NATO allies
- Update main strategic documents to include resilience-building measures against foreign malign influence on all levels
- Develop horizontal as well as vertical structures that foster the effective exchange of information and the development of whole-of-government approaches to security, including countering foreign malign influence

4

To empower society and contribute to overall resilience to foreign malign influence:

- Invest more into CSOs and their empowerment to limit dependence on foreign funding, etc.

For the region

- Stimulate regional and bilateral cooperation between neighboring countries that face similar foreign malign influence challenges, develop trust and information-sharing, and reduce the amount of covert foreign activities
- Support initiatives that bring Balkan countries closer, including the strengthening of economic links via trade and investment

For the EU

- Increase support for programs that foster socioeconomic reforms and build regional infrastructure
- Invest in communication campaigns (in consultation with local experts) to rebuild confidence in the EU

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