

 **GLOBSEC**

Vulnerability Index 2021

  **Hungary**

Montenegro

North

Macedonia

Romania

Serbia

→ Contents

04
Comparative map and credits

26
Country overview

40
Information landscape

06

What is this report about?

28
Public attitudes

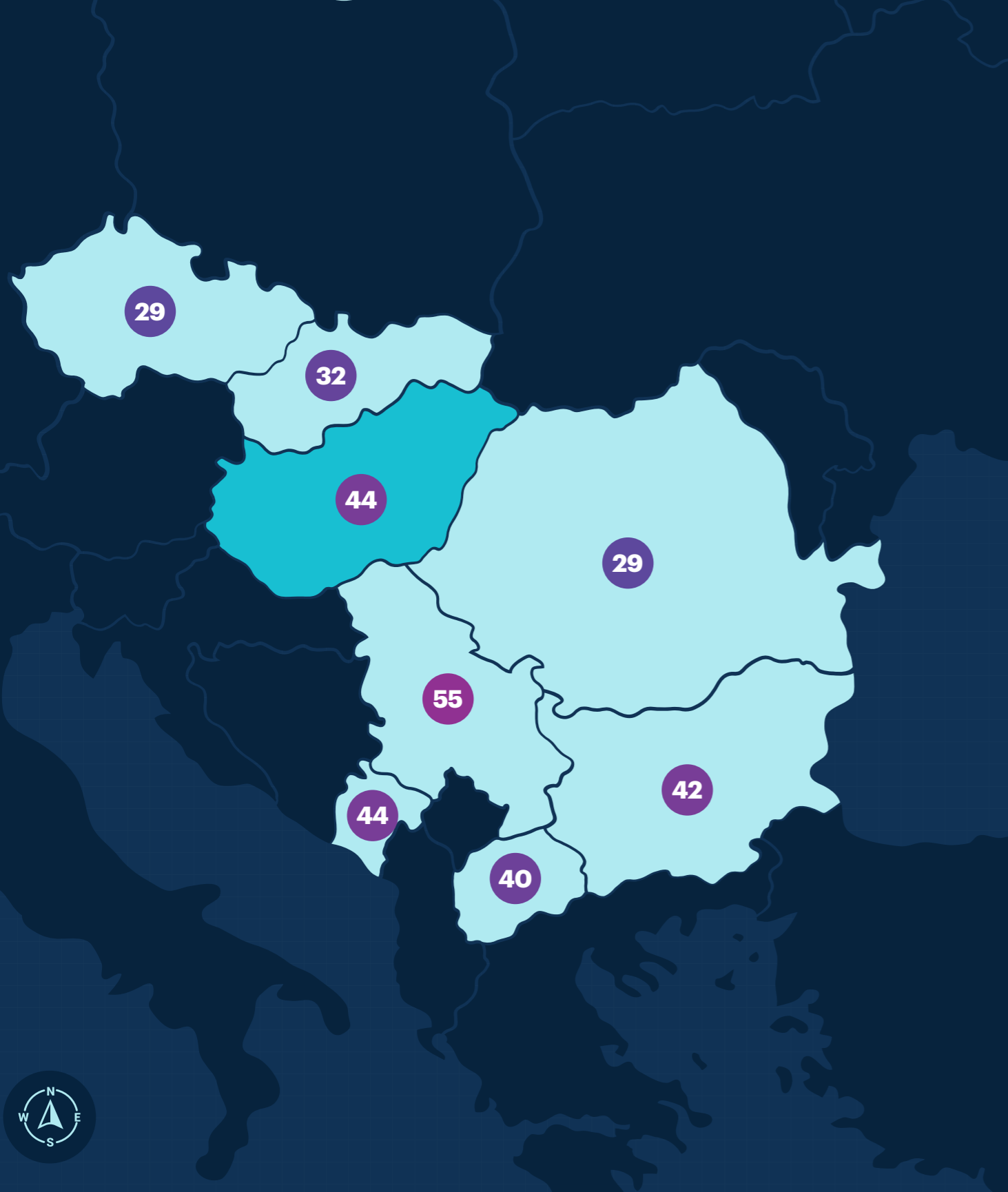
44
Civic & academic space

32
Political landscape

14
Comparative assessment

36
Public administration

→ Vulnerability score region overview



→ Editors & authors

Dominika Hajdu
Policy Director

Katarína Klingová
Senior Research Fellow

Miroslava Sawiris
Senior Research Fellow

Centre for Democracy and Resilience



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→ Authors of Focus on Hungary

Patrik Szicherle
Analyst

Csaba Molnár
Quantitative Analyst

Political Capital



www.politicalcapital.hu



➔ What is this report about?

The GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index measures vulnerability towards foreign influence in eight countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia on a 0-100 scale, where 0 is the most resilient and 100 the most vulnerable.

It assesses five key dimensions: public attitudes, political landscape, public administration, information landscape, and civic and academic space, with a particular focus directed towards the Kremlin's and Beijing's activities.

Why are we doing this?

The Index is the result of a two-year project supported by the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center and led by GLOBSEC in cooperation with partnering organizations in each covered country. The project, focusing primarily on Russian influence, mapped out the networks and relevance of Facebook pages that spread pro-Russian or pro-Kremlin propaganda; measured the impact of pro-Kremlin influence on the public via representative opinion polls and focus groups; and, finally, analyzed key vulnerabilities towards notably pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing influence in the region.

The Vulnerability Index consists of a large overarching report that examines the five aforementioned dimensions from the regional comparative perspective, and eight country-specific reports with more in-depth analysis of local context and case studies that showcase particular vulnerabilities. Examples of the Kremlin's and Beijing's influence outlined within country chapters are not exhaustive, and due to the word limit should not be treated as an all-encompassing overview of the situation in specific countries.

The country-specific reports were written by respective partnering organizations and reflect their expert views. As the editors consider the presented plurality of opinions and assessments as the report's strength, they did not interfere with analysts' assessments and interpretations of the situation in their respective countries. Thus, country chapters are heterogeneous in terms of topics covered and writing style.

Whereas the Index analyzes vulnerabilities, it is complemented by a series of papers that propose solutions and recommendations - both from the country-specific and regional perspective.



Our theoretical approach

The Index focuses on measuring vulnerabilities within the societies and governance systems through an analysis of internal dynamics and gaps. These can either have the potential to serve or already serve pro-Kremlin and/or pro-Beijing interests; or they have the potential or are already directly utilized by the Kremlin and/or Beijing.

The theoretical approach underpinning this Index works with three overarching concepts: international relations theories of classical realism and liberalism, as well as sharp power theory¹ to explain the analyzed countries; and how these conditions co-shape these countries' vulnerability to foreign influence.

Countries in Central Europe and the Western Balkans are regionally defined by their position between the Eastern hegemonic powers, Russia and China, and by their proximity to/membership in Western international structures, the EU and NATO. This Index works with:

➔ The classical realist argument that external conditions and actors interact with states' domestic actors and institutions, as there is no strict line between international and domestic politics². Internal state factors and their resilience or lack thereof thus translate into higher susceptibility towards hegemonic influence, as evaluated in the country rankings in each of the five studied dimensions.



The countries we cover

The selection of countries was based on the donor's requirements at the beginning of the project period. At the same time, covering parts of both Central Europe and the Western Balkans allowed for a comparative perspective between countries which share a totalitarian past and aspired to become developed democracies, but whose paths diverged after 1989. This range allows the reader to compare

countries that are both members and non-members of the EU, Schengen zone, NATO, etc., and assess how societal, economic and historical developments have shaped their present vulnerabilities towards foreign influence. Nonetheless, the report does not provide either an exhaustive list or a complete picture of the phenomena and challenges affecting the countries.

The team aims to expand the number of countries to broader Central and Western Europe in the next years.



➔ Liberalism's understanding of democratizing processes, networking, and the role of international institutions in promoting cooperation and reducing the risk of violent conflict. The Index reflects this by defining integration in regional economic and military structures, such as the European Union and NATO, as a source and agent of resilience.

➔ The concept of sharp power as efforts which undermine the integrity of institutions through manipulation and efforts to "pierce political and information environment in targeted countries".

Through rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis, this Index captures how each of the analyzed countries is the subject of such efforts and to what extent they succeed.

Our methodological approach

The quantitative representation of vulnerabilities provides an overarching perspective on the situation in a respective country, and allows for easy region-wide comparison. Such approach should, nonetheless, be understood only within the context of the five studied dimensions.

The Index methodology has been consulted with the Steering Committee that provided advice on methodological approach in initial project stages. Measurement methods have been created in cooperation with index development experts.

Consultants on measurement methods:

Kyle Marquard

Assistant Professor, HSE University

Received his PhD in Political Science from University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. He is an assistant professor at HSE University, Russia; as well as a research fellow at the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development and a project manager for the Varieties of Democracy Project. His research interests include post-Soviet politics, identity politics, statistical techniques for measuring difficult concepts, and survey research. More [here](#).

Alexander Stoyanov

Director, Vitosha Research

Senior Fellow at CSD and Director of Vitosha Research. Since 1991 he has participated in the design and implementation of a number of social and market research projects in the fields of social and economic behavior, social justice, corruption and organized crime, and crime victimization, including the Corruption Monitoring System, National Crime Survey, Survey of the Grey Sector, Eurobarometer and Flash Eurobarometer Surveys in Bulgaria. Dr. Stoyanov also works as Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of National and World Economy, Sofia. More [here](#).

Dan Pemstein

Associate Professor, North Dakota State University

Associate Professor at North Dakota State University and a co-developer of the Digital Society Project, Unified Democracy Scores, and Scythe Statistical Library, and a project manager for the Varieties of Democracy Project. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Illinois, USA, and specializes in statistical tools designed to answer questions about political institutions, party organization, digital politics, and the political economy of development. More [here](#).

➔ The vulnerability calculation was based on seven key data sources

➔ Representative opinion polls conducted in October 2020 on a **sample of 1,000 respondents per country** (8,000 respondents altogether)

➔ **Online survey with at least 20 experts per country** selected in a non-biased, transparent process, with at least 10% representation from each of the following sectors: media, academia, civil society, public, and private sectors.

➔ **Desk research** conducted by partnering organizations, analyzing:

- key security strategies and documents which are or should focus on foreign influence in the past six years
- legislative and structural resilience addressing electoral interference
- actions and rhetoric of key political actors in each country within the past six years

➔ **Specific variables and indices tailor-made for Vulnerability Index purposes by consultants** - experts from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Index developed by the V-Dem Institute based at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden

➔ **Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index**

➔ **World Press Freedom Index** developed by Reporters Without Borders

➔ **Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index** developed by FHI 360

The results from all existing indices were analyzed for the past six years, from January 1, 2016, until June 30, 2021, in order to reflect at least one change in government in the analyzed countries.

The Index is made of five dimensions, with each comprising several indicators and each indicator including specific variables.



➔ Vulnerability dimensions

1 Public attitudes

Public attitudes are based on a representative opinion poll conducted in October 2020. A total of 24 questions were assessed and re-calculated to 0-100 scale.

Questions were thematically grouped into the following indicators: 1) Orientation towards the EU, 2) Orientation towards NATO, 3) Perception

of democracy, 4) Perception of Russia, 5) Perception of China, 6) Belief in conspiracy theories and disinformation, and 7) Trust. Vulnerability is determined by: anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-democratic, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese attitudes, proneness to believe in conspiracy theories and disinformation, and distrust in institutions and the media.



2 Political landscape

The quality of the political landscape is measured through six indicators collected via desk research and responses from expert surveys that are designed to capture political elites' attitudes towards the EU, NATO, Russia, and China. In order to reflect the evolving nature of the political environment in each state, four desk research indicators consist of a six-year assessment of a given country's political landscape - an analysis of speeches, actions, and the social media posts of all political entities which managed to either a) form a government, b) nominate a President, or c) secure

seats in national assemblies and parliaments within the monitoring period. The following sources were used to create the dimension:

- 1 Political landscape assessment vis-à-vis the EU
- 2 Political landscape assessment vis-à-vis NATO
- 3 Political landscape assessment vis-à-vis Russia

- 4 Political landscape assessment vis-à-vis China
- 5 Expert survey assessment of the extent to which parliamentary actors have promoted pro-Kremlin interests since 2019
- 6 Expert survey assessment of the extent to which parliamentary actors have promoted pro-Beijing interests since 2019

3 Public administration

The public administration dimension is composed of seven indicators that measure the resilience of the democratic system of governance from the perspective of guaranteeing basic freedoms, non-discrimination, electoral integrity, fight against corruption, strength of checks and balances, legislative and structural resilience, and a willingness to address and counter foreign influence. Specifically, it contains the following indicators:

- 1 Corruption Perceptions Index ranking conducted by Transparency International
- 2 V-Dem Checks and Balances Index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index)
- 3 V-Dem Civil Liberties and Non-discrimination Index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index)
- 4 V-Dem Physical Violence Index
- 5 Electoral integrity, comprised of the V-Dem Free and Fair Elections Index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index), desk research assessment (conducted by project partners) of the regulatory framework covering electoral resilience against potential foreign influence, and an expert survey assessment of cases of foreign interference in the past two years and the impact thereof

- 6 Legislative and structural resilience, comprised of desk research assessment (conducted by project partners) of key security documents from the perspective of foreign influence and expert survey assessment of the whole-of-society approach and alignment of security and defense strategies with EU policies (Western Balkans countries only)
- 7 Expert survey assessment of awareness of and counter-measures to pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing activities





4 Information landscape

The resilience of information landscape in this Index is determined by eight indicators that assess the quality of both offline and online information space. Vulnerability of the information environment is determined by a lack of freedom and rule of law, high circulation of information manipulation in the information space, as well as stronger influence of Russia and China or their proxies. The indicators are:

- 1 Media freedom - World Press Freedom Index ranking
- 2 V-Dem Access to Diversity Online index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index)
- 3 V-Dem Capacity to Protect Digital Space Index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index)
- 4 V-Dem Digital Rule of Law Index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index)
- 5 V-Dem Government Control over Digital Space Index (tailor-made for the Vulnerability Index)
- 6 Presence of information manipulation and disinformation: six V-Dem variables and two expert survey questions, measuring the influence of sources that spread manipulative content, and the spread of manipulative content by major political parties as well as both domestic and foreign governments and their agents.

- 7 Expert survey assessment of Russian and pro-Kremlin influence on the media
- 8 Expert survey assessment of Chinese and pro-Beijing influence on the media



5 Civic & academic space

The civic and academic space dimension assessment results from combining three data sources: a) Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, b) selected V-Dem variables on the civic space and the Academic Freedom Index, and c) expert survey responses to evaluate the extent of Kremlin's and Beijing's influence. Altogether, this dimension consists of five indicators:

- 1 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index
- 2 V-Dem Academic Freedom Index
- 3 Civic space (based on V-Dem data)
- 4 Expert survey assessment of Kremlin's influence on civil society
- 5 Expert survey assessment of Beijing's influence on civil society



GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index country reports also include findings and statements acquired during in-person interviews (conducted by project partners) with local experts in the five analyzed dimensions. This qualitative data is not included in the calculation of the Index, but provides insights and context into the country chapters.

Find out more about the composition of the index, data collection, as well as methodological measurements in the Extended Methodology.

[Learn more](#)





→ Strategic insight

In mapping out vulnerabilities to foreign influence, GLOBSEC has conducted extensive research and overseen the elaboration of country studies across Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. The project's pertinence, however, extends far beyond the region itself. It is a litmus test of how global confrontation between the West, on one side, and Russia and China, on the other is playing out in one of the strategically important parts of the world – the region with geographically peripheral members of the EU and NATO but also countries in the neighborhood aspiring to become members or close partners. The scope of the study encompasses sovereign states but also potential targets, platforms and/or gateways through which Beijing and Moscow can influence the global order upon which Western institutions rest.

The five dimensions analyzed in this Index provide deeper insight into socio-political resilience to foreign malign influence in the eight examined countries. While the Index sheds light on only a segment of a considerably larger sphere of vulnerabilities in Central Europe and the Western Balkans, it provides important guidance to policymakers at both the national and international levels. While the country reports and accompanying papers provide an

in-depth analysis of the situation in each respective society, several overarching lessons can be drawn from the Index results:

First, membership in international organizations (e.g. the EU and NATO) contributes to greater resilience from the perspective of common policy solutions, centers of excellence and collective defense. Differences in the quality of public administration, the enactment of relevant legislation and the integrity of elections, however, underscore varying levels of vulnerability within respective societies. It is, therefore, important to continue with the integration processes and common standards and policies. Any discussions concerning the enlargement of NATO or the EU should reflect these considerations.

Second, perceptions often matter more than tangible structures including institutions, administrative capacities and the availability of hard resources. And mindsets are often shaped by information spaces which constitute a delicate construct in all democracies, not to mention the still immature political systems of CEE. More resources should thus be allocated to understanding and addressing vulnerabilities stemming from manipulative actors and

campaigns. Slavic countries tend to be more vulnerable to Russian and pro-Kremlin influence, necessitating the need to confront the 19th century notion of pan-Slavism through the articulation of effective counter-narratives that explore other, more modern identities.

Third, the legacy of communism, even three decades later, has seen numerous problems emerge in the region. These challenges concern the instability of political institutions, the volatility of public opinion, and the deeply entrenched problems of corruption, nepotism and clientelism. Democracy and the rule of law are less entrenched and subjected to a constant onslaught by cynical politicians – a dynamic eroding trust in democratic institutions. Though Western European countries were not included in the Index, if they had been, the gap between the best-scoring countries of CEE and states like Austria and Belgium would have been visible. This conclusion underlines the rationale for expanding the study to include a greater number of countries in the future.

Fourth, the Kremlin's influence activities and the debate about them are much more prevalent in the region than Beijing's own involvement, despite its growing

presence). This represents an opportunity to get ahead of developments through proactive measures but also a potential vulnerability if the information vacuum is ultimately first filled by China. In other words, Russia, no matter how pernicious its actions in the region, is far from a new player, which implies it is understood better than others. China, meanwhile, is a less known enigma and potentially able to severely disrupt political and civic systems in the region.

Foreign malign activities, finally, constitute both a cause and consequence of weak and vulnerable societies and governments. Were China or Russia not present in the region, these countries would still be grappling with challenges such as corruption, state capture and the erosion of press freedom. Foreign actions, even if they exploit these weaknesses, should not be understood as an explanation (or an extenuating circumstance) of all deficiencies in these countries' public arenas.

Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, Miroslava Sawiris and Jakub Wiśniewski

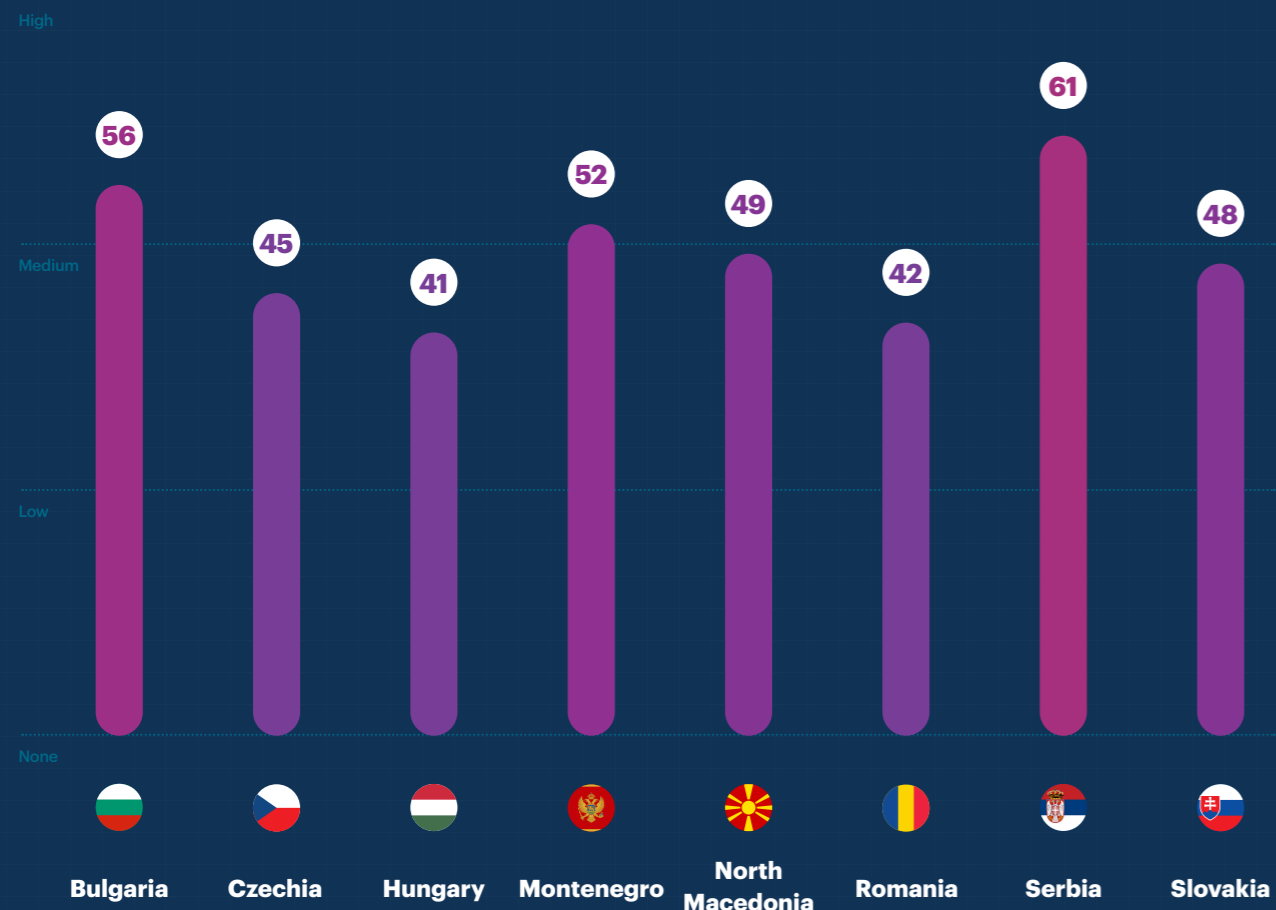


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina famously begins, "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". We invite you to decide for yourself the extent to which the vulnerabilities described below are unique to the countries examined or constitute a broader problem facing contemporary democracies.





Public attitudes



Public attitudes dimension is particularly key, with most countries assigned the highest or second highest vulnerability score herein. The driving factors behind such vulnerabilities vary from country to country. In Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Slovakia, for example, Moscow has been utilizing the notion of pan-Slavic unity, language proximity, shared history and cultural ties. The lack of debate concerning

the past and insufficient strategic communication of public institutions leads to, in some countries, the capture of public attitudes, a process systematically reinforced by both domestic and pro-Kremlin actors. Such image projection and the diffusion of pro-Kremlin narratives resonates in 6 of 8 countries, with Czechia and Romania being the exceptions.

The Orthodox Church, moreover, has been identified as a particularly influential actor bolstering the dissemination of these narratives in Montenegro, Serbia and Bulgaria.

Dissatisfaction with how democratic system works and doubts whether it exists at all are rampant across the region, particularly in Serbia, Bulgaria and Czechia. The attitude



In 4 of 8 countries, Moscow has been utilizing the notion of pan-Slavic unity, language proximity, shared history and cultural ties.

that democracy and Western institutions, predominantly the EU, failed to deliver on promised economic and social benefits underscore an internal vulnerability that can be seamlessly exploited by both anti-systemic domestic and foreign actors to drive social polarization and inequality. This disillusionment, nurtured by corruption and state capture, can be found mostly in the Western Balkans, Romania and Bulgaria. Dissatisfaction, surging especially during the pandemic, is steering an increasing number of citizens towards preferring strong autocratic leaders who need not bother with parliament or elections. The mask and vaccine diplomacy of the Kremlin and Beijing, furthermore, positively resonated among the public, particularly in the Western Balkans.

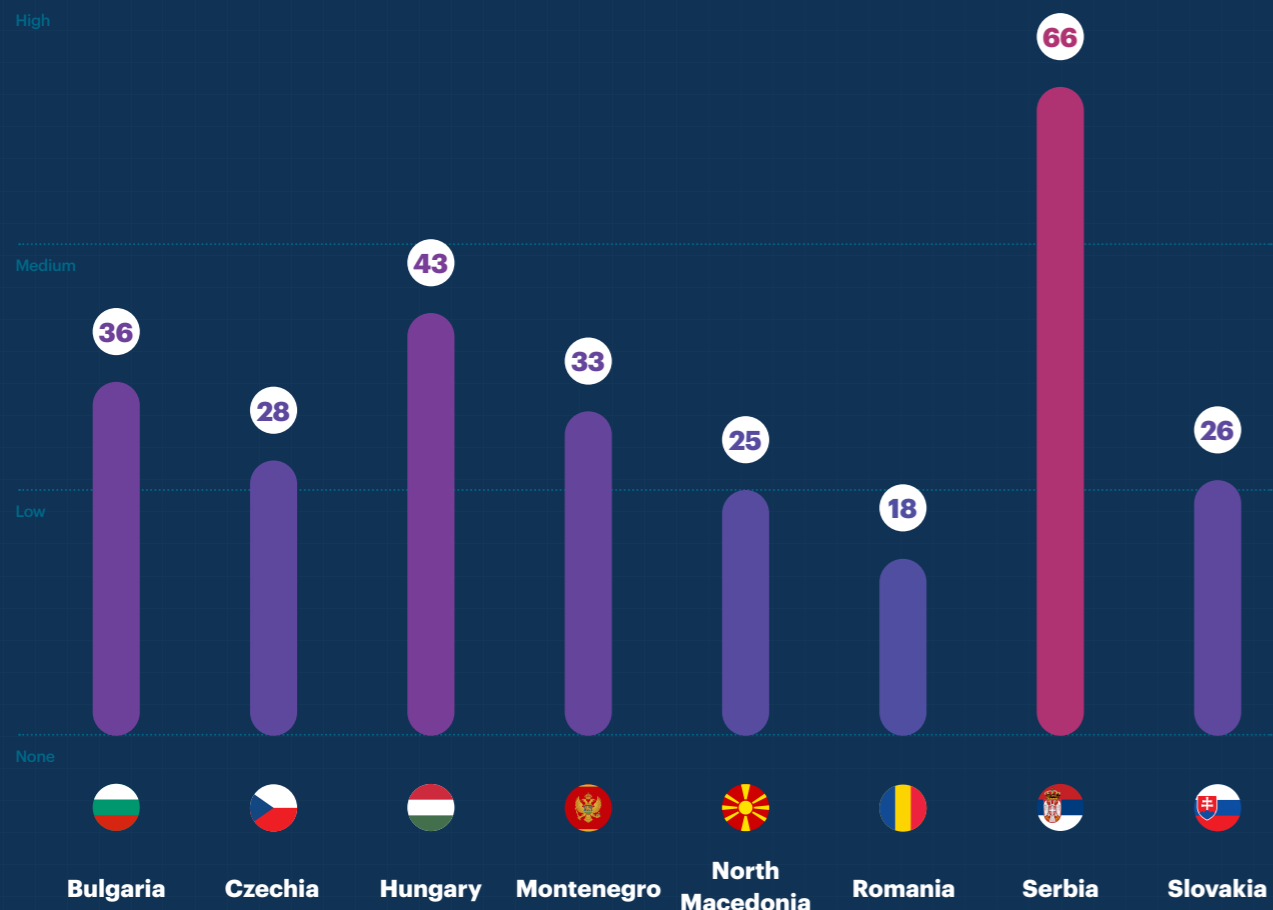
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

towards migrants and other minority groups. The inability to distinguish between “liberalism” as a concept and “liberal policies” contributes to the success of demagoguery and “othering” in further polarizing these societies. A total of 41% of respondents from analyzed countries think that liberal democracy threatens their traditional values and national identity and only 36% believe that LGBT+ rights should be guaranteed. Combined with widespread buy-in to disinformation and conspiracy theories, a well-placed Molotov cocktail can all too easily ignite brewing societal and political tensions, especially in Montenegro, Bulgaria and Romania.

Cooperation with foreign malign actors and the absence of support for EU and NATO membership often stems from ignorance and a lack of citizen interest in these topics. The same logic applies to the matter of China and its absence from public debate. The Czech Republic, where the topics of Tibetan independence, Taiwan and the violation of human rights in China have occupied space in the public conscience for years, stands out as an outlier. Favorable attitudes towards these foreign actors, nevertheless, have not been value-driven but rather motivated by presumed economic benefits and steered by intensive PR campaigns – this is particularly the case for Montenegro, Hungary and Serbia.



→ Political landscape



The extent to which any country could be susceptible to foreign malign influence is broadly influenced by the quality of political representation. This includes the polity's commitment to the rule of law and its willingness to pursue cooperation with or membership in important democratic multilateral organizations that safeguard peace and security.

Central Europe and the Western Balkans regions boast a diverse political landscape, reflecting historical, geographic and cultural differences. These patterns are mirrored in widely contrasting levels of Beijing's and the Kremlin's ability to steer political developments on the ground according to their interests. Despite these differences, however, the political representatives of the countries

included in the Vulnerability Index are surprisingly homogenous in their stable commitment to the EU and NATO, which to some extent limits the scope for interference by malign actors.

The political landscape and its vulnerability to foreign influence, nonetheless, varies relatively widely across the eight covered countries. This variance can be summed up into three



Countries displaying greater resilience to foreign influence in the political arena typically display a combination of an enthusiastic orientation towards the EU and NATO and a muted pro-Kremlin and/or pro-Beijing orientation.

tiers: countries where political landscape has proven to be somewhat resilient towards malign foreign influence (Romania, North Macedonia, Slovakia and Czechia); places where a moderate level of vulnerability is present (Bulgaria and Montenegro); and countries whose political entities and figures contribute significantly to the country's vulnerability (Serbia and Hungary).

Countries displaying greater resilience to foreign influence in the political arena typically generally display a combination of an enthusiastic orientation towards the EU and NATO and a muted pro-Kremlin and/or pro-Beijing orientation. In other cases, pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing actions and rhetoric of some political figures, typically

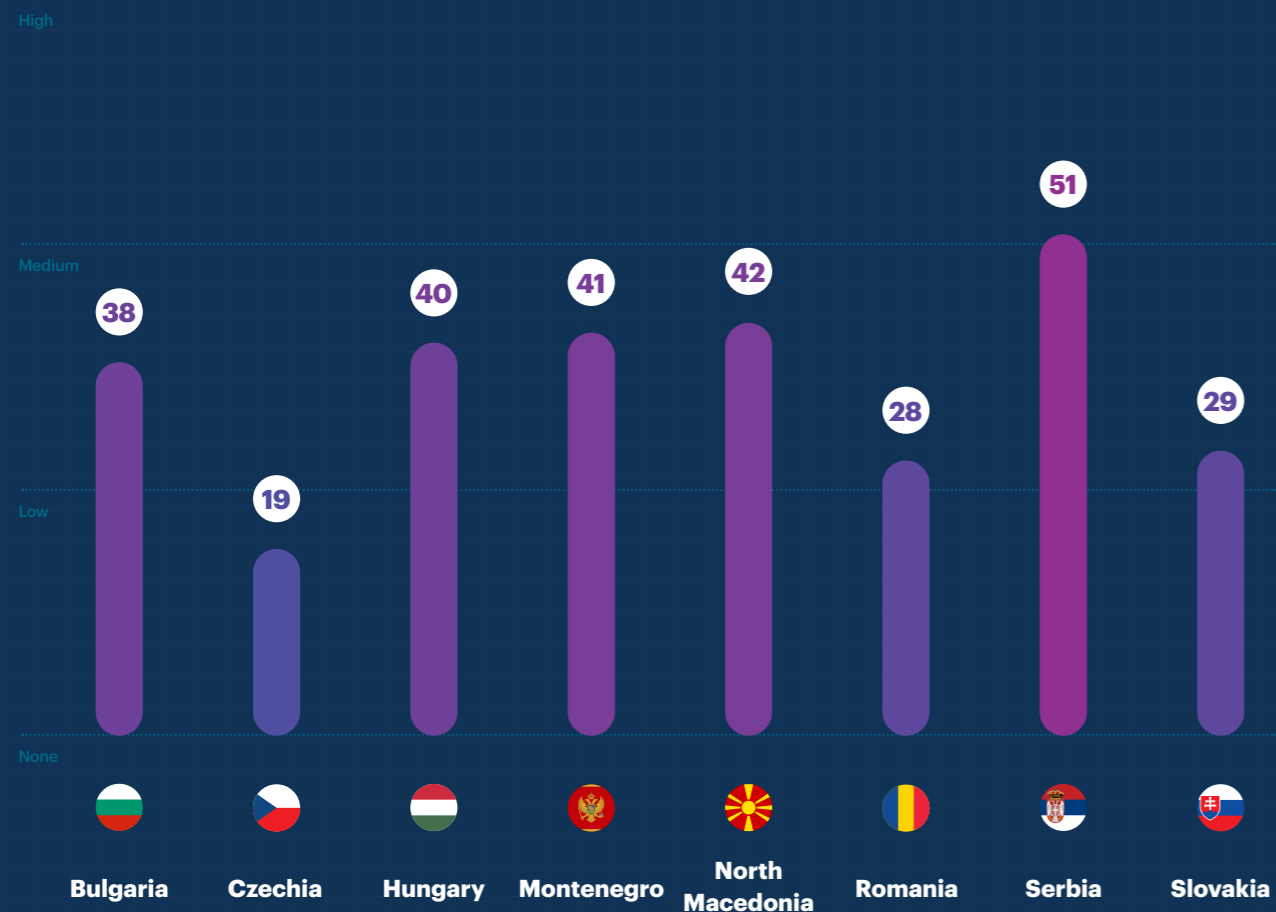
facilitated by the witting or unwitting promotion of their interests, is counterbalanced by strong commitments to Euro-Atlanticism. Over the monitoring period from 2016 to June 2021, political representatives in six of eight countries studied generally pursued policies supportive of the EU. NATO, for its part, commands even greater backing, with 7 of 8 countries pursuing constructive long-term cooperation with the Alliance.

Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's absence from Euro-Atlantic structures. This focus, in turn, renders any meaningful foreign policy shift unlikely in the near future.

In terms of the extent to which Beijing and the Kremlin have been successful in promoting their interests through close cooperation agreements or political PR in the analyzed countries, the Kremlin still holds significant sway in Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, while promotion of Beijing's interests by influential political actors is somewhat less prevalent but plays an important role in Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.



→ Public administration



Sizeable differences in the resilience of public administrations are present across the region, with Czechia being the most and Serbia being the least resilient due to its shortcomings in electoral integrity, malign foreign influence, and legislative and structural issues. Concerns about widespread corruption, state capture and the need for increased protection of the election system are, in fact,

present, at least in some form, in all analyzed countries. Most feature outdated legislation, inadequate checks and balances, and governments that are lethargic in implementing effective reforms. These factors all make the countries susceptible to new forms of influence operations.

While half the analyzed countries regulate third party involvement in elections, the online environment

is not sufficiently covered in the electoral laws in 6 of 8 countries, with Hungary and Czechia being exceptions. Electoral and campaign regulations, however, are not effectively applied and enforced in the online setting in any of the countries.

“Concerns about widespread corruption, state capture and the need for increased protection of the election system are present, at least in some form, in all analyzed countries.”

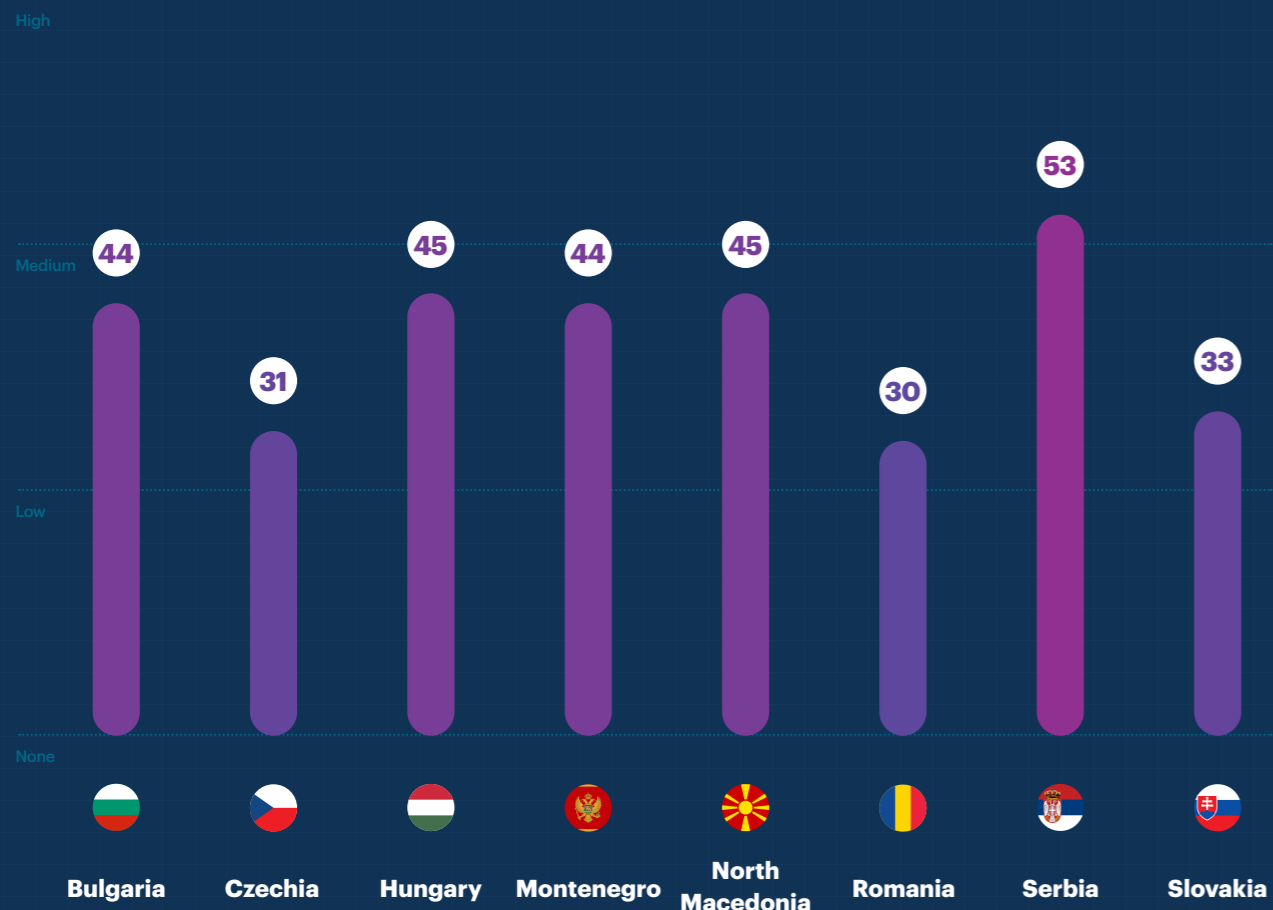
Limited and one-track understanding of threat perception is often the result of political leadership unwilling to change the status quo and establish new cooperation structures that emphasize whole-of-government and whole-of-society policies. These approaches have not been adopted in any of the analyzed countries.

Public servants having an insufficient situational awareness is, consequently, a common and prevailing problem. But recognition of this gap, the first necessary step if change is to occur, has progressed in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and even Montenegro, following an attempted coup. These developments matter – they are both cause and consequence to the different “securitization” approaches applied in different national security and defense

strategies across the region. Some countries (e.g. Czechia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia) clearly recognize the activities of foreign malign actors. Yet others (e.g. Hungary and Serbia) are reluctant to take a critical stance towards Russia and China and rather perceive them as strategic partners. The noted shortcomings shape the rhetoric of public officials and also (can) engender a significant impact on public attitudes.

Differences in situational awareness can also be seen in the number of strategic documents and their regular updating (or lack of it) or in the annual reports produced by intelligence services. While Czechia has updated its Security Strategy four times since 2000, Slovakia has done so only once in the past 16 years. The annual reports of intelligence services can also provide insight into changes in the domestic security environment. Publicly available reports are, however, not common in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and even Hungary. This assessment presumes that access to information, including a general overview of the domestic security environment and the identification of threats, increases societal resilience and limits the maneuvering space for foreign malign influence operations. Transparent public communication about threats also fosters an informed public, engaged in debates on key security issues facing the country, thereby diminishing space for conspiracy theories.

→ Information landscape



A diverse information environment buttressed by trusted and quality outlets that provide verified and constructive assessment of events is a prerequisite for democracy, where the officials should be elected based on the informed consent of the electorate. The quality of the information landscape, therefore, constitutes an important dimension in the formation of resilience towards foreign influence.

With a rising share of people drawing on the internet as a key source of information, the information operations of foreign actors find fertile ground if oversight (without impinging on freedom of speech) over social media and online content is not present. At the same time, the adoption of manipulative content and narratives aligned with pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing interests by domestic actors with

no direct links to China or Russia renders the struggle for a quality information space even more difficult.

In the information landscape dimension, the examined countries can be broadly divided into three groups based on the quality of their information space: the most resilient states (Czechia, Romania, and Slovakia) characterized by diverse media

“ The presence of disinformation in both the online and offline information space in the region correlates with the presence and influence of pro-Kremlin actors and narratives in the media. ”

The presence of pro-Kremlin actors and content in the media space is one of the most serious challenges contributing to vulnerability across Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans.

Also, perhaps unsurprisingly, the presence of disinformation in both the online and offline information space correlates with the presence and influence of pro-Kremlin actors and narratives in the media in the region. Given the information space in all monitored countries demonstrates varying degree of information manipulation and disinformation contamination, this correlation represents a key vulnerability factor. Beijing’s influence, meanwhile, is moderately prevalent in 7 of 8 countries and constitutes a strong level of vulnerability only in Serbia.

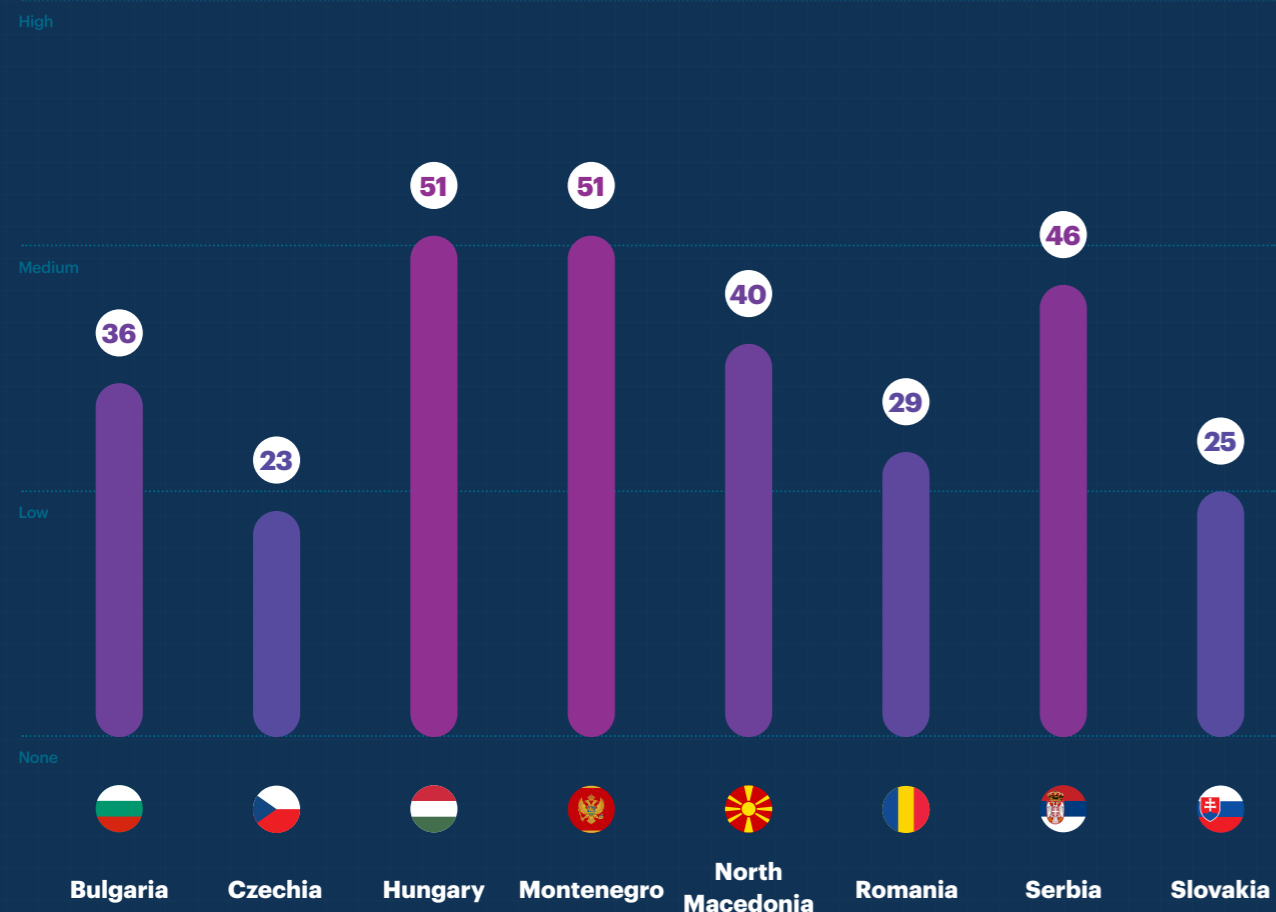
environments and at least basic protection of users in the digital space; mid-ranked countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) whose information environments display more vulnerabilities including weaker media freedom even as some points of resilience are present, such as relative internet freedom; and the worst performing country, Serbia, which sees its information landscape exhibiting vulnerabilities in nearly all areas monitored.

Even in countries with a freer media environment, such as Czechia and Slovakia, narratives serving pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing interests garner space in the mainstream media, as they are often shared by domestic political actors, journalists insensitive to strategic communication, and/or other alleged experts invited to “balance the discussion”.

In countries where key political figures, especially in the government, are propagating information manipulation, such as in Hungary, Montenegro, and Serbia, vulnerability increases considerably, as manipulative content comes to be disseminated by all media outlets covering politics, including the public broadcaster. This problem corresponds more generally to a lack of access to diverse political perspectives, thereby hindering citizens from developing informed beliefs. This deficit is highest in the three Western Balkan countries and Hungary. Key points of resilience, especially among EU member states, can be found in user and privacy protections that hamper online censorship (including of political content) and the misuse of data. These safeguards are present in 6 of 8 countries.



→ Civic & academic space



The quality of civil society and the civic space in which it operates is a barometer that reflects the robustness and viability of a country's democratic governance. A healthy and vibrant civil society is thus a clear indicator of a vigorous democracy, while a polarized civic space, the

co-opting of NGOs to promote state or foreign state interests, and attacks on civil society from the political or (dis)information arenas, meanwhile, are all signs that democratic governance may be internally or externally threatened.

The sustainability of civil society and its ability to serve as a watchdog within the countries analyzed is, therefore, determined by the quality of the civic space. In 5 of 8 countries, this space is characterized by high levels of political polarization and in 4 of 8 states, the mass mobilization



In 5 of 8 countries, the civic space is characterized by high levels of political polarization.

the vulnerability of civil society, which, despite these challenging environments, still manages to mobilize the public behind pro-democratic causes.

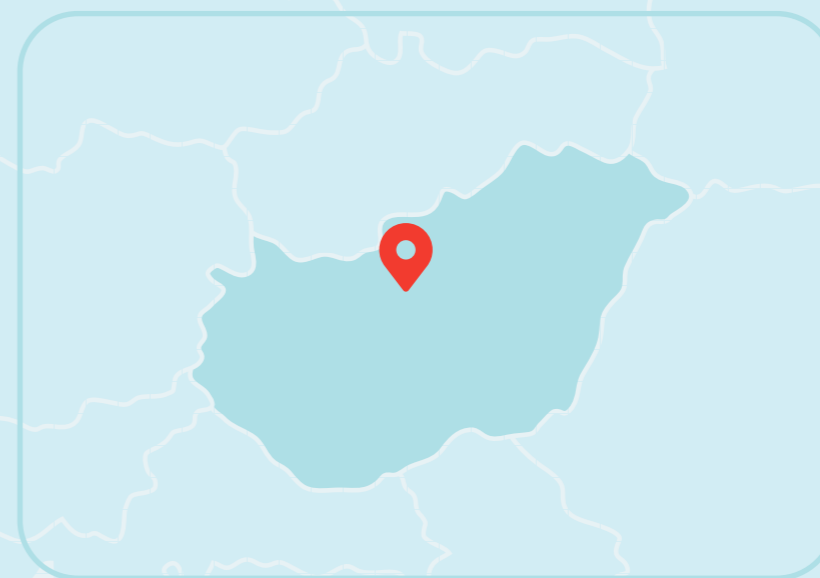
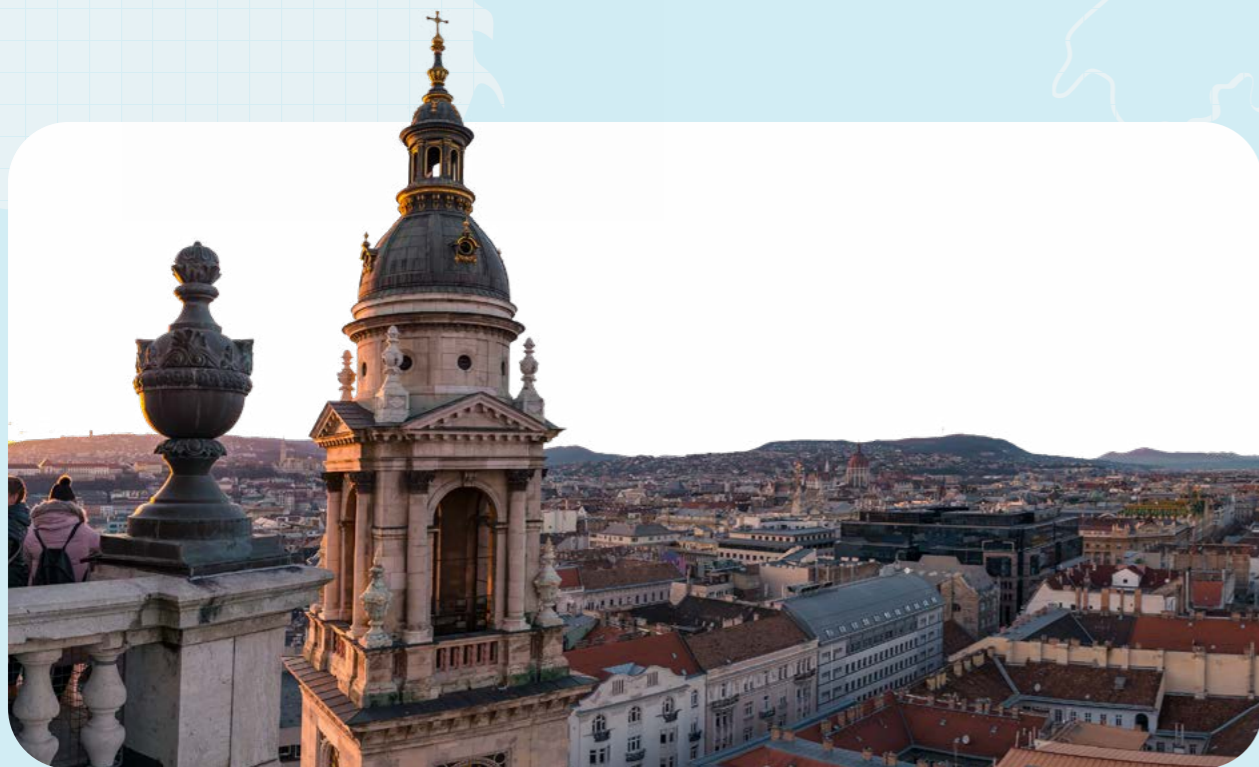
The Kremlin's influence cannot be overlooked either, particularly in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, where it is exerted mostly through NGOs and GONGOs that promote the interests of Moscow, albeit with limited impact. Beijing's influence, for its part, is most notable in Hungary's civic and academic space through projects such as a partnership with Fudan University and the growing number of Confucius Institutes established in the country.

of society behind autocratic goals is rather common. This highlights the precariousness of the conditions the civil societies operate in.

Of the countries covered in the Vulnerability Index, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania are most resilient – these civic spaces are significantly less polarized than those of other countries included in this research, while their academic institutions are largely free from internal or external interference, even if other problems, like pervasive corruption, may be present. By contrast, the civic spaces in Hungary, Montenegro, and Serbia display high levels of social polarization while restrictions placed on academic freedom pose major barriers in Hungary and Montenegro.

None of the countries analyzed can be considered to host truly sustainable civil societies. Sustainability is impacted by problems ranging from difficulties in securing funding to demonization campaigns aimed at democratic civil society actors and Kremlin-inspired legislative proposals to frame these actors as "foreign agents". All these often home-grown factors contribute to

Focus on Hungary



↓ Vulnerability score

44
/100

Compared to other EU countries assessed by the Vulnerability Index, Hungary faces greater vulnerability to foreign influence across multiple areas.

Government control over certain segments of the public sphere, in particular, has contributed to extreme political polarization and a severely weakened civil society, academic space, and information environment. Leading mainstream

media outlets, in recent years, have repeatedly disseminated messaging that accords to government views. Most Hungarians, consequently, have been exposed to manipulative information and narratives promoting pro-Kremlin and/or pro-Beijing interests on a regular basis.

Despite an open door, the Kremlin and Beijing have exerted only limited effort to build covert networks in the country through which they can exercise their influence.

The populace's continued backing of democracy, the EU, and NATO, meanwhile, constitute key pillars underlining the country's

resilience and its potential to foster a stronger democracy premised on a pro-transatlantic foreign policy orientation.

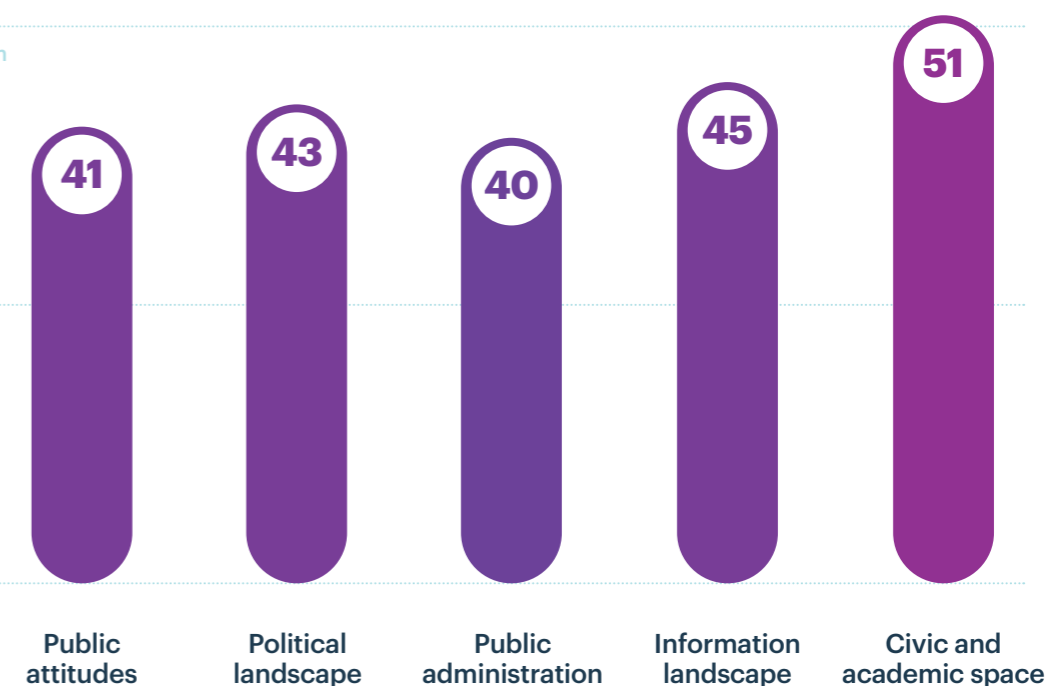
Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

41
/100



Hungarian society, on the surface, is resistant to the pro-Russian narrative that it may be better to live outside Euro-Atlantic structures.³ A total of 78% of Hungarians wish to stay in the European Union and 80% back NATO membership.⁴

Upon closer scrutiny, however, a far from ideal picture emerges. 56% of Hungarians would see their country situated geopolitically between East and West - thus, a considerable subset of society is not firmly glued to Hungary's pro-West foreign policy direction. These

"neutral" citizens could fall prey to the influence of pro-Kremlin narratives. Russia and China, in fact, are rarely depicted publicly as threats in Hungary and both are on the receiving end of adulatory coverage, particularly in the large pro-government media conglomerate under the umbrella of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) and the public broadcaster.⁶ This backdrop could be one explanation behind why more Hungarians consider Russia (35%) and China (30%) to be strategic partners than the US (13%).⁷

The sizeable volume of favorable media content directed at the two states and the reluctance of Hungarian state institutions to counter this phenomenon constitute a considerable vulnerability towards foreign influence.

The birth of grassroots support for the Kremlin's interests

Hungarians, responding to historical experiences, were traditionally rather skeptical towards Russia⁸ due to Russian and Soviet forces, respectively, repressing the Hungarian

revolutions of 1848-49 and 1956 and the Soviet domination persisting from the end of the WWII to 1990. Following Hungary's first democratic elections in 1990, there was a strong national consensus in support of the country's integration into NATO and the EU. As the early 1990s saw Russia struggle to cope with the consequences of the Soviet Union's breakup, relations with Moscow were deprioritized.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's first government, in fact, witnessed Hungarian-Russian relations reach an all-time low, with Budapest espousing an ardently skeptical stance towards Russia at the time.⁹ It was the socialist government of ex-Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy that started rebuilding this relationship.¹⁰ Jobbik, an extremist party at the time, also emerged as an openly pro-Russian force on the Hungarian political scene.¹¹



“ I think we have to be afraid of Russian expansion.”

Male, 37,
Hungarian focus group participant

A shift in 2010

After acceding to power in 2010, Fidesz turned towards eastern regimes in parallel with its increasingly conflictual relationship with western allies. Over the past ten years, the ruling party's rhetoric on Russia and China has become more and more favorable, with its takeover of numerous media outlets seeing these messages disseminated to a wider range of voters. Fidesz backers are now the most pro-Russian electoral group in Hungary.¹² Fidesz's relations with Russia are, notably, dictated by joint projects, like Paks II,¹³ which Hungarian government-friendly oligarchs can profit from.¹⁴

Russia and China, in this vein, maintain a considerable advantage in Hungary. The ruling party and the media they control are propagating numerous narratives also prevalent on pro-Kremlin portals including the claims that the EU "dictates" policy to its member states without their consent or that the EU is seeking to forcibly transport migrants to Hungary. The "EU dictate" narrative, for instance, was believed by 38% of all Hungarians in 2020 and by 75% of Fidesz voters.¹⁵ The reach of these narratives is substantially higher than would be the case if they were merely relegated to fringe pro-Kremlin and conspiratorial sites. Moscow and Beijing, therefore, need only exert minimal effort to penetrate Hungarian minds.¹⁶

The government and pro-Kremlin apparatus have, in fact, generally been successful in selling

Russia as a political, economic, and military powerhouse. This conclusion is underscored by Political Capital's research that found Hungarians highly overestimating the weight of Russia in world affairs.¹⁷ Both Russia and China are depicted by media outlets as Hungary's friends, development models to emulate and crucial economic partners¹⁸, which can foster a perception that relations with these countries could bring increased prosperity to Hungary too. The constant overemphasis on the real or perceived military and economic power of Russia and China without any reference to the possible threats they pose (e.g. data access via Huawei 5G networks, dominance over certain

economic sectors and associated dependence, and loan-related dependency) constitutes a key tool towards rendering societal attitudes vulnerable to foreign influence.



Perception of democracy

The views of Hungarians towards democracy could also provide a potential pathway for the Kremlin to exploit in the future. While society accepts democracy as a concept according to a recent poll,¹⁹ people agree less on the finer details of democracy and many back what Viktor Orbán termed "illiberal" or "Christian" democracy. Though pro-Kremlin websites have refrained from attacking the country's democratic record and shortcomings, a change of government could potentially change their approach, playing on the "disagreement" between Hungarians regarding certain aspects of democracy. And despite the fact that territorial revision has not been official Hungarian policy since WWII,

the populace's attitudes towards the Treaty of Trianon and the subsequent loss of territory and the current cabinet's conflictual relationship with some of the country's neighbors could also be a source of exploitation for the Kremlin.²⁰

📌 In 2018, 51% of Fidesz voters said Hungary should have closer ties with Russia.²¹

Top-down influence on public attitudes

In contrast to most EU member states, foreign influence in Hungary, overall, is a top-down affair: the incumbent government voluntarily takes positions or disseminates rhetoric that can potentially extend the influence of hostile foreign powers. At the same time, the government has adhered to most of the country's commitments to the West (e.g. 2% of GDP on defense by 2024 or participation in NATO missions). This posture indicates that Hungarian policy, formally, aims to find a balance between East and West even as an ardently pro-East rhetoric is employed for domestic purposes to underpin the rejection of certain Western values

including the rule of law. The top-down approach has succeeded in fostering grassroots support for closer relations with authoritarian regimes, too. As a result, the demand for pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives could persist even if a change in government were to occur. This peddling could be spearheaded either by Fidesz-loyal media or pro-Kremlin and pro-Chinese websites, opening a window of influence in the country. Additionally, the stark societal divisions in Hungary between the "Fidesz" and "opposition" camps could be exploited by hostile third actors to generate further social tension in the country. Since societal support for the EU and NATO remain firm, Hungary will not seek to leave these organizations. The main question, consequently, concerns whether malign foreign influence attempts can generate further resistance in society against the fulfilment of Hungary's obligations to its western partners.

📌 In spring 2021, 68% of Hungarians were optimistic about the EU's future, while only 30% were pessimistic.²²



Political landscape

Chapter 2

Vulnerability score

43
/100



Hungary's political landscape is highly divided between a right-wing bloc occupied primarily by the two ruling parties, Fidesz and KDNP,²³ and an opposition bloc consisting of a diverse range of forces from socialists and greens to the formerly far-right Jobbik. Up until the 2019 municipal elections, the opposition bloc itself was fragmented, allowing Fidesz to secure constitutional majorities in the National Assembly in 2010, 2014, and 2018. However, opposition parties

recently began cooperating with one another with the aim of contesting the 2022 general election as an alliance backing one prime ministerial candidate and joint candidates in single-member electoral districts.

These two blocs and their electoral bases are nearly completely divorced from one another, contributing to extreme societal divisions including on key foreign policy questions related, for example, to the EU, Russia, and China.

Everyone wants to be in the EU, but many do not like it

The country's EU membership is one of the few areas where the Hungarian ruling party's official policy and the opposition bloc find agreement. Minister for the Prime Minister's Office Gergely Gulyás, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, and Minister for Families Katalin Novák, among others, have all affirmed their support for EU membership.²⁴ Some voices within or close to Fidesz, however, such as House Speaker László Kövér,²⁵ also openly oppose EU membership.²⁶ Two political parties officially favor Hungary leaving the EU –far-right Mi Hazánk²⁷ and the far-left Workers' Party²⁸, but neither appears likely to earn seats in the National Assembly.²⁹

While Fidesz's official policy backs EU membership, the party

★ Hungary was first to ratify the Lisbon Treaty on 17 December 2007.

has launched multiple anti-EU campaigns based on manipulative claims³⁰ operationalizing the EU dictate narrative. House Speaker László Kövér has put this storyline to work: "We did not join an empire, we had enough of that when we were a Soviet client state, colony."³¹

The opposition bloc, meanwhile, firmly supports further integration even as they differ on the areas and modes of cooperation.³²

Jobbik, which used to be a stark opponent of EU integration and once called for a referendum on the country's EU membership, has now also adopted a pro-EU policy position. However, one interviewed expert noted that there are still some "sovereignist forces" within Jobbik who are opposed to further integration.



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Uncontested NATO membership

NATO is practically missing from public debate in Hungary, at least at the highest political level. While no mainstream political forces are disseminating disinformation regarding NATO, discussions on its benefits are not prevalent either, with the topic only appearing when key political figures attend NATO events.

Opposition parties, meanwhile, are also supportive of NATO, according to their joint preliminary program.³³ The two extra-parliamentary parties, Mi Hazánk³⁴ and the Workers' Party, alone are advocating for leaving NATO.

Hungary has generally fulfilled or sought to meet its

🗳️ **We can talk about an eastern and a southern threat, but we must know that these are different. The eastern one is called Russia, the southern one is called terrorism. These are two different types of threats, risks, dangers to our security.**³⁵

Viktor Orbán,
Prime Minister, 2018

NATO commitments and the government faces no meaningful societal opposition in this regard. The government's rhetoric on NATO, furthermore, as a key player in combating migration could be

giving a boost to NATO's image in a society that has become largely opposed to migration in the wake of multiple government campaigns.³⁶

Eastern threat is close to the government's heart

Hungary has regularly been described as Russia's Trojan Horse within western alliances.³⁷ FM Péter Szijjártó stated in 2017 that the "Hungarian economy suffered USD 6.5 billion in losses due to sanctions on Russia",³⁸ a figure widely disputed by experts.³⁹ It must be emphasized that Hungary, nonetheless, never steps over certain red lines and avoided vetoing the EU's sanctions policy and NATO initiatives seeking to deter the Kremlin. Its anti-sanctions rhetoric, however, could be seen as seeking to dissuade Brussels from implementing further punitive measures against Moscow.⁴⁰ 28 out of 39

★ **In 2017, Viktor Orbán predicted that due to transformations in the world, the EU-Russia relationship would improve.**⁴¹

surveyed experts responded that parliamentary actors had been highly successful in representing Kremlin interests in Hungary, with some pointing to Fidesz as the main culprit.

All six prime ministerial candidates from the united opposition, by contrast, support countering Kremlin political, economic, and communications influence in the EU and Hungary.⁴²

Pivot to China?

30 out of 39 surveyed experts responded that parliamentary actors were also successful in representing Beijing's interests in Hungary, once again pointing to Fidesz. The incumbent government has regularly vetoed joint EU statements condemning Chinese actions and Fidesz MEPs were among a small minority casting votes against freezing the ratification process of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.⁴³

🗳️ **China should not be scolded by developed nations on human rights and the market economy.**⁴⁴

Viktor Orbán,
Prime Minister, 2017

The united opposition, in contrast, is strongly opposed to Chinese influence in Hungary. In a joint letter addressed to Xi Jinping, they noted that "whichever of us would become prime minister, they would immediately halt the renovation of the Budapest-Belgrade railway and the Fudan project."⁴⁵ They also back the EU's sanctions on Chinese officials.⁴⁶



A common approach to Russia and China

The divisions discussed in this chapter are exemplified by a spectrum of geopolitical orientations preferred by different parliamentary political actors.

The interviewed experts suggest that both Russia and China value Hungary solely as a partner within the EU and NATO that can weaken these alliances from within. One interviewee noted that Fidesz had been particularly successful in tuning Hungary's foreign policy strategy to fit Kremlin interests. Another expert noted that Hungary, as a small country lacking natural resources, would not be an enticing partner for Russia and China if not for its presence in western alliance structures.

Moscow and Beijing have similarly approached relations with Budapest through the launch of multiple joint projects, all of which are financed by bilateral loans.⁴⁷ These projects, in part, offer Hungarian pro-government business owners access to funds not overseen by the EU.⁴⁸

Hungary, overall, showcases, consequently, a considerable vulnerability to foreign influence through its politics and this vulnerability could prove difficult to overcome for any future cabinet.

Public administration

Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

40
/100



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Hungary’s public administration has undergone massive centralization following Viktor Orbán’s ascendancy to power in 2010,⁴⁹ with the European Commission’s assessment noting that public administration reforms are aimed at strengthening the Prime Minister’s role within the government.⁵⁰ Viktor Orbán and his personal network of loyalists – including those leading formerly independent institutions – have a firm grip on decision-making in Hungary.⁵¹ As one interviewed expert pointed

out, the lower levels of public administration now have no room for maneuver with regard to independent initiatives.

The European Commission’s 2021 rule of law report on Hungary further put a spotlight on increasing concerns about judicial independence in the country including the selection of the president of the country’s highest court (Kúria), despite the negative opinion of the National Judicial Council, and the extension of presidential powers.⁵² Another concern pertains to authorities being granted the right to attack Constitutional Court decisions.⁵³ The courts have become ever more favorable to the ruling parties according to a study by Hungarian CSOs.⁵⁴ The Commission also noted that the system of checks and balances, transparency, and the quality of the legislative process remain “a source of concern.”⁵⁵ Fidesz, using its constitutional majority in the National Assembly, can essentially change Hungary’s laws at will, thereby effectively blocking future governments with no constitutional majority from taking action on these matters.⁵⁶

The Hungarian government, in this regard, currently maintains nearly complete influence over public administrative bodies. Survey research further suggests that trust in public institutions depends on political preferences in the country: those who support Fidesz are more likely to trust public institutions.⁵⁷ This chasm not only deepens societal divisions but prevents public administrative bodies from being regarded as independent representatives of the country as a whole.

A severe lack of information on malign foreign influence

Hungarian state security agencies and the cabinet itself are rather tight-lipped regarding malign foreign influence, particularly as it concerns Russia and China. Hungary’s key strategic documents reflect this approach as well.

The 2020 National Security Strategy⁵⁸ lists EU and NATO membership as factors strengthening national security and pledges to maintain NATO cohesion and strengthen the EU’s role in defense policy. While acknowledging “tensions” in the West-Russia relationship and China’s increasing “resoluteness” on the international scene, it calls for pragmatic economic cooperation and dialogue on both counts. Information operations are mentioned only briefly in the document. The 2021 National Military Strategy⁵⁹ also acknowledges hybrid warfare and information operations as threats but withholds mention of any



specific potential perpetrators. Hungarian national security services, moreover, do not publish regular reports on these activities. An interviewed expert emphasized that Hungary's allies have limited the extent of information-sharing with Hungarian counterparts to avoid leaks to hostile powers. Close relationship with Russian and Chinese regimes is a state policy which mirrors the ruling party's stance and limits public administration's ability to counter foreign influence.

★ Hungary's ineffective lobbying law was repealed on January 1, 2011.⁶⁰

🔴 There are no democratic control mechanisms, checks and balances [...] that would allow certain domestic institutions or actors to step up against foreign influence despite the Hungarian government's activities.

Expert on public administration

This finding is mirrored in the expert survey results: 23 out of 39 respondents said public authorities do not address the activities of either pro-Kremlin or pro-China actors in the country and that parliamentary actors have been successful in representing their interests.

Only combating low-level corruption

Hungary was ranked 69th on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index in 2020, similar to Romania and Bulgaria.⁶¹ Few high-profile cases are brought to court by prosecutors despite OLAF raising red flags about high-level corruption.⁶² One interviewee noted that the government only focuses on combating lower-level corruption.⁶³

Rules against lobbying are virtually non-existent and public consultation procedures are non-transparent - they can be easily avoided altogether. This dynamic has contributed to the birth of unorthodox approaches, including "strategic partnership agreements" between the cabinet and businesses. The result has essentially been government discrimination of particular private firms over others.

As noted above, high-level political corruption can impact foreign policy decisions and government strategies: favors



provided to authoritarian partners can open the door to joint economic projects that pro-government oligarchs could profit from.⁶⁴ One interviewed expert also stressed that lobbying by authoritarian powers can be effective on large projects like Paks and the Budapest-Belgrade railway. The lack of legislation on lobbying, however, has kept the precise nature of these processes elusive.

Election infrastructure at risk

Multiple interviewed experts noted that Hungary has not faced foreign attempts to influence its elections, with the main potential reason being that general elections have not been competitive since 2010 - Fidesz has always had a definitive advantage due to opposition fragmentation and its own popularity. The ruling party's advantages have been highlighted, among others, also by ODIHR.⁶⁵

The expert survey, nevertheless, revealed that the country's electoral oversight bodies are not ready to address cases of foreign interference. One interviewed expert pointed out that the rules on the ban of foreign funding

🔴 The new election website crashed during the 2018 elections despite previous warnings that it would be unable to withstand the election night.⁶⁶

of political parties have been adequately implemented but that campaign funding laws can be circumnavigated by, for instance, NGOs friendly to one political party or another.

State institutions cannot generally be considered resilient to malign

foreign influence and - in fact - there is little information, even available to experts, on the actual capabilities present to counter such efforts even if the public administration's hands were not tied politically.



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Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

45
/100



Hungary's information landscape differs from the vast majority of EU member states in that the country's ruling party controls a large amount of media outlets, including the public broadcaster.⁶⁷ This media conglomerate, in the works since 2010, is now used to broadcast government messages to the public,⁶⁸ including those concerning its close ties to Russia and China.

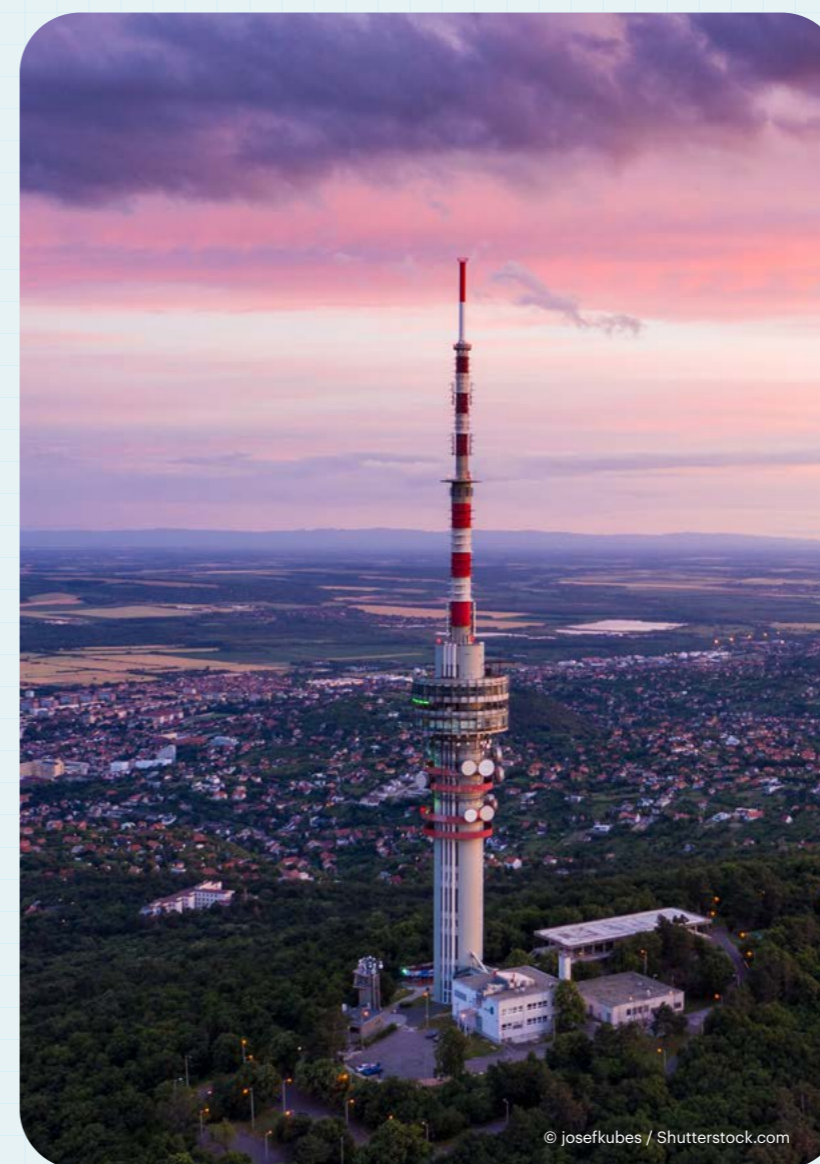
Government's control of media

Fidesz-KDNP efforts to extend its grip on the media sector have also been apparent in the country's rankings on the World Press Freedom Index, with Hungary falling from 23rd place in 2010⁶⁹ to 92nd in 2021.⁷⁰ The ruling party has pursued a host of measures to restrict media independence in the country including legislative moves aimed at creating media oversight bodies packed with Fidesz loyalists subsequently aiding

pro-government businessmen in expanding their media ownership. The government has also financed allied oligarchs in their purchases of struggling media outlets – just to offer their properties to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) for free.⁷¹ KESMA now boasts around 500 media outlets under its umbrella.⁷² For example, Index, the most popular independent online portal, was swiftly pacified by pro-government interests

after Szabolcs Dull, its editor-in-chief, was fired and most of its journalists left.⁷³ Formerly independent media, such as Hír TV and Magyar Nemzet, adopted a pro-government tone immediately after their sale to pro-government businesses following the 2018 general election.⁷⁴ Government-allied individuals, in fact, were present during the takeover of Hír TV and openly acknowledged their intention to transform it into a pro-government channel.⁷⁵

Hungary was also, notably, identified as employing Pegasus spy software, with the targeting encompassing, among others, Hungarian journalists critical of the government and the owner of Hungary's largest independent online portal.⁷⁶ The intention could be to encourage self-censorship among independent journalists, further threatening press freedom in the country. Lajos Kósa, the Fidesz-affiliated head of the National Assembly's Defence and Law Enforcement Committee, has confirmed that the Hungarian state purchased the software.⁷⁷



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📌 **The manufacturer of Pegasus said they can sanction states abusing the product.⁷⁸**

The Kremlin's lack of interest in Hungarian fringe media

The results of the expert surveys suggest that significant space is given to pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing actors in both the public and mainstream media: 28 of 29 responses noted that some space is given to pro-Kremlin interests in public media outlets and 26 of 29 said the same about mainstream sources. One interviewed expert noted that this is likely due to the fact that respondents consider KESMA outlets as mainstream even though they solely disseminate Hungarian government views on relations with Moscow and Beijing. Another brought attention to the fact that the Chinese ambassador to Hungary has recently published several opinion pieces in pro-government dailies⁷⁹ and Magyar Nemzet recently published a long and friendly interview with Russian FM Sergei Lavrov.⁸⁰ These opportunities enable Russian and Chinese officials to disseminate their messages directly to the Hungarian population.

The fringe media scene in Hungary, for its part, is made up primarily of (1) grey-zone outlets that openly support either the ruling or the opposition bloc, (2) conspiratorial sites, and (3) a small number of pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing outlets. The narratives of the first group depend entirely



✦ **Distrust in mainstream media has increased from 55% to 69% over the past year, to the highest in the V4.**

on their political preferences - they communicate the messages of their chosen political bloc.⁸¹ Conspiratorial sites generally engage in anti-US, anti-EU, and anti-Western conspiracy theories (pro-Russian material occasionally appear too). The third group, meanwhile, unmistakably represents the interests of the Kremlin or Beijing.⁸² Pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing influence on the fringe scene, however, as one interviewed expert emphasized, is not meaningful. Both countries already receive enough favorable coverage in the pro-government media, necessitating that neither Moscow or Beijing invest resources into penetrating the Hungarian media space. This is confirmed by the findings of the expert survey, with 16 of 39 respondents not aware of either state influencing fringe outlets in the country.

The number of pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing outlets is rather limited. Among these are News Front, supposedly connected to Russian intelligence services⁸³, Orosz Hirek⁸⁴ or Moszkva tér⁸⁵, which is edited, among others, by Gábor Stier, a long-time pro-Kremlin foreign policy journalist

and a regular participant of Valdai Discussion Club meetings.⁸⁶ The state-owned China International Radio maintains a Hungarian branch but it is not influential.⁸⁷

The central activity of these fringe pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing sites is to disseminate narratives that are rarely - if ever - present in the pro-government media including anti-NATO statements and the Kremlin's claims to Crimea and eastern Ukraine.⁸⁸ Their purpose, in this regard, is to bring narratives into the Hungarian media space that generally cannot be found in mainstream pro-government media. Due to their small audience, they generally only achieve limited success in this mission though. Since these outlets are relatively marginalized and prominent Hungarian political actors are not hostile to NATO, anti-NATO narratives find a sizeable share of support here.

A vulnerability that offers an opportunity

As the Hungarian information space has become an easy playing field for promoting the pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing interests, Russia and China have eschewed investments of resources into creating their own media infrastructure within the country. Should there be a change of government and media financing rules that were to cut off pro-government outlets from their

vast public financing, Moscow and Beijing, consequently, could find themselves expending outsized efforts to push their narratives in Hungary. The current vulnerability, in this regard, could become a (temporary) source of resilience, providing an opportunity for a new government to find an adequate response to the media strategies of the Kremlin and Beijing.

✦ **RT was allegedly planning to launch a Hungarian-language program, but the idea was dropped.⁸⁹**



Civic & academic space

↓ Vulnerability score

51
/100



Hungary has become increasingly politically polarized over the past few decades,⁹⁰ leading to “tribalism”, a process that involves people rallying around the leader of a tribe and rejecting other groups. This phenomenon is especially impactful among supporters of Fidesz and the Democratic Coalition, the largest opposition party at the time of writing the report.⁹¹ This political polarization, highest from the surveyed countries⁹²

and fueled by multiple political processes following the country’s democratic transition,⁹³ has shaped the civic space too. Hungary, at present, is essentially divided into a pro-government and an independent civic sphere. The former is committed to supporting any and all governmental measures through various tools – expert opinions, campaigns, statements, etc. The other camp, meanwhile, is seeking to carry out a civil society

role even as it lacks meaningful access to public resources⁹⁴ or forums to pursue cooperation with state institutions, especially following the approval of the lex-NGO proposal.⁹⁵

✪ Hungary lost access to EUR 214.6 million of Norway Grants funding due to a lack of agreement on the management of subsidies.⁹⁶

Lex-NGO

Lex-NGO was the first tangible product of the government’s years-long anti-NGO campaign. The process began with an attack on Ökotárs, which was accused of distributing Norway Grants in a politically biased manner (these allegations were later found to be ungrounded).⁹⁷ Lex NGO forced CSOs receiving foreign funds of over HUF 7.2 million (EUR 20,000) to declare themselves as “foreign funded organizations”



although the law was never enforced in practice.⁹⁸ The government replaced the law with a new one, allowing the Fidesz-controlled State Audit Office to annually inspect the finances of associations managing an annual budget of HUF 20 million (EUR 55,500).⁹⁹ This move provided the government an opportunity to harass CSOs independent of the ruling party.

The independent elements of civil society have generally been in the crosshairs of the incumbent government and gained the favor of the opposition. In 2006-2010, Fidesz – then in opposition – continuously referred to reports and statements by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Amnesty International, and the

Hungarian Civil Liberties Union to condemn the actions of the MSZP-SZDSZ government.¹⁰⁰ But after 2010, Fidesz developed its “own” civil society using public financial resources, leading to the strengthening of pro-Fidesz organizations and the creation of new ones.¹⁰¹

Government NGOs spread pro-Kremlin views

The purpose of the government-controlled civil society is – as in the case of media – to spread or justify the government’s policies including its pro-Eastern foreign policy preferences. Pro-government think tanks,¹⁰² for instance, routinely praise the cabinet’s so-called “Eastern Opening” policy allegedly designed to improve economic relations with up-and-coming economic powerhouses like Russia and China.¹⁰³ The experts of these NGOs are subsequently welcomed in pro-government media to express their views without any independent experts present to contest or balance their claims.¹⁰⁴

Almost all interviewed experts emphasized that there is no evidence that Russia or China are directly funding civil society organizations. This does not exclude the possibility, however, that Russia has sought to co-opt Hungarian civic actors: cooperation between Russian intelligence and the far-right Hungarian National Front, for example, is well documented.¹⁰⁵ An expert pointed out, though, that this was rather a pilot project for the GRU and it was the Kremlin who was affected more negatively by the scandal that followed.¹⁰⁶

✪ 16 of 31 experts agree that Kremlin has only limited influence on the country’s civil society.



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China might shine in the academic space

Based on V-Dem’s Academic Freedom Index, Hungarian academic freedom has been deteriorating steadily from 2009 (when it was at 0.96 points) to today (0.44 points in 2020).¹⁰⁷ A key strategy plank of the Hungarian government has been to transfer state-owned universities to the management of public benefit foundations whose boards are appointed by the government and enjoy considerable influence over the universities.¹⁰⁸ Viktor Orbán declared that the boards are selected based on “having this sort of nation-centric viewpoint,” essentially admitting to using political criteria.¹⁰⁹ The University of Theatre and Arts (SZFE) was one such university taken over by a public benefit foundation.¹¹⁰ The chair of the foundation, Attila Vidnyánszky, accused the previous leadership of SZFE of

“ideological education” and said that the quality of courses at the university had been subpar.¹¹¹ The transformation of the university was pushed through despite widespread protests among faculty and students.¹¹²

The government also sought to establish its own education organization, the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, which will be present throughout the Carpathian Basin.¹¹³ The ruling party, in this vein, has considerably extended its grip on the education sector.

In 2021, the cabinet signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the Chinese Fudan University, which entails Fudan opening a campus in Hungary and “supporting Hungarian higher education through healthy competition between universities and channeling the work of well-known foreign professors into Hungary.”¹¹⁴ The National Assembly also approved a law creating an asset management foundation that would be responsible for managing the university’s Hungarian campus.¹¹⁵ The proposal, however, has

been met with fierce resistance because it would displace a planned student dormitory complex. The government has now pledged to only pursue the construction after a referendum on the issue.¹¹⁶ The project, which would be financed by a Chinese loan, could considerably extend Chinese influence over Hungarian academia. The university, through its promise of better wages, could draw away the most talented Hungarian scholars from Hungarian universities. The university, finally, could serve as a platform enabling China to forge personal connections with future (Hungarian) state officials given that it would offer political science programs.

Even as the government has fostered cooperation with Fudan University, Central European University was forced to relocate and cease most of its activities in Hungary following a legal battle initiated by the adoption of the lex-CEU law.¹¹⁷ Government arguments voiced against CEU - alleged “ideological education”¹¹⁸ and concerns about its effects on the competitiveness of Hungarian universities¹¹⁹ - have not been raised in connection with Fudan University.

One interviewed expert also noted that China’s Confucius Institutes have seen an expansion in Hungary, especially in the countryside. Additionally, Chinese universities offer research and exchange programs to Hungarian students and researchers.¹²⁰ Those who go to China as exchange students, in turn, are presumed to be less likely to be critical of China’s foreign policy and the Hungarian ruling party’s foreign policy, benefitting both sides according to the expert.

101 <https://index.hu/belfold/2017/12/05/alciv-il-szervezetek-civil-szervezetek-cof-bekemen-et-migraciokutato-alapjogokert-kozpont/>

102 The list includes but is not limited to: Századvég, Nézőpont, and Alapjogokért Központ.

103 <https://szazadveg.hu/hu/2021/01/18/kan-yarban-elozni-n1586>

104 <https://24.hu/belfold/2021/05/26/nagy-elannel-vetette-bele-magat-a-kormanyme-dia-az-oszodi-evforduloba/>

105 <https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/27/orsz-hirszerzok-gyakorlatoztak-a-rendorgy-ilkos-harcosaival/>

106 <https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/27/orsz-hirszerzok-gyakorlatoztak-a-rendorgy-ilkos-harcosaival/>

107 The scale ranges from 0 to 1, where 1 marks the highest level of academic freedom and 0 marks the lowest <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>

108 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/world/europe/hungary-universities-orban.html>

109 <https://444.hu/2021/04/30/orban-nyilt-an-elismerte-hogy-vilagnezeti-alapon-valogat-jak-ki-az-egyetemi-kuratoriumok-tagjait>

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111 <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20200812-vid-nyanszky-attila-interiu-szfe.html>

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119 *ibid.*

120 See, for instance, this ad on the website of Tempus Public Foundation: <https://tka.hu/palyazatok/6644/kina>



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GLOBSEC

myHive

Vajnorská 100/B, 831 04

Bratislava Slovak Republic

+421 2 321 378 00

info@globsec.org

www.globsec.org