

GLOBSEC

Vulnerability Index 2021

  **Serbia**

Slovakia

Bulgaria

Czechia

Hungary

Montenegro

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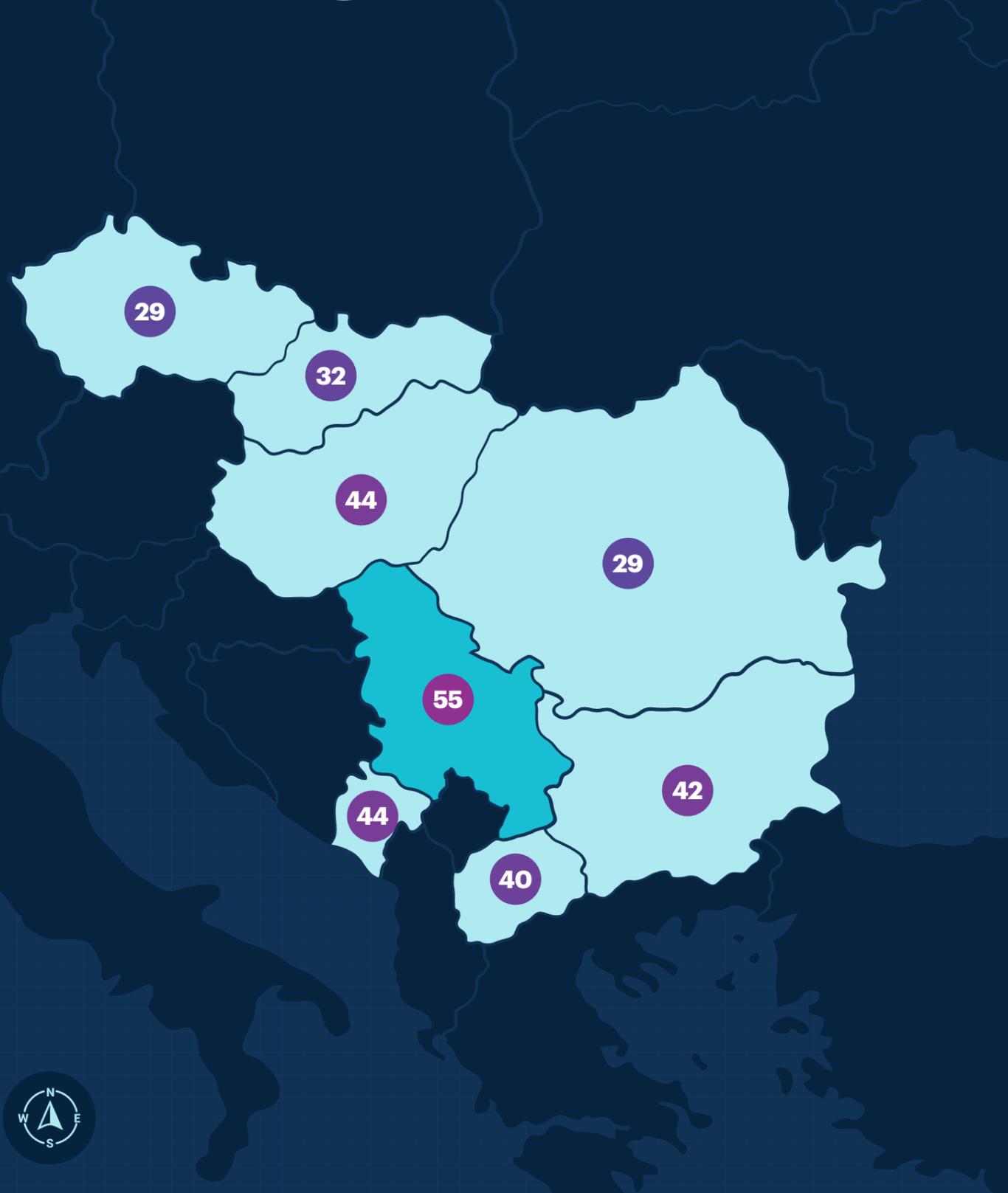
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Sincere thanks to **Jakub Wiśniewski**, Senior Adviser at GLOBSEC, for his strategic advice and direction, and Democracy & Resilience Project Coordinator, **Michal Kortiš**, for helping the team with report drafting, editing, and process coordination.

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➔ 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 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.

➔ 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.



➔ 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

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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](#).

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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](#).

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➔ 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

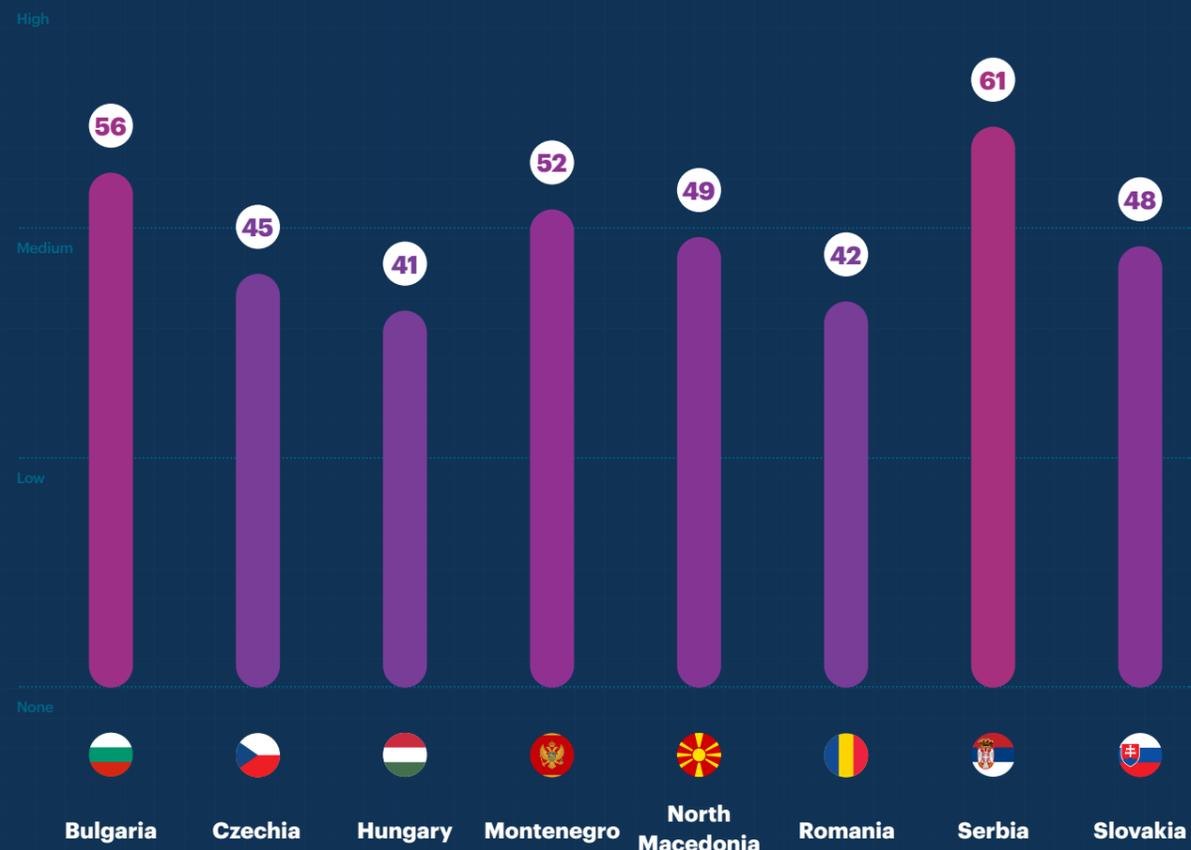


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina famously begins, "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". 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.

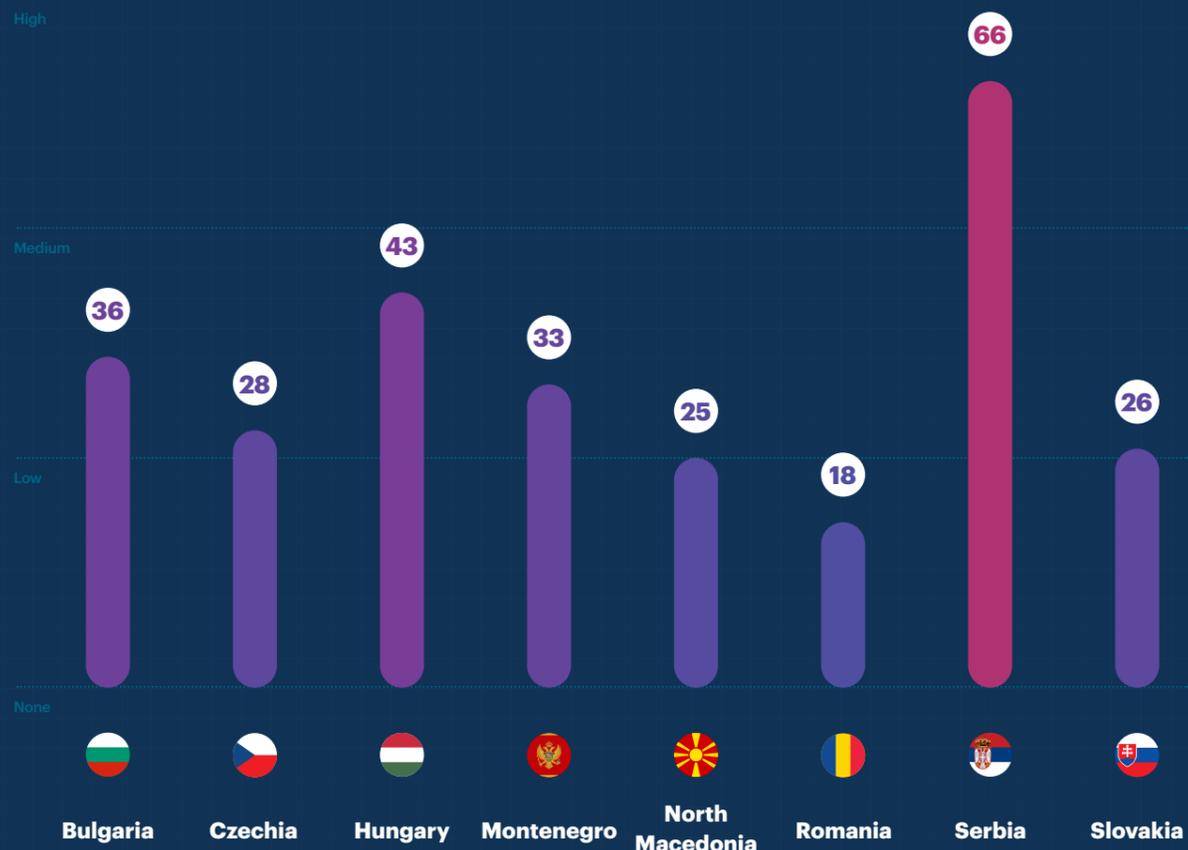
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

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.

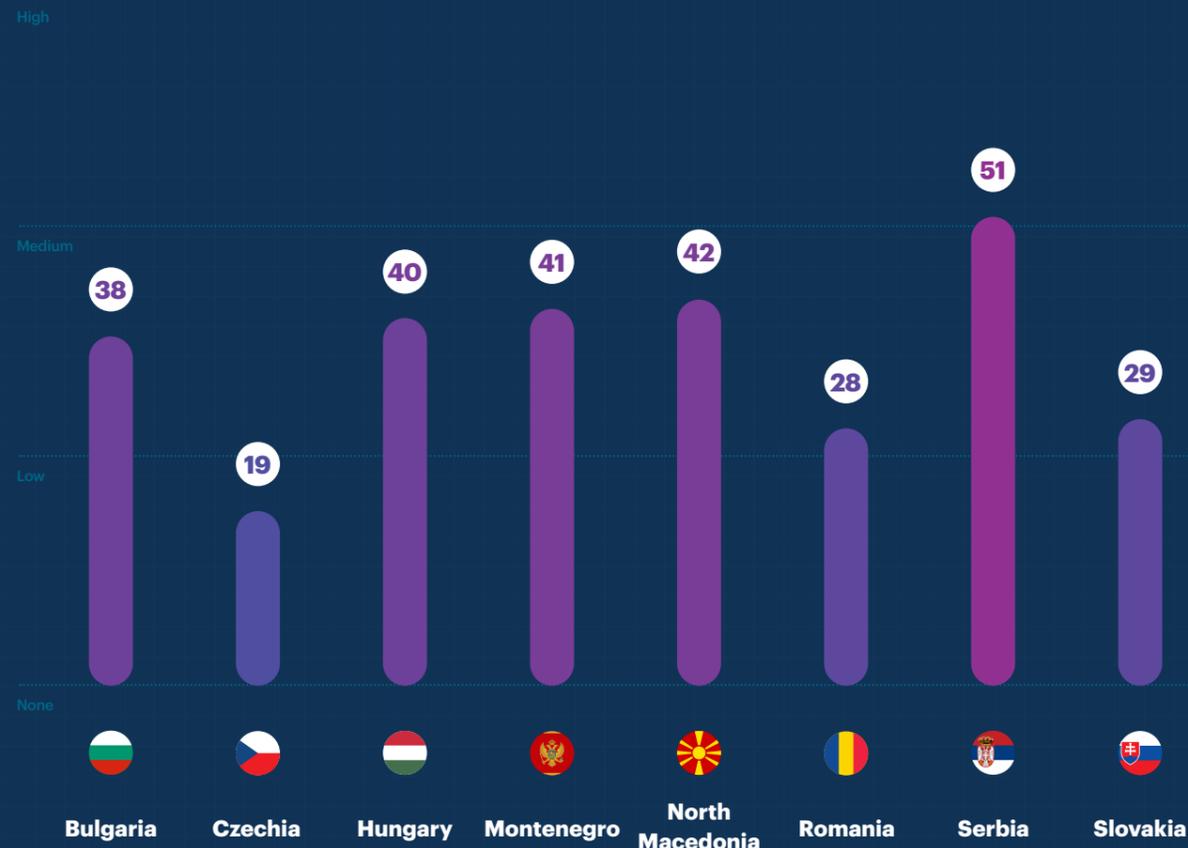
Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's 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.



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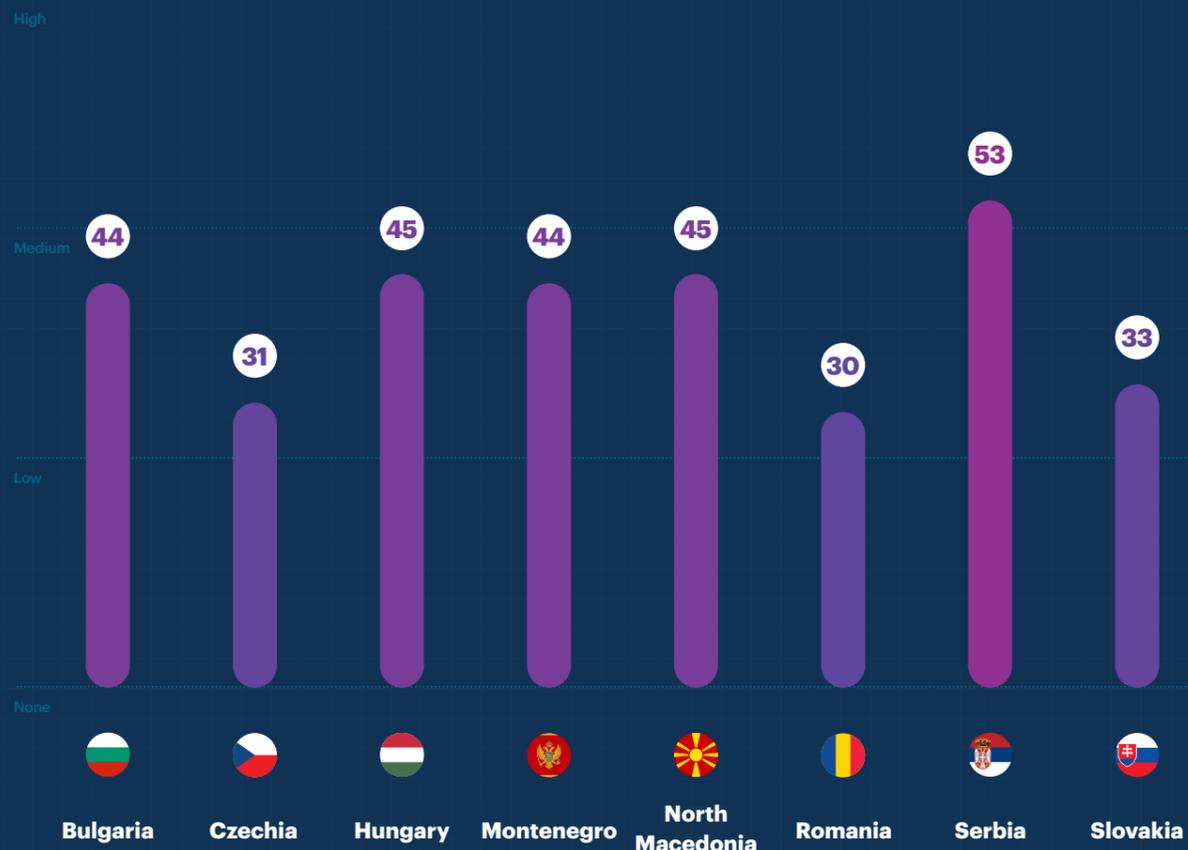
Limited and one-track understanding of threat perception is often the result of political leadership unwilling to change the status quo and establish new cooperation structures that emphasize whole-of-government and whole-of-society policies. These approaches have not been adopted in any of the analyzed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

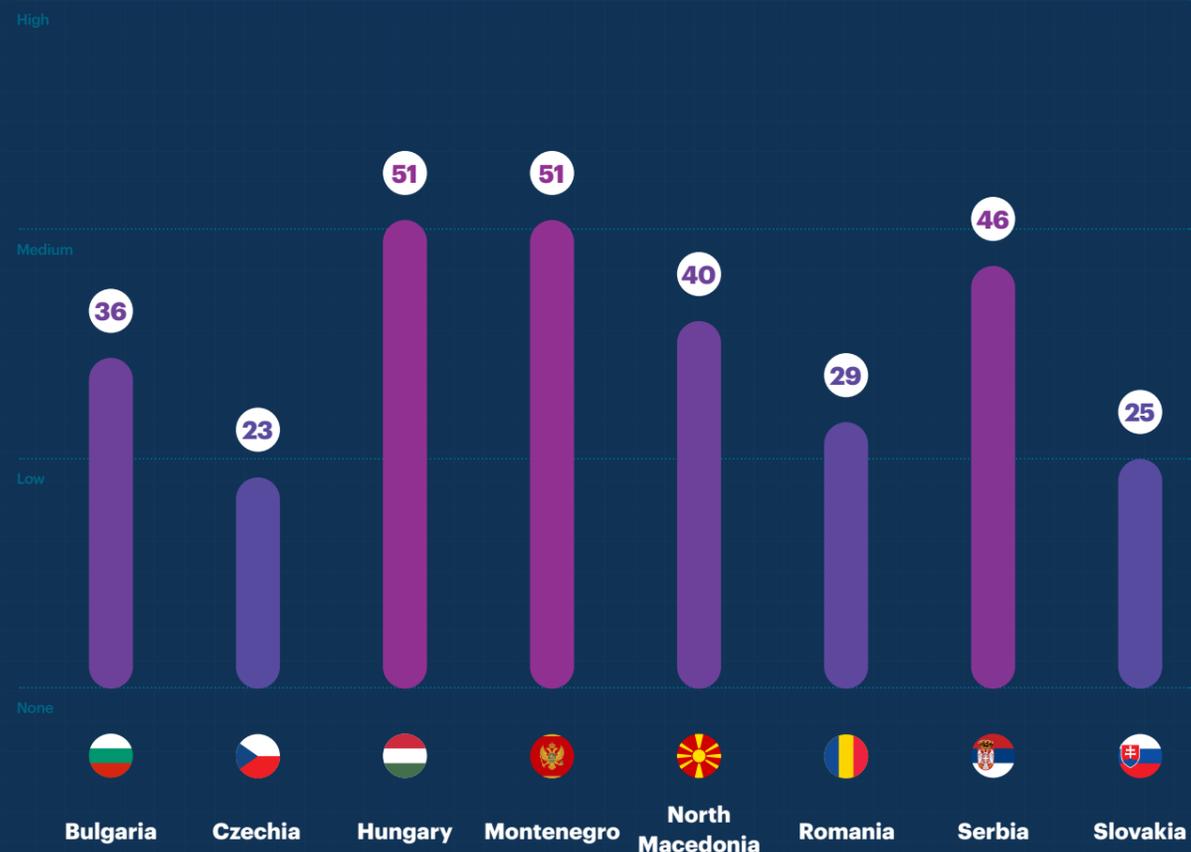
environments and at least basic protection of users in the digital space; mid-ranked countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) whose information environments display more vulnerabilities including weaker media freedom even as some points of resilience are present, such as relative 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 Serbia



↓ Vulnerability score

55
/100

Serbia's significant challenges lie in the four of five dimensions analyzed in the report. A paramount issue concerns political competition, with the governing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) ruling since 2012. The parliament has lacked a legitimate

opposition since the 2020 election boycott.

This development has endangered the country's democratic plurality. But the dynamic also engenders repercussions on foreign policy, with the government's pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing orientation going uncontested.

The government's foreign policy orientation is mirrored in public attitudes. Compared to others in the region, Serbian society is particularly sympathetic towards Russia and China, antagonistic to NATO, and ambivalent about the EU. The public administration's

numerous flaws, including pervasive corruption, state capture, and an information space flooded by propaganda and disinformation, further impede the development of a more democratic and resilient society. Civil society and academia, nonetheless, provide a degree of resilience with academic freedom and freedom of assembly widely respected.

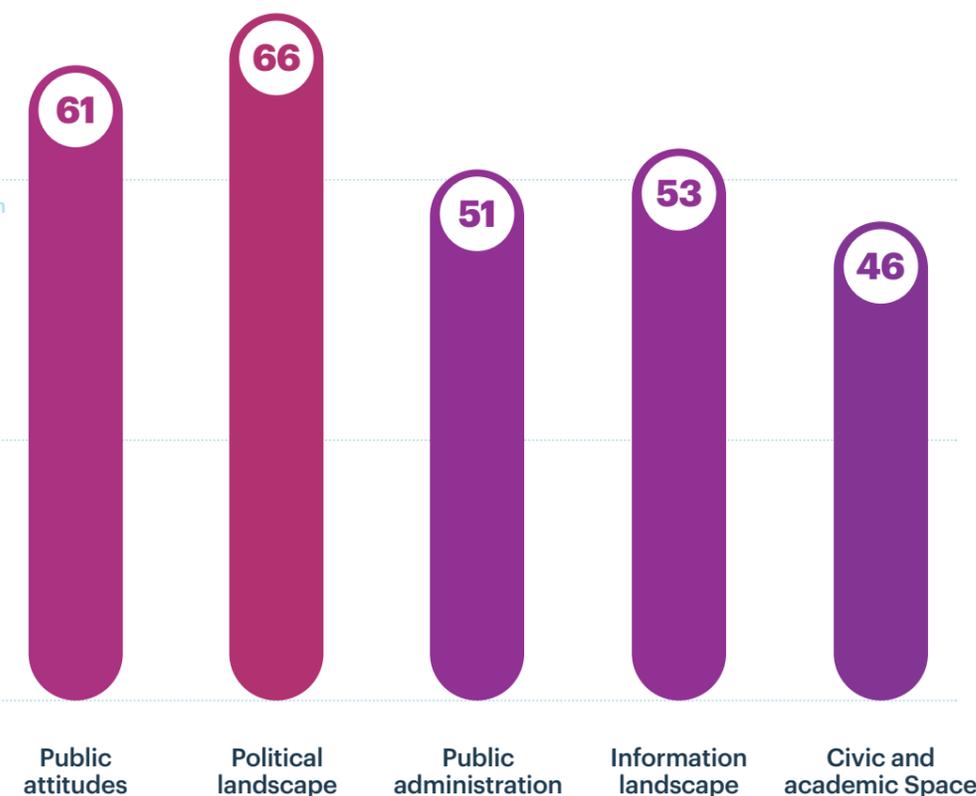
Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

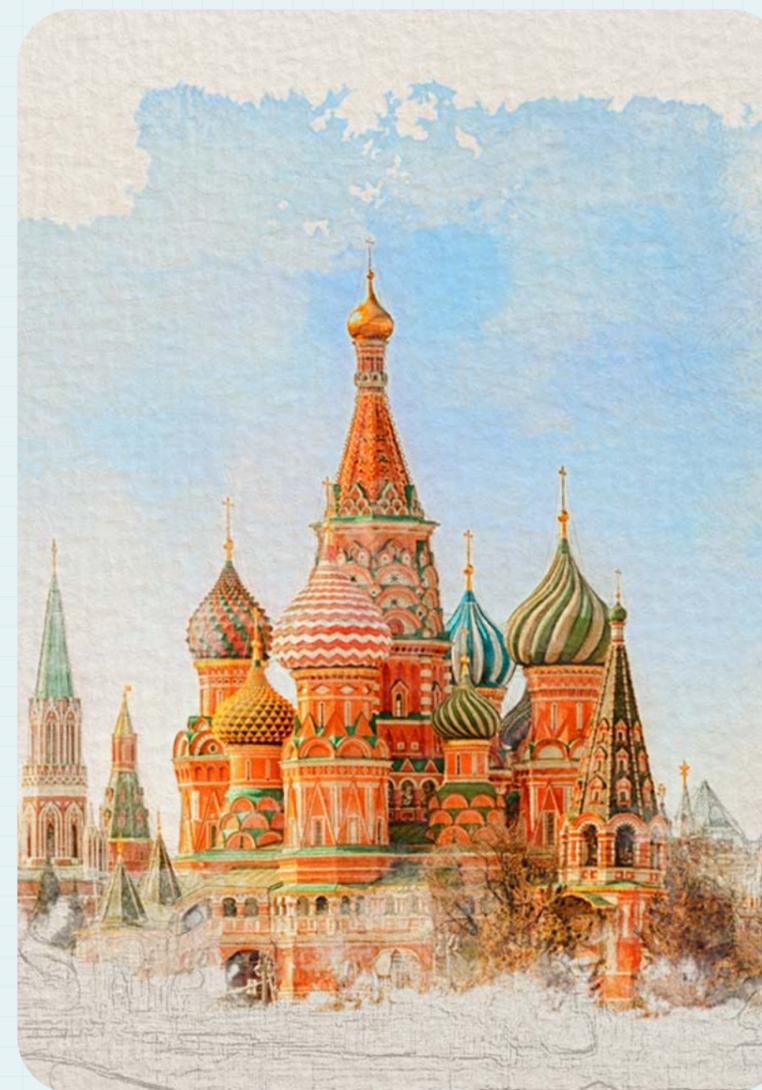
61
/100



Serbia's vulnerable population comprises people from all cross-sections of society, regardless of age, education or place of residence. Attachments to Russia, pervasive throughout the country, are buoyed by cultural, religious, and historical connections between the two nations. Generally positive attitudes towards China, meanwhile, stem from Beijing's extensive investments in Serbia and a lack of negative historical experiences. While trust in democracy as a system

remains high, a majority of citizens are pessimistic regarding the functioning of democracy. This deficit leaves the country only further vulnerable to already present authoritarian influences and opens space for the further involvement of malign foreign actors.

★ **76%** percent of young adults aged 18-24 think of Russia as Serbia's important strategic partner, the most from all age groups.



during Ottoman rule. The Serbian public, in other words, judges Russia to have played a critical role in the establishment of the modern Serbian state in the 19th century and the country's liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Russia's willingness to wage war with Austria-Hungary in 1914, against the backdrop of Vienna's ultimatum to Belgrade following the Sarajevo assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, is fondly remembered in the country today.⁵

Despite the fact that the mutual relationship with communist Russia/USSR was far from ideal, approaching the brink of war at times (e.g., following Yugoslav President Tito's refusal to obey Stalin's orders in 1948), public attitudes remained positive towards Russia.

Rather than considering itself as part of the West or East, Serbia is inclined to identify itself somewhere in between (59%)⁶. This opinion holds across all socio-demographic groups, likely a legacy of communist Yugoslavia,

Strong pro-Russian sentiments

The EU enlargement process for the Western Balkans is essentially on hold as these countries, and particularly Serbia, remain on the periphery of Europe. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that support for the EU and NATO has fallen and conversely increased for Russia and China. Research³ reveals that Serbia is a country alarmingly vulnerable to Russian influence - the vast majority of the

adult population (82%) perceives Russia as their traditional Slavic brother and as the country's most important strategic partner (59%). Furthermore, NATO integration is strongly opposed, by 84% of adult respondents and a slight majority of 52% supports joining the EU.

Russia, a predominately orthodox nation, is seen as a historical defender of rights of Orthodox Christians during the Ottoman Empire. A vast majority of Serbs, consequently, sees Russia as an orthodox "big brother" who protected and supported them throughout numerous conflicts and independence uprisings⁴

which was one of the champions of the Non-Aligned Movement and sought to stake out the role of “middleman” in international politics during the Cold War.⁷ This niche, nevertheless, leaves space for the spread of Euroscepticism and cynical attitudes regarding the West, thus opening space for sympathies towards non-Western players, in particular Russia and China.

In Serbia, pro-Russian sentiment has been reinforced through the statements and actions of government officials⁸. Russia backs Serbia’s viewpoint on the matter of Kosovo’s self-proclamation of independence, amplifying the “Russia as protector and brotherly nation” narrative. This climate has rendered a majority of Serbians susceptible to Kremlin narratives and image projection attempts - 71% of Serbians judge Russia to be unjustly blamed by the West for problems and 91% think that Russia does not represent a danger to Serbia.⁹



Complicated relations with international organizations

Russia owes its favorable sentiment in Serbia also to the society’s perceived negative experiences with the West. Notable examples include UN sanctions, the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and Republika Srpska (in Bosnia) in 1995, the stop-go dynamic of the EU integration process, and support for Kosovo independence. The 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the subsequent deluge of anti-NATO articles in the media saw more than two thirds of the population turn against NATO and believing that NATO provokes Russia.¹⁰

While it would be logical to expect that pro-Kremlin propaganda is amplifying these attitudes, the situation is primarily “self-inflicted”. Serbia’s political leadership, right-wing parties, and media platforms controlled by

the former two groups regularly lambast NATO (and the EU).¹¹ According to opinion polls,¹² though, the public differentiates between EU integration and Western ideals. A total of 68% of Serbians think Western countries promote a morally corrupt and decadent lifestyle veiled behind “civil liberties”, only 18% of Serbians see the EU as a strategic partner, and 55% believe that EU integration threatens democracy and traditional values. At the same time, EU integration is viewed as an opportunity to improve the lives of ordinary people.¹³

This finding is a pertinent data point and comes despite the lack of any concerted political campaign backing EU accession and in the face of persistent anti-EU rhetoric in pro-government tabloids.¹⁴

China perceived as a natural ally

China is generally perceived favorably – many see it as a burgeoning superpower and a natural friend due to a lack of historical grievances. All told, 86% of Serbians think that the power and significance of China has increased over the past five years and 59% consider China to be Serbia’s most important strategic partner apart from Russia.¹⁵

The survey data suggests an environment which is generally exposed to manipulation and the formation of numerous contradictions in public opinion. While a majority backs democracy as the preferred political system for Serbia and values human rights, fundamental freedoms, and rule of law as part of this equation, a majority simultaneously believes in the conspiracy theory that democracy does not exist because the world is ruled by secret elites.¹⁶



📊 84% of adult respondents in Serbia do not think of China as a threat for their country.

Political landscape

Chapter 2

Vulnerability score

66
/100



The political landscape in Serbia is highly concentrated around one right wing catch-all party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which has been in power since 2012. SNS has a number of satellite parties which run on the same electoral card with SNS for local and parliamentary elections, but they cannot be deemed independent.

The last parliamentary elections in June 2020 were boycotted by most of the democratic opposition. Only two lists, apart from SNS, won

seats (not including minority parties) – the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS). These two parties are both oriented around nationalism and merely officially support a pro-EU orientation. SPAS, furthermore, has since merged with SNS, leaving only SNS and SPS as the main parties in parliament. With no true opposition represented in parliament, pro-EU voices are becoming more elusive and their political impact, at times, marginalized. This democratic deficiency, stemming from poor electoral

conditions, limited media freedoms, and serious rule of law issues, is only further increasing the vulnerabilities of political stakeholders and institutions.

Declining enthusiasm for the EU

EU membership officially remains a government goal, with major parties professing their backing, albeit with small reservations.¹⁷ SNS, nonetheless, refrains from employing enthusiastic EU narratives or referring to EU integration as something desirable. The party further eschews mentioning and promoting EU values. And despite associate membership within the European People's Party, SNS has indicated closer alignment towards parties such as the Hungarian Fidesz Party¹⁸ and the SPS follows a similar pattern. Opposition parties, meanwhile, are divided. The Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party, and League of Social Democratic Party espouse their support for EU integration and EU values, while others such as Dveri and Democratic Party of Serbia are more conservative and prefer Serbia's full independence, sovereignty, and neutrality. The most extreme viewpoint is represented by the Serbian Radical Party and its staunchly anti-Western perspective.



There is much disappointment and frustration regarding the opening of clusters in negotiations with the EU, but Serbia proceeds with reforms in the interest of its citizens.¹⁹

Ana Brnabić,
Prime Minister, 2021

Political actors in Serbia are the most critical of the EU from the analyzed countries.

NATO membership still a taboo

NATO finds little popular appeal in Serbia and nearly no parties advocate for NATO membership. SNS and SPS are staunch supporters of Serbia's "military neutrality", though they are proponents of cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace. NATO is generally

recognized as important because of KFOR in Kosovo²⁰ and Serbia regularly participates in military exercises with NATO and its member states. Given NATO's lack of popularity, however, officials are not particularly keen on stressing the benefits of Serbia's cooperation with NATO. They instead often sow doubt about it and also frequently attend commemorative events for the 1999 NATO bombing devoted to victims and fallen soldiers during the Kosovo war. The drills, consequently, and the

"benefits they bring are rarely followed in the media. Pro-democratic opposition parties usually avoid this topic, while only some minor ones openly advocate for integration. For the nationalistic opposition, NATO represents a topic for the "flexing of patriotism".²¹

🇷🇺 Serbia will maintain its position of military neutrality and the "Partnership for Peace" is the optimal form of cooperation with NATO.²²

Aleksandar Vulin,
Minister of Defence, 2018

🇷🇺 NATO aggression was the last great and unfortunately unpunished crime in the 20th century and Serbia should never forget that crime. 21 years ago, they tried to kill Serbia but they managed to kill international law.²³

Aleksandar Vulin,
Minister of Defence, 2020



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© Sasa Dzambic Photography / Shutterstock.com

🇷🇺 Serbia will never support sanctions against the Russian Federation. We remain committed to the further development of brotherly relations. We have high-level cooperation like the cooperation of our presidents. We have a strategic partnership and common interests, common issues and challenges. Unity and solidarity are very important at this time.²⁶

Ivica Dačić,
Speaker of Parliament and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2021

Unwavering pro-Russian orientation

The governing parties, SNS and SPS, have generally adopted pro-Russian views, often proclaim that Serbia will never introduce sanctions against Russia, despite pressure from the West, and profess their eternal friendship.²⁴ Given the formidable popularity of Russia, nearly no political actors question cooperation with Russia, apart from some civil society organizations and pro-Western media outlets and a handful of parliamentary members from minor parties. The Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, aggressive posture

towards its neighbors, and influence operations in Serbia are largely avoided by all as a topic to address. Policy towards Russia and many other aspects of state policies is mostly crafted by the government, whereas the parliament, dominated by SNS, lacks opposition powers.²⁵ Along with a strategic partnership agreement with Russia, Serbia maintains a number of other agreements with the country (FTA, energy, military-technical cooperation, academic cooperation, etc.), most of which were almost unanimously approved by parliament.

Over the past six years, Putin visited Serbia several times, with each visit turning out to be a spectacle. According to media reports, the ruling SNS mobilized its membership to organize mass

🇷🇺 30,000 people reportedly greeted Vladimir Putin during his visit to Serbia in 2019.²⁷

rallies to welcome Putin.²⁷ An uncritical discourse leaves ample space for the dissemination of Russian influence in the country. Vladimir Putin remains one of the most popular politicians in Serbia and he is frequently referenced as the embodiment of the ideal strong leader.

During the pandemic, Serbian officials praised Russian assistance (e.g., disinfection teams)²⁹ and expressed interest in the production of the Sputnik V vaccine in Serbia. The country also became one of the first to accept Russian vaccines and did so without asking for information from producers (although this was the case with all vaccines that Serbia obtained).

An exception to this pattern, however, concerns the July 7 civic protests that arose in response to the alleged unfair and ad-hoc implementation of anti-pandemic measures. Some lower-level officials from the ruling majority, tabloids and GONGOs accused the Russian “deep state” of being responsible for the protests.³⁰ The government has also resisted Kremlin pressure to award diplomatic status to the Russian Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Nis and open a liaison office of the Russian Ministry of Defense in the Ministry of Defense in Serbia.³¹ Serbia is an observer to the Russian-led CSTO and participates in drills with the Russian Army.

Beijing’s interests promoted by politicians

No political actors criticize Serbia’s cooperation with China, apart from a few minor opposition parties. Belgrade’s strategic documents, reinforced through the statements of political leaders, characterize China as one of the most important partners of Serbia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, in fact, is personally engaged in the promotion of China. At the outset of the pandemic, Vučić labelled

“European solidarity” a lie in response to the temporary ban on the export of medical equipment and supplies³². He instead called on Serbia’s “Chinese brothers” to come to the country’s aid. All pandemic cooperation and aid from China have been promoted in a positive light through the direct engagement of top politicians in the country (e.g., the active promotion of Chinese mask diplomacy efforts). Vučić and his colleagues often downplay criticism regarding Serbia’s cooperation with China and its potential consequences (e.g., air pollution at the beginning of 2020).³³ 25 of 34 surveyed experts believe that parliamentary actors directly promote Beijing’s interests in Serbia.



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“ This is a great day for our country! The arrival of Chinese experts is extremely important. Many thanks to President Xi Jinping, many thanks to the people of the Republic of China! They proved to be friends when we fight for our lives. The Chinese have shown not only friendship and love for our people - they have also shown solidarity with the Serbian people.”³⁴

Aleksandar Vučić,
President of Serbia, 2020

Serbia has declined to align itself with any of the EU’s CFSP foreign policy declarations and measures on China and rather chose a direct support of Beijing’s controversial moves. In 2020, President Vučić, for example, sent an open letter to Chinese president Xi Jinping supporting the implementation of the new National Security Law in Hong Kong. And on July 1, alongside Russia and 43 other counties, Serbia supported the Belarus declaration filed at the UN Human Rights Council backing Chinese policy and acts in the Xinjiang province.³⁵

★ Serbian political entities score 88/100

– highest from the region – in their attitudes towards China.



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Public administration

Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

51
/100



According to the EU Commission's Serbia 2020 Report, "Serbia is moderately prepared with the reform of its public administration" against the backdrop of the accession process.³⁶ Serbia has taken some action to improve its administration, such as digitalization, and slightly reduced corruption and vulnerabilities at the lower administrative levels. Despite this fact, "it is [still] a nexus of clientelism, nepotism and corruption."³⁷ Even though the legal framework for the simplification of administrative

procedures has been in place since 2016, citizens are still not aware of their enhanced rights, allowing the administration to apply outdated and cumbersome procedures.³⁸ Checks and balances are lacking and the services of the administration are geared towards serving the party in power.³⁹

The power dynamics at play, including administrative control, encapsulates the notion of state capture recognized by scholars.⁴⁰ Serbia, consequently, shows an openness

towards regimes like Russia and China. The administration has little awareness regarding the hybrid threats these states could pose. The country's two major strategic documents, the National Security Strategy⁴¹ and the National Defense Strategy⁴², have been revised over the past couple of years but do not address either Russia or China from the perspective of challenges they might pose to Serbia's security.

Corruption prevails

Corruption is a major problem afflicting both the state administration and Serbian society more generally. Efforts to counter it have proceeded in a rather uneven pace, with public procurement coming up against widespread fraudulent behavior. The EU Commission assessed that "the legislative framework for public procurement and the strategic and legislative framework for conducting financial control was strengthened," but Serbia

failed to progress in improving budgetary transparency.⁴³

Progress has been mostly confined to adapting to the EU framework. The implementation of strategies, action plans, and laws, meanwhile, remains insufficient. This deficit is, notably, coupled with the weak performance of supposedly independent state institutions. Opinion polls reveal that the public sees the healthcare system, judiciary, and police as the three most corrupt institutions in Serbia⁴⁴ even though the latter two are precisely the institutions necessary to combat corruption and organized crime. And according to the Transparency International Global Corruption Index, Serbia ranks 91st (of 180 countries), a decline of 14 spots compared to 2017.⁴⁵

Although Serbia ratified the UN Convention against Corruption in 2005 and is a party to the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), the country is implementing the provisions and recommendations connected to each of them rather slowly. Despite glaring signals of possible corruption committed by state officials, the public prosecutor's office has failed to react to most cases.⁴⁶ This negligence includes cases connected to organized crime exemplified by the recent so-called Belivuk scandal.⁴⁷ According to independent reports, Belivuk's gang had been linked to the ruling majority, which subsequently cleaned its hands of this association through mass arrests.⁴⁸ The state typically decides to arrest government or party officials only in response to internal power struggles and as a demonstration of force.⁴⁹ Similar action is initiated against



organized crime groups usually when they become too powerful and seek to wrestle influence away from the ruling party.⁵⁰

Awareness of hybrid threats remains limited

While national strategies generally recognize the activities of foreign actors as a threat, there is no specification of specific challenges or tactics to counter these threats. According to the expert survey, both whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches are lacking. While the National Security Council is tasked with securing/steering both whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, with its primary function being to consider issues of importance for national security,⁵¹ its institutional design and scope of work are not sufficient to enable it to achieve its mission (the Minister of Foreign Affairs and members of the judiciary, for example, are excluded).

As noted above, the two key strategic documents do not contain any mention of the malign activities of foreign autocratic actors. On the contrary, the National Defense Strategy embraces the role of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), stating that it “significantly contributes to preserving and improving the security of the Eurasian space” and that it is “aimed at confronting challenges and threats of a global nature, such as terrorism and drug trafficking”.⁵² The strategy also commits Serbia to expanding and improving cooperation with the CSTO.

Hybrid threats are recognized as a challenge but not elaborated further. As these two strategies are the only publicly available documents detailing the government’s thinking and approach, it is difficult to conclude whether other services, such as the intelligence agencies, hold a different assessment or viewpoint.

In light of the poor state of the public administration and the overall concentration of power in the hands of the executive, the only plausible conclusion is that the entire state administration is exposed to potential external influences.

★ Serbian strategic doctrines generally refer to Russia in positive terms.



🔴 Key shortcomings include lack of clarity of some of candidate registration rules, insufficient measures against the misuse of administrative resources for campaigning, inadequate regulation and oversight of campaign finance, deficiencies and loopholes in dispute resolution, absence of sanctions for some violations, and the lack of provisions on election observation.⁵⁵

ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report



Elections as a tool of influence

The electoral system is not prone to malign influence from foreign actors. Its flaws rather concern domestic problems, with those in power manipulating the system to increase their vote share or that of their allies. Given the state capture, the quality of the election system and elections, in general, has been poor, requiring the European Parliament to negotiate between the governing and opposition parties in seeking to secure improved electoral conditions.⁵³ The OSCE/ODIHR has published several reports highlighting the shortcomings of the system and underlining the tactics the ruling majority uses to render politics extremely uncompetitive.⁵⁴ Taking into

consideration the proclivity of Serbian political leadership towards the Kremlin and openness to China, these two actors face no need to intervene in the electoral politics of the country.

The expert survey, however, notes that if foreign actors were interested in interfering in the country’s elections, they would find few obstacles hindering them from doing so. A total of 15 of 32 experts said that the national election oversight bodies are not aware and not able to process and respond to cases of foreign interference.

Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

53
/100



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The information landscape in Serbia has come under the influence of both pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives. This content, though, is mostly spread by government-affiliated media. The social media space, by contrast, is dominated by content either directly linked to sources from Russia or representing original pro-Kremlin material.⁵⁶ Russian ownership of media outlets is confined to only a few outlets, Sputnik Serbia being the only influential one. Most content espousing pro-Beijing narratives, for its part, is

limited in scope and generally linked to Belgrade's engagement with China. The Serbian information space underlines the greatest vulnerability facing the country, with Belgrade recording one of the poorest performances in the wider region on press freedom.⁵⁷

Limited media freedom

According to the World Press Freedom Index, Serbia ranks lowest in the Western Balkans region and 90th altogether.⁵⁸ Progress is hindered by state control of the media space through either direct ownership and/or different models of state financing (public tenders for media projects, public procurement of media services, and direct advertising contracts) distributed arbitrarily.⁵⁹ Media companies that are close to the government control most of the information space through nationally broadcasted television networks and daily newspapers including tabloids.⁶⁰ That said, a handful of independent media publications also operate in the country. These outlets have primarily established anti-government profiles and came, in a result, under withering attack from members of the ruling elite,⁶¹ with some journalists and owners of independent media subjected to physical violence.⁶²

Political influence over the media is currently a major topic of EU (EP) mediated dialogues between the ruling parties and the opposition. The opposition indeed claims that these supposedly independent institutions work on behalf of the government and tolerate a lack of media freedom.⁶³ This pertains particularly to the functioning of the State Broadcasting Service (RTS), the most influential news media organization in Serbia according to polls.⁶⁴

★ Presence of information manipulation and disinformation in the Serbian information landscape is rated as 94/100, – the highest in the region.

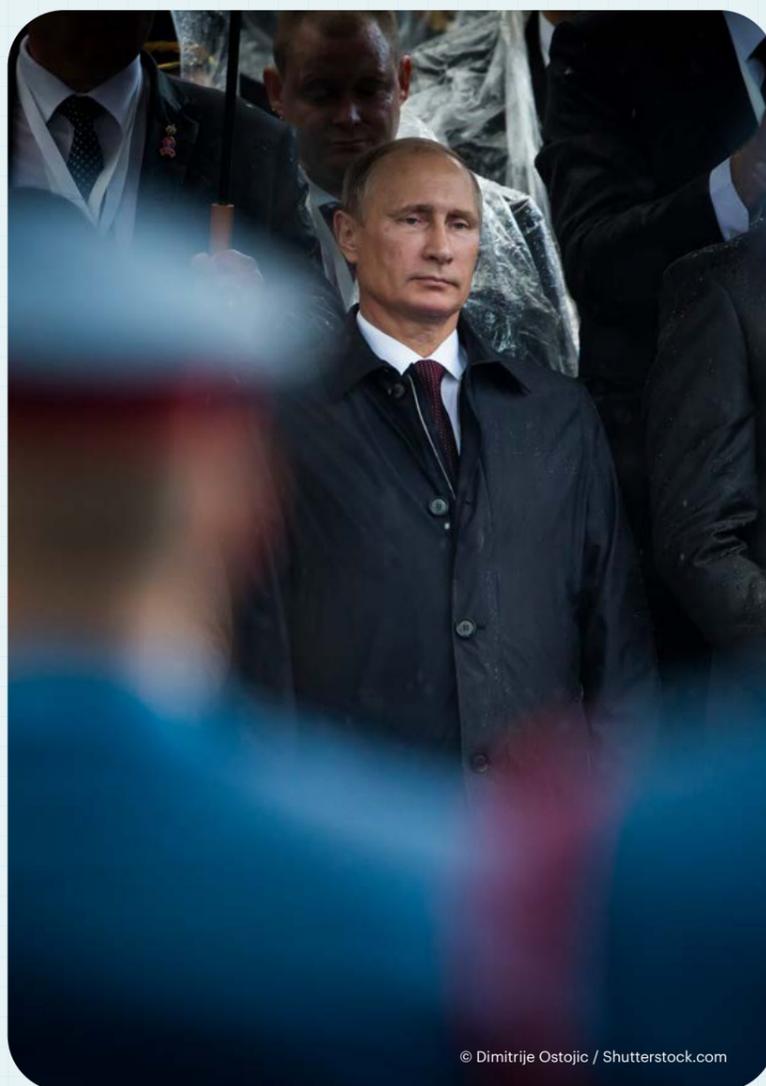


Pro-Kremlin messaging

While the number of media outlets directly owned by Russians is relatively low in Serbia, the footprint of content in line with pro-Kremlin's interests is significant. Two outlets are directly linked to Russian companies or the state: Sputnik Serbia (website and radio) and Russia Beyond (website and news magazine). Neither is registered in Serbia or inscribed in the Media Registry.⁶⁵

Sputnik and Russia Beyond provide content that reflects the Kremlin's official positions – this material finds itself further disseminated by other media outlets in Serbia. Sputnik is particularly important as it offers its news content for free to other media outlets in Serbia. Some popular radio stations, such as Radio Novosti, directly transmit the Sputnik news broadcast. There are also several portals that promulgate content from several pro-Kremlin or Kremlin-affiliated pages (translated into Serbian)⁶⁶ as illustrated in the recent network mapping of Serbian and Montenegrin Facebook conducted in summer 2020.⁶⁷

A considerable share of pro-Kremlin (and to a lesser extent pro-Beijing) content, news dissemination and original content creation can be sourced to several tabloids and two nationally televised stations. Tabloids such as Informer, Kurir, Srpski Telegraf, and Alo! deemed close to the current ruling political elite are especially paramount to this dynamic.⁶⁸ The nationally broadcasted news programs of



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28 of 29 experts believe that pro-Kremlin actors and narratives receive regular attention in the Serbian public broadcaster.

Happy TV and Pink Media Group via Pink TV are also marked by spreading pro-Kremlin discourse. Almost all these media outlets boast influential websites and contribute to the spread of pro-Kremlin narratives online. Their reporting on Russia is characterized by sensationalism and a lack of a critical stance towards the Kremlin and its interests, while also containing an “emotional burst” not found in articles published by Sputnik according to one observer.⁶⁹ The media outlets also tend to provide

favorable coverage to China even as this reporting is generally confined to Serbian government activities. This segment of the press is often dubbed as “pro-government”⁷⁰ and the media content they publish is used to support the policies of the ruling elite and advance a stridently negative picture of the West including NATO and – to a lesser extent – the EU.

The most notorious case involves leased billboards in Belgrade by Informer, a tabloid, that expressed gratitude to Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, and Xi Jinping on three occasions, mirroring government attitudes vis-à-vis these foreign politicians.⁷¹ Parts of this media grouping though put out vehemently anti-Kremlin stories during the July 2020 civic protests in Serbia that accused the “Russian deep state” of being responsible for protests.⁷²

Two media outlets, finally, are characterized by ardently pro-Kremlin attitudes but do not belong in the “tabloid” grouping. These publications seek to present ever slightly more balanced coverage without the sensationalism and “emotional” tone that defines the tabloids.⁷³

Daily Politika, the oldest and socially most influential Serbian daily and a state-owned institution, uses Russian sources though it is not openly pro-Kremlin.⁷⁴

Facebook as a catalyzer

Pro-Kremlin narratives, as mentioned above, are present on social media as confirmed by expert surveys (24 of 29 agree that pro-Kremlin actors succeed in shaping opinions and the debate on social media). As network mapping of Serbian and Montenegrin Facebook conducted in summer 2020 demonstrates⁷⁵, the pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-affiliated pages on Facebook form a visible network on the platform, with several pro-Kremlin or Russia-affiliated pages sharing content from disinformation-spreading pages and vice versa. The fact that pro-government media pages are not part of this information sharing, however, is perplexing.

Chinese influence on the information landscape in the country has been rather constrained, with political actors being the most vocal in spreading pro-Beijing narratives. President Aleksandar Vučić ranks as the most pronounced actor herein. On several occasions, his social media posts have engendered a considerable impact in China, especially following his March 15 plea for help from “Chinese brothers” and “brother Xi.”⁷⁶



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Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

46
/100



According to the AV-Dem index, the civic space in Serbia has become increasingly polarized since 2014, a pattern that has continued into the present. This fragmentation, nevertheless, still remains far off the pre-2000 levels breached during the rule of Slobodan Milošević.⁷⁷

Due to the opposition boycott of the 2020 parliamentary elections⁷⁸, the principal political debate has played out on the streets and in highly

polarized media rather than through political institutions. The series of protest marches in 2018-2019⁷⁹ were reminiscent of the anti-government protests from the late 1990s, with many of the actors the same on both sides. Some of these demonstrations, like the 2017 student protests “against dictatorship”⁸⁰ and the July 2020 protests in Belgrade⁸¹, started spontaneously in response to popular discontent with the state of democracy in the country,

not organized or orchestrated by the opposition.

Pro-government groups have also arranged civic gatherings aimed at underscoring popular support for certain moves of the government,⁸² countering civic actions,⁸³ and/or creating a favorable impression on foreign leaders visiting Serbia.⁸⁴ Some media outlets reported that the government had allegedly employed criminal groups,⁸⁵ often connected with football hooligans,⁸⁶ to counter civic protests (though these accusations have not undergone judicial scrutiny).



The environmental movement across Serbia, furthermore, has become increasingly pertinent, organizing protests and demonstrations against environmental and urban degradation blamed on micro hydro power plants on small rivers and streams,⁸⁷ including investments from China.⁸⁸ Environmental and urban degradation issues are becoming a major political cleavage in the country, mobilizing citizens of different political and ideological orientations.

The vast majority of respondents in the expert survey (27 of 32) agree that a whole-of-society approach towards building societal resilience to foreign influence campaigns either does not exist or is not being implemented at all, leaving Serbia’s civic space exposed and vulnerable to such maneuvers.

★ Serbia’s academic space has been seriously corrupted by purchasing false diplomas and titles by the highest state officials.

Civil society demonized by political actors

Serbian civil society is one of the least sustainable in Europe and Eurasia. According to the Civil Society Sustainability Index, Serbia bests only the likes of Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, etc.⁸⁹ and is worse than all neighboring countries. This disrepair has been undergirded by persistent demonization campaigns dating back to the period of Slobodan Milošević's rule. At that time, the pro-government media started to portray civil society as "national traitors and foreign henchmen", a perception that has continued to persevere.⁹⁰

Numerous pro-democratic and environmental NGOs are being targeted by different threatening campaigns and labelled as a "threat to state security"⁹¹ or as agents of foreign intelligence services.⁹² Prominent MPs from the ruling SNS party have been particularly involved in



these campaigns. This includes Aleksandar Martinović, head of the SNS parliamentary group, who has frequently accused different NGOs and independent media outlets of being "criminal groups" and publicly shared personal information of some CSO officials including their home addresses.⁹³ Another concerning development pertains to the possible use of state tools designed to combat terrorism and money laundering to instead target CSOs and prominent individuals in Serbia. CSOs have argued that audits carried out by state institutions were conducted to demonize and threaten them.⁹⁴ More than a year after the investigations were launched, no information about the findings have been published.⁹⁵ Many international

institutions, including the EU, UN, US Embassy to Serbia, and the Working Group for Financial Action, have criticized these measures.⁹⁶

It is notable, however, that not all CSOs are pro-democracy oriented. The Center for Serbian-Russian Cooperation, Russian Balkan Center, and Belgrade Center for Eurasian Studies, for example, all seemingly maintain direct links with the Kremlin. While GONGOs present in the country mostly engage in promoting policies and beliefs close to the ruling regime,⁹⁷ the scope of their influence, nonetheless, is limited - the expert survey reveals the prevalent opinion to be that the Kremlin does not broadly influence civil society actors and individuals in the country. The same goes for Beijing - only one organization, the Center for Cooperation with Countries of Asia, was mentioned by interviewed experts. These organizations are mostly engaged in countering pro-democratic CSOs.⁹⁸ Another subset of domestically funded NGOs advocate for strategic alternatives and an eastern orientation for the country (e.g., the Center for Strategic Alternatives⁹⁹) but are not directly connected to Moscow or Beijing.

99 Russian attempts to establish its own CSOs in Serbia failed to produce tangible results. The public discourse is already suffocated by pro-Russian information. There is, consequently, no need to invest in further promotion. It seems like Sputnik and a number of portals that are indirectly connected to pro-Kremlin sources are enough for now.

Expert from a Serbian online outlet

Academic space affected by the corruption

The academic space in Serbia is relatively free although not a single higher education institution ranks among the top 500 world universities. This can be attributed, in part, to the unstable situation characterizing the country for more than three decades. Corruption scandals related to payment for exam grades and fraudulent diplomas, exemplified in the so-called "Index Scandal" at the University of Kragujevac, remain challenging.¹⁰⁰ Privately owned universities are particularly accused of awarding degrees and academic titles without any criteria or despite plagiarism. Institutionally endorsed and covered-up cases, however, have attracted intense media scrutiny. Publicly known high-profile cases include the current Serbian Minister of Finance (and ex-mayor of Belgrade),¹⁰¹ or a scrutiny of the doctoral diploma of the current Minister of Interior¹⁰² and the master's degree of the former President.¹⁰³

Another issue academia faces is the fact that some prominent academics frequently promote pro-Kremlin attitudes. Slavenko Terzić, former ambassador to Russia and a professor at the University of Belgrade, for example, heads the recently established Russian Balkans center¹⁰⁴ and numerous faculty members participate in



pro-Russian events organized by Russian institutions in Serbia (e.g., Ruski dom).¹⁰⁵ A few opposing the Serbian government, meanwhile, claim that the regime is actually undermining the further deepening of Serbia-Russia cooperation.¹⁰⁶

Beijing's status is less clear and its influence is considered limited according to the expert survey. Its impact in the academic sphere is exercised through Confucius Institutes, some of which were established in Serbia as early as 2006.¹⁰⁷ There are also a number of initiatives promoting cooperation between Serbian and Chinese universities and other institutions.¹⁰⁸ In the sphere of political science, the only prominent case concerns the establishment of the Center for "Belt and Road" studies based at the Institute for International Politics and Economics in Belgrade. The Center was established by a memorandum the Institute signed with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.¹⁰⁹

99 Chinese influence is less clear in both the media and academia and goes under the radar almost unnoticed. However, given that China will soon open the biggest cultural center in the region in Belgrade, we should expect some changes and more pronounced attempts to use soft power.

Expert on China-Serbia cooperation

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This project was financially supported by the US Department of State's Global Engagement Center.

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