

GLOBSEC

Vulnerability Index 2021

  **Slovakia**

Bulgaria

Czechia

Hungary

Montenegro

North

Macedonia

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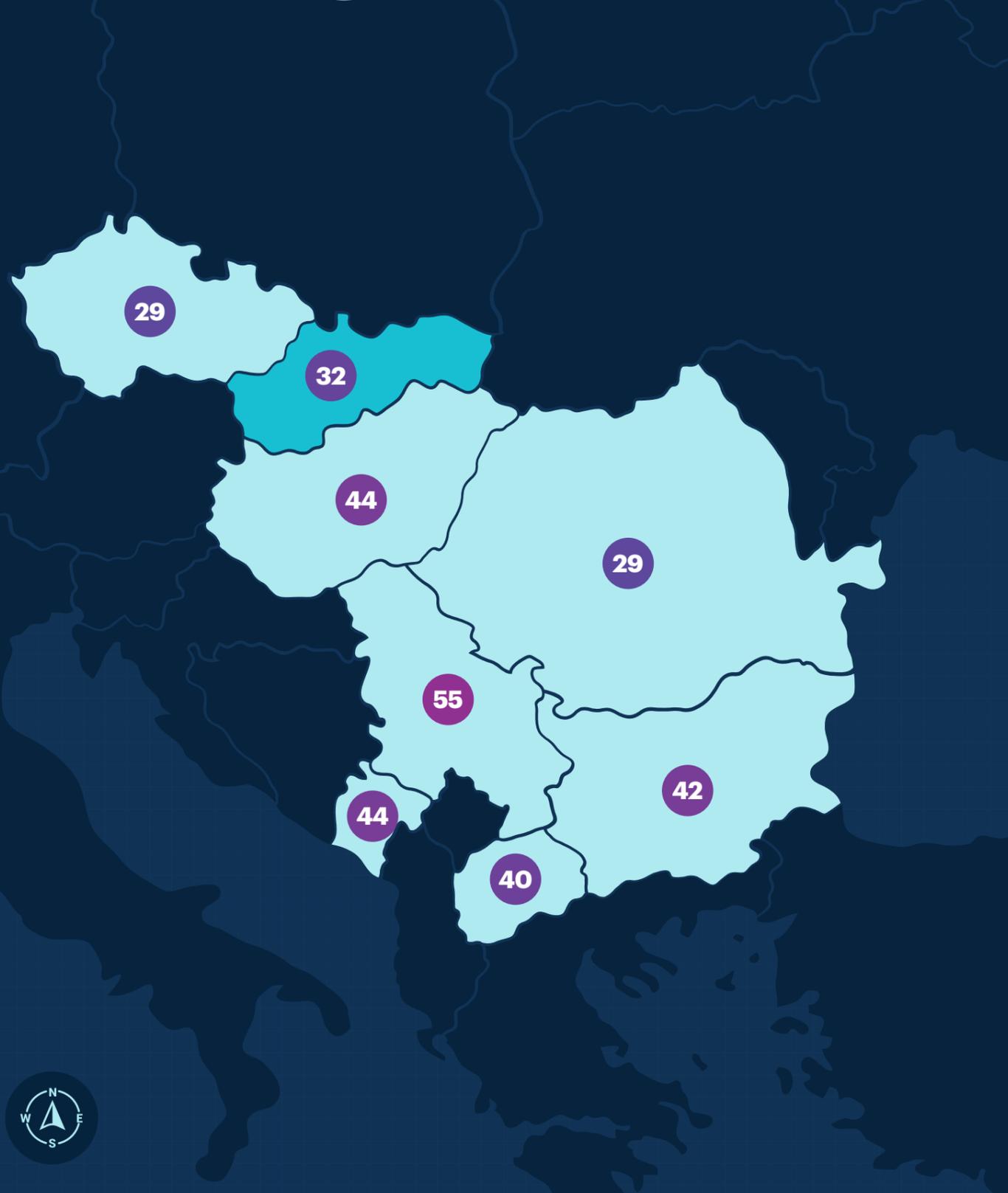
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Dominika Hajdu
Policy Director

Holds an MA in EU Foreign Policy from the University of Leuven in Belgium. In research, she focuses on the impact of information operations and social media on a democratic society, cognitive security, and public sector strategic communication. Has led several international research, awareness-raising, and capacity-building projects aimed at building societal and state resilience. Gained experience in the advertising sector and EU policy-making, having worked in institutions in Brussels, Belgium. More on [the Globsec website](#).



Katarína Klingová
Senior Research Fellow

Holds an MA in Political Science with Specialization in Research Methodology and Social Analysis from the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Since 2016 she has led research on information operations and hybrid threats, and capacity-building projects focusing on societal resilience, vulnerabilities of public administration, and strategic communication. In her previous capacities, she worked for the European Commission and Transparency International Slovakia. More on [the Globsec website](#).



Miroslava Sawiris
Senior Research Fellow

Holds a First-Class BA degree in Arabic & Russian Civilization from the University of Leeds, and an MA in International Relations from the University of York, United Kingdom. In her research activities, she focuses on malign efforts to undermine democratic societies, strategic communication, and internet governance. She has led research projects on the impact of disinformation campaigns on electoral processes in Europe, and she coordinates the Alliance for Healthy Infosphere. More on [the Globsec website](#).

Centre for Democracy and Resilience



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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

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

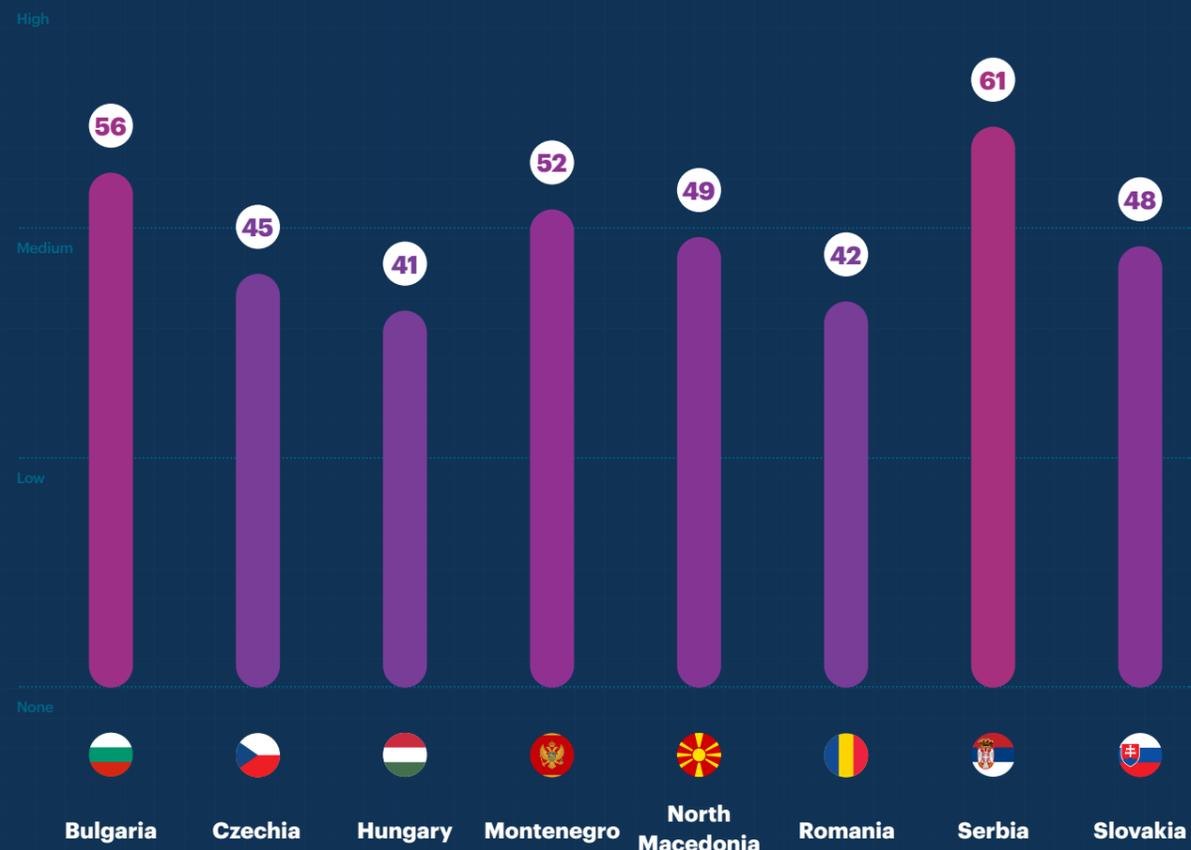


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina famously begins, "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".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

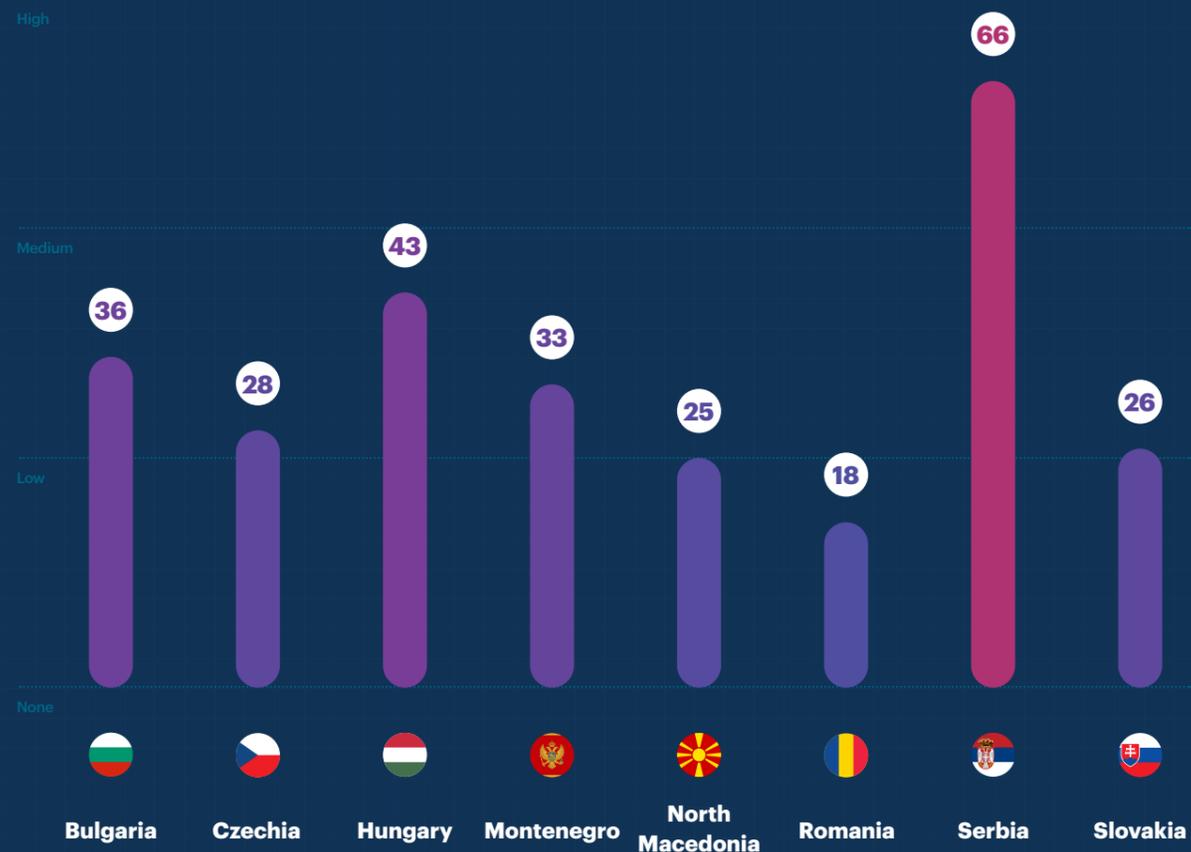
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

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.

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.

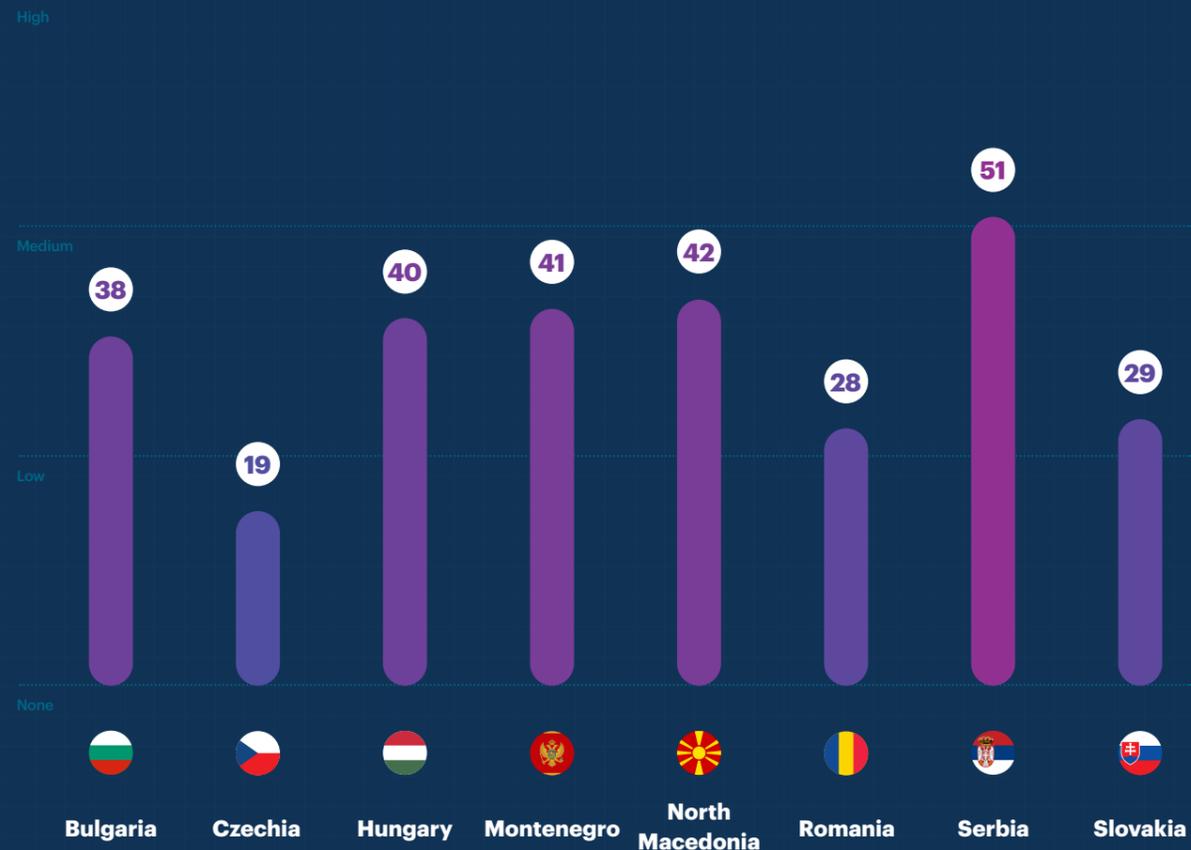
Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's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

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

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.

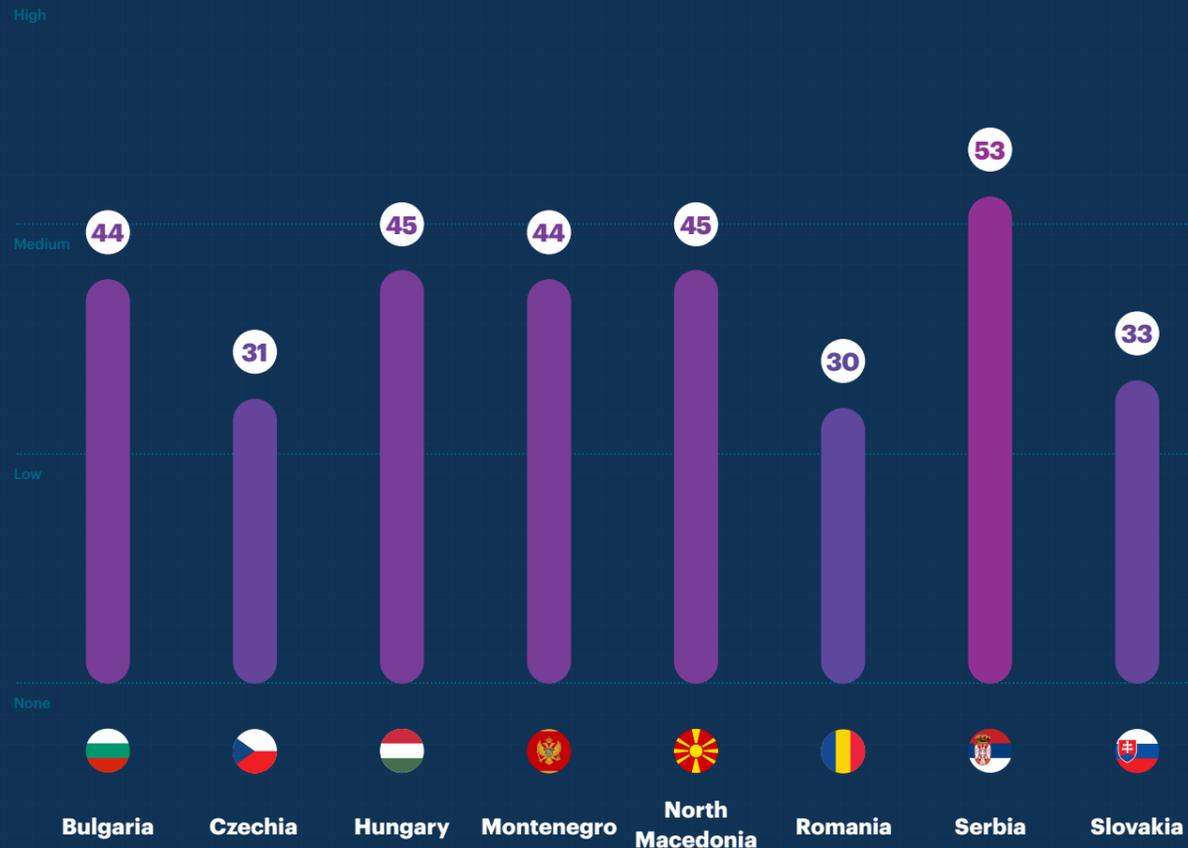
Public servants having an insufficient situational awareness is, consequently, a common and prevailing problem. But recognition of this gap, the first necessary step if change is to occur, has progressed in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and even Montenegro, following an attempted coup. These 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.

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”.

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.

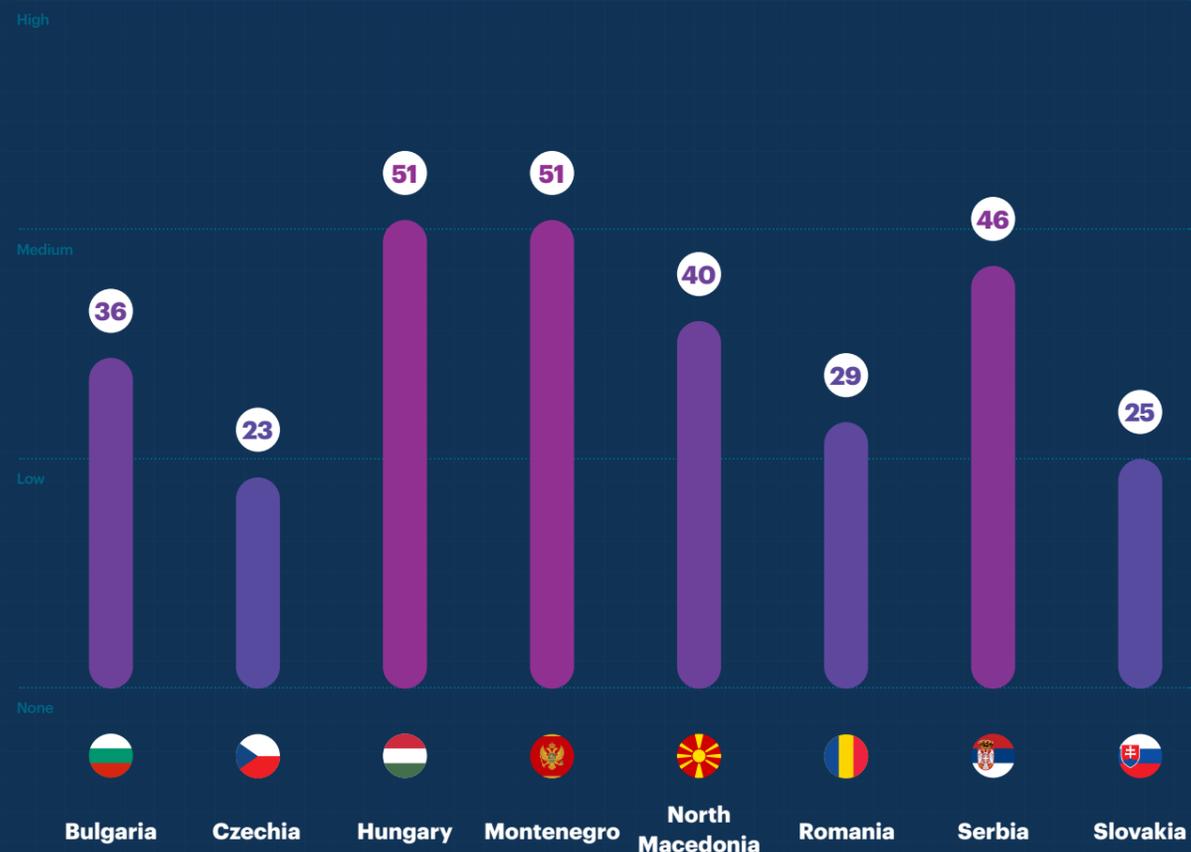
Also, perhaps unsurprisingly, the presence of disinformation in both the online and offline information space correlates with the presence and influence of pro-Kremlin actors and narratives in the media in the region. Given the information space in all monitored countries demonstrates varying degree 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.

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.

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.

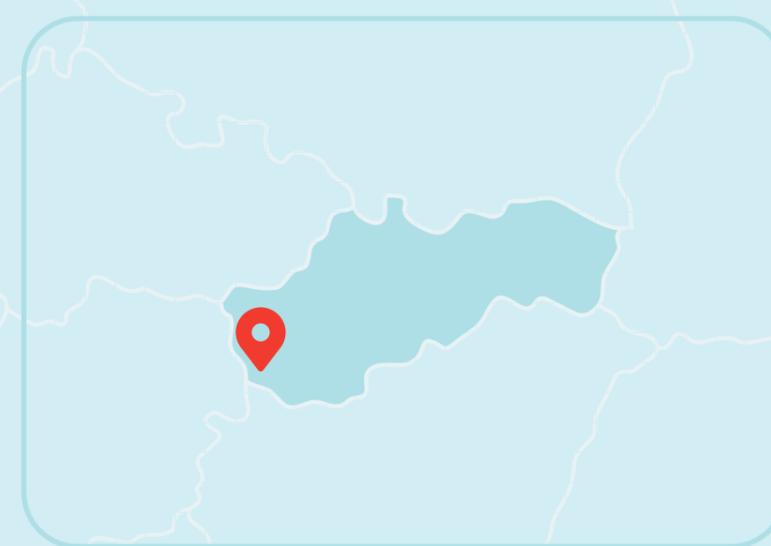
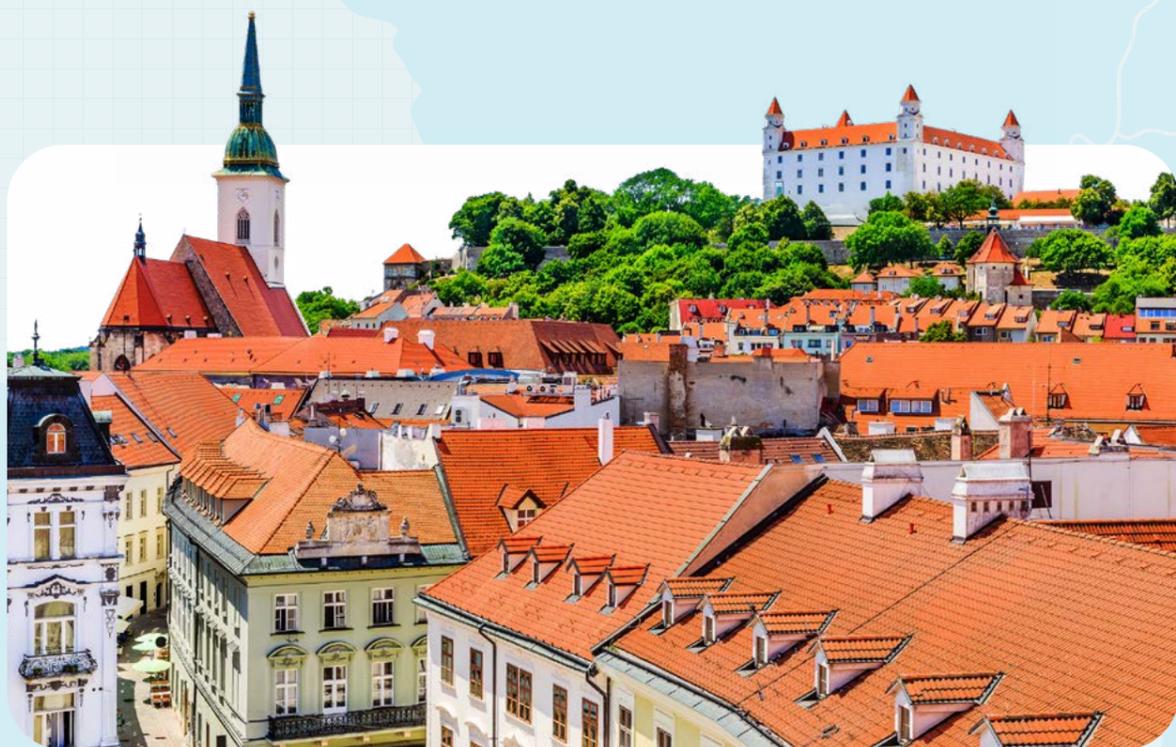
None of the countries analyzed can be considered to host truly sustainable civil societies. Sustainability is impacted by problems ranging from difficulties in securing funding to demonization campaigns aimed at democratic civil society actors and Kremlin-inspired legislative proposals to frame these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

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.



Focus on Slovakia



Vulnerability score

32
/100

Slovakia measures up as one of the three most resilient countries examined in the report.

Civil society, notably, has been instrumental in the country's significant turning points (the fall of Vladimir Mečiar's rule in the 1990s and the change in government following the murder of Ján Kuciak in 2018). The civic and academic space underscores an area of relatively robust resilience. Limited polarization, an academic community free of external influence, and active and sustainable civil society

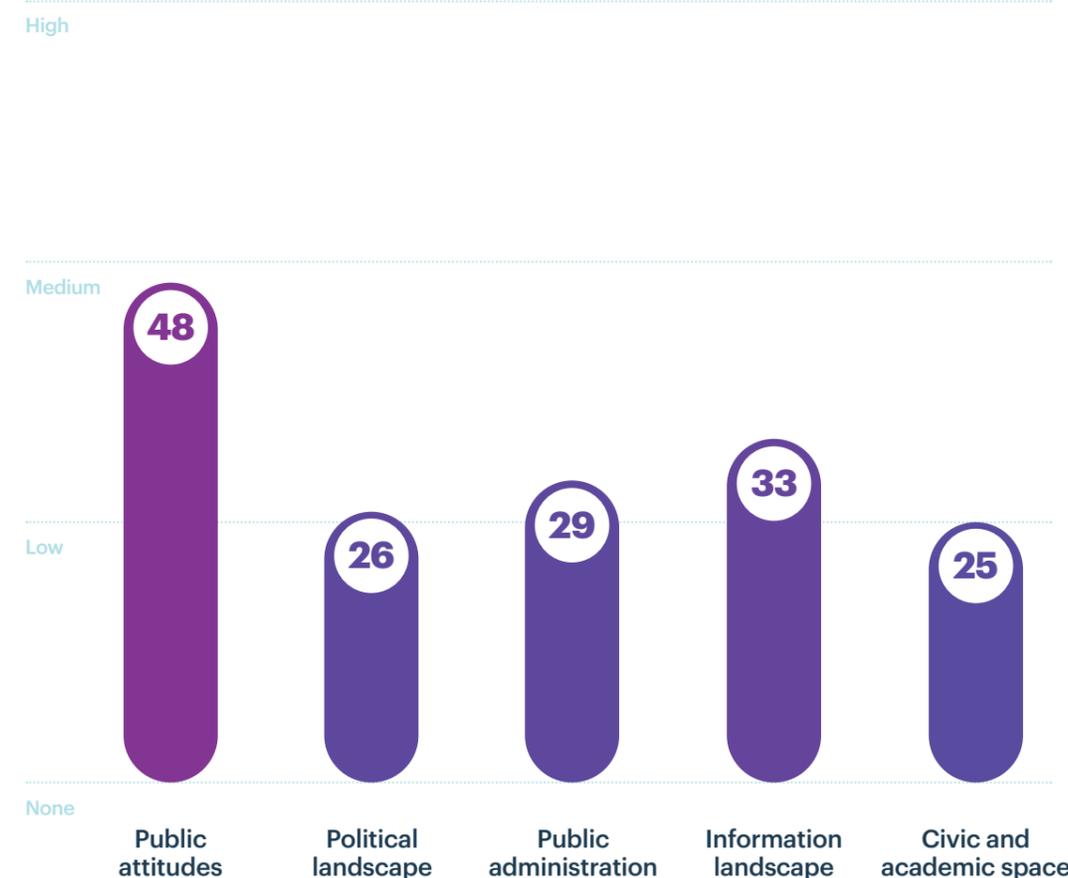
organizations contribute to a rather vibrant civic space.

The country's strident pro-transatlantic orientation has been strengthened by the backing of a majority of important political players over the past decade including multiple presidents and foreign ministers. Pro-Kremlin figures, however, continue to make political appearances and seek to exploit the country's key vulnerability – citizen attitudes.

Pro-Russian attitudes and a general lack of awareness regarding Beijing's influence constitute key points of societal vulnerability in the country. These counter currents are combined

with a strong inclination to believe disinformation and conspiracy theories. Further paired with a vast ecosystem of outlets that promulgate problematic content, these factors constitute a major vulnerability for the future.

Vulnerability score overview



Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

48
/100



While the EU and NATO find broad support in Slovakia, Slovaks are also among the most pro-Russian societies in Central Europe. According to GLOBSEC Trends, 61% of Slovak respondents do not perceive Russia as a threat³ and 35% regard their country's values to be in line with those of Russia.⁴ This openness has been shaped by complex historical, political, and cultural relations. Support for democracy remains high too⁵ but disillusionment, lack of trust, and dissatisfaction with the system⁶ constitute significant

vulnerability to foreign influences. A general lack of awareness of Chinese influence and a lack of public debate on the topic could pose vulnerabilities too.

False nostalgia and the need for historical revisionism

While pro-Russian sentiment has, in part, been undergirded by Kremlin propaganda and influence operations⁷, Russia's symbolic appeal and its romantic misconceptions date to the 19th century. Ludovít Štúr (1815-1856) was leader of the Slovak national revival and Slovak language codifier. In aspiring for the self-determination of Slovaks within the confines of the Austro-Hungarian empire, he suggested that cooperation with Russia could counter the Hungarian Revolution of 1848⁸. His book shifted some Slovaks away from the idea of Slovak nationalism towards a conception of pan-Slavism⁹ and became an underground pamphlet shaping the thinking of Slovak intellectual elites from the 1850s. Many experts point out that Štúr and his followers held an idealistic and naive perception of Russia spurred by their desire to curtail Austrian and Hungarian influence. This image, nevertheless, became part of Slovakia's national identity and is still influential in school teaching.¹⁰

The image of Russia, as the Soviet Union's successor, also benefits from post-communist nostalgia associated with Soviet-induced industrialization and urbanization during the mid-20th century in communist Slovakia. Many Slovaks nostalgically recall the

🗨️ We need to re-start a debate about pan-Slavism. It is a narrative which is incredibly strong in Slovakia and nobody dares to doubt it in the public space. Pan-Slavism is a supranationalism which claims that all Slavs have a unique common essence, which is in absolute contradiction with the fact that Slovakia is a Western state. It does not use azbuka and it is a majority Catholic and Lutheran nation. However, the country seems not to be aware of this fact.

Michal Vašečka, PhD.,
Program Director, Bratislava Policy Institute

communist era through rose-tinted glasses – perceptions persist that it was an era of low prices, low unemployment, and affordable housing.¹¹ These beliefs continue to be prevalent – 41% of Slovaks express nostalgia for communism and believe that their lives were better before 1989.¹² Slovakia's favorable ties with Russia were further reinforced in the 1990s when Vladimír Mečiar, then Prime Minister of a newly-

📊 78% of adult Slovaks perceive Russia as Slovakia's Slavic brother.

established independent Slovakia, envisioned the country becoming a neutral bridge between West and East.¹³ These inclinations have since been further bolstered through the creation of several political parties espousing positive attitudes towards Russia including the Slovak National Party.¹⁴ Another potential factor leading to preference of being on good terms with Russia concerns Slovakia's notable dependence on Russian gas for energy and perceptions of Russia's military superiority.¹⁵

The Kremlin has been seeking to exploit Slovak history and culture and the notion of pan-Slavic unity to strengthen influence operations and propaganda targeted at the country¹⁶. Numerous historical events and anniversaries connected to the defeat of fascism¹⁷ and the end of World War II are used to reinstate Russia's importance and link to the Slovak nation and its independence¹⁸. This process is aided by a lack of narratives about Slovak military heroes and victories¹⁹ that could outshine the narrative, dominant for decades, of the "victorious Red Army" liberating Slovakia.

✦ **Slovaks are most susceptible to believe disinformation and conspiracy theories from V4 countries.** 31% of adults in Slovakia, on average, believe in some COVID-19 related conspiracy theory.

Attempts to undermine democracy

Pro-Russian sentiment has also been propagated by a variety of actors spreading anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-US narratives, including those undermining liberal democracy and fostering polarization.²⁰ Slovakia, in fact, is one of the CEE countries most susceptible to conspiracy theories and disinformation.²¹ Such beliefs are supported by dissatisfaction with democracy and distrust in public institutions leading to preference for strong autocratic leader rather than liberal democracy.²² These beliefs further correlate with a general distrust in the media. Many vulnerable groups in Slovakia are consequently turning to problematic outlets that promise to reveal the “hidden truth” and give voice to disenfranchised groups.²³ These developments, importantly, pose a fundamental issue – there is a pressing need to find constructive ways to promote participation in the democratic process.

EU and NATO on the radar

Despite these issues, Slovaks are resolute in their support for the EU, which is generally perceived as beneficial. The EU, NATO, and, consequently, the US, however, have been the primary targets of Moscow’s influence operations since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.²⁴ Focus group discussions revealed conflicting beliefs and a rampant lack of understanding of the EU’s functioning. On the one hand, many expect “Brussels” to develop effective policies. On the other, they continue believing that “Brussels dictates” Slovakia what to do. Those more prone to Kremlin influence tend to be more vocal in standing up “against Brussels” and its “liberal policies” that are allegedly destroying Slovak values. These voters rather lean towards adopting similar approaches to governments in Poland and Hungary in establishing their “own way”.²⁵

Disinformation narratives accusing NATO of being a militaristic and aggressive alliance and

a puppet of US imperialism and expansion also find broad popular resonance.²⁶ Even the notion that NATO provides a security guarantor encounters skepticism, with some unsure that Slovakia can rely on the Alliance’s collective defense principle.

Pro-Kremlin voices have exploited the lack of information and strategic communication about the EU and NATO coming both from the Slovak government and the organizations themselves.



Dissatisfaction with the system

Democracy is another core component of vulnerability against a backdrop where pro-Kremlin narratives often serve to undermine democratic systems and processes. While democracy is overall judged in a favorable light in Slovakia, its execution is a long-term source of frustration for Slovaks and could potentially risk many becoming more sympathetic to authoritarianism.²⁷ While focus group participants identified elections and multi-party systems as core to democracy, they omitted other

crucial elements including individual freedoms, rule of law, human rights, civil society, and media engagement.²⁸ Corruption, moreover, is perceived as a long-standing problem that the system has failed to address. These attitudes are often employed by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors to downplay criticism of their own political system and to denigrate Western values, marginalized communities, and, ultimately, the democratic processes in Slovakia.



Unknown China

An entirely different vulnerability is present, meanwhile, with respect to China. Despite the fact that the country has been in the international media spotlight for several years already,²⁹ Slovaks largely hold blank slates regarding their perceptions of Beijing and its activities both domestic and abroad. Many also hold favorable views, with 19% regarding the Chinese regime as a potential inspiration for Slovakia.³⁰ This climate is enabling China to intensify its influence operations in the country.

Political landscape

Chapter 2

Vulnerability score

26 /100



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The political landscape in Slovakia can be characterized as a fractured space divided on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues. The 2020 parliamentary elections were contested by 25 political parties, with the current parliament entailing a mix of strident backers of liberal democracy, staunch transatlanticists, far-right extremists, and ultra-traditional Catholics.³¹ The past few years, alarmingly, have witnessed an undermining of democracy spurred by a rising exploitation of divisive issues

and the active promotion of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Though views towards Russia and China vary, the transatlantic orientation of the country has received unequivocal support in Slovakia's political space in recent years.



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EU membership vs. EU dictate

The country's membership in the EU stays one of the few uncontested areas in the political discourse. Even the far-right Kotleba-ĽSNS party, which had previously unsuccessfully (due to a lack of signatures) attempted to initiate a referendum on "Slov-exit", has shifted its rhetoric and stopped advocating for leaving the bloc.³² The rhetoric of key political parties on the EU, however, extends beyond

constructive criticism calling for reforms. Numerous benefits go unquestioned, including the Euro currency seen as a source of stability and the Schengen area perceived as a symbol of freedom. Many political actors have, however, framed the Union as an "other" and targeted "Brussels" as a key component in their blame-game. The most prevalent political narrative in the past six years consisted of the so-called

“There is nothing better than the EU, we are the EU and there is no functioning alternative.”³⁴

Robert Fico, leader of SMER-SD and then Prime Minister, 2018

“Brussels dictate” that treats the EU institutions as dominant forces giving orders to Slovakia and oppressing national sovereignty.³⁵

Although the financial and migration crises tended to catalyze emotionally charged rhetoric laying blame at the EU, for some, these postures shifted depending on their political status. Both Robert Fico (SMER-SD) and Igor Matovič (OĽANO), for example, took less critical and more constructive stances towards the EU when holding the post of Prime Minister than when they were the party leaders.

“Being in the core [of the EU] will probably mean the loss of further freedoms... maybe, as Slovakia, we will not be able to have our own taxes. That will be unified, dictated to us. Maybe it means having to accept as many migrants as Brussels dictates to you, with no objections!”³³

Boris Kollár, leader of Sme Rodina, 2017

Complex relationship with NATO

Despite the prevalent belief in NATO-related conspiracy theories in Slovakia³⁶, the political actors' actions and rhetoric on NATO showed rather resilient features. This is likely driven, in part, by the fact that NATO tends to feature less frequently in broader public debate. Exceptions include the Kotleba-(LSNS party, which has consistently called for a departure from NATO³⁷, and Andrej Danko, leader of the Slovak National Party (SNS), former Speaker of the Parliament, and a figure particularly critical of the organization.

“Today, there is no alternative to NATO. Although I hope it will come.”³⁸

Andrej Danko,
Andrej Danko, leader of SNS, 2020

This antagonistic rhetoric has, however, been counterbalanced by key pro-transatlantic figures at the posts of the Presidency³⁹, Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁴⁰, and Ministry of Defense.⁴¹ The active strategic communication of these leaders and some public institutions, exemplified in the involvement of Slovakia in the #WeAreNATO campaign, has contributed to an increase in support for NATO membership by 20 percentage points in the past five years.⁴²

★ A key symbolic action accentuating the foreign policy orientation of Slovakia pertained to a common declaration by the **three highest representatives – Prime Minister, President, and the Speaker of the Parliament** – on Slovakia's commitment to the EU and NATO. The declaration was signed three times - in 2017⁴³, 2019⁴⁴, and 2020⁴⁵.



Turn from Russia

Slovakia remains susceptible to pro-Kremlin influence, with the diverse range of views of political actors underlining this vulnerability. Around 50% of experts surveyed⁴⁶ agreed that both parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors have played

a role in ensuring that pro-Kremlin interests are sometimes reflected in the policies and foreign policy actions of Slovakia.

Both public debate and actions concerning Russia combine a mixture of adoration and/or vehement support for the country and its regime, with imbalanced communication often based on a lack of situational awareness and threat perception connected to



Russian influence in the country. This lack of awareness has been demonstrated repeatedly, witness the recent Sputnik V vaccine order leading to government turmoil and a prime minister change. The case has been noted (e.g. by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok) as emblematic of the hybrid influence exerted by Moscow⁴⁷.

Other examples, nevertheless, reveal a gradual change in Slovakia's approach towards Russia, spurred on by parliamentary elections in 2020. The expulsion of Russian diplomats is a case in point. In March 2018, following the Skripal case, the Slovak government decided not to join its allies, including all other V4 countries, in expelling Russian diplomats⁴⁸. Years later, the media uncovered that the expulsion was blocked by Andrej Danko, who maintains strong ties to Russian political representatives.⁴⁹ In November 2018, however, the country

did expel one diplomat based on espionage.⁵⁰ In 2021, in response to revelations of Russian involvement in the Czech Vrbětice explosion, Slovakia became the first country to expel three diplomats in an act of solidarity.⁵¹

Another example underscoring a shift on Russia concerns the 2017-initiated process that saw an updating of Slovakia's security and defense strategies that had dated back to 2005. Following their adoption by government,⁵² the parliament initially failed to approve it, with SNS refusing to give its stamp of approval on account of its objection to Russia being referred to as a threat.⁵³ But in 2021, a new government adopted the strategies with the framing of both Russia and China as potential challenges to the country's security. The move was criticized by Andrej Danko.⁵⁴

Lack of China in a public debate

A lack of public awareness regarding Chinese activities is reflective more broadly of China's absence from public debate. Only 3 of 10 political parties analyzed referenced China in their party manifestos. Mentions of China have been mostly linked to economic cooperation, or its potential, and foreign visits between the two countries. The image of China as a key economic partner has been promoted mostly by the SMER-SD party⁵⁵ and the Slovak National Party.⁵⁶

Symbolic actions have been rare but exceptions include statements from President Čaputová and former Slovak President Kiska⁵⁷ putting a spotlight on Chinese violations of human rights and the need to speak out about such issues.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic rather saw a mostly one-sided positive promotion of China, with several political leaders welcoming medical supplies from China and promoting Beijing's mask diplomacy.⁵⁸ While 50% of surveyed experts declared parliamentary actors only somewhat successful in promoting Beijing's interests, a majority point to the fact that there is little or no awareness of public authorities about China and similarly little response to the actions of pro-Beijing actors.

Public administration

Chapter 3



The Slovak public administration has grown markedly more resilient over the past years, but the systematic reform of the judiciary, education, security, and crisis management systems still awaits.⁵⁹ Political structures and legislation need to be updated to reflect the digitalization of society and new threats associated with it. The new Ministry of Investments, Regional Development, and Informatization, in this vein, aims to reduce bureaucratization through the digitalization of

public services.⁶⁰ Limited awareness concerning security also persists among many civil servants – officials typically lack knowledge about hybrid threats and strategic communication. Numerous initiatives, however, have been launched to change this too.⁶¹

Some political actors perceive the public administration not as an independent public service disconnected from politics but rather as a “prize” awarded to election winners. This perspective continues to hinder the performance of the public administration. While the replacement of the most senior-level positions could be expected with each new administration, the periodic “purge” of civil servants, even at the department head level, severely undermines the professionalism, effectiveness, and competence of the public administration⁶² and contributes to an overall loss of trust in these institutions. Nonetheless, the public interrogation of candidates for selected high-level positions, including Attorney General, is a good recent practice.⁶³

Intelligence services have indicated the malign activities of foreign intelligence agencies,⁶⁴ hybrid threats, and disinformation as security threats since 2016.⁶⁵ And in August 2017, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs established a special strategic communication unit, becoming the first institution to establish this type of specialized department.⁶⁶ In 2018, moreover, the Framework of the Slovak Republic on Countering Hybrid Threats⁶⁷ was adopted and, a year later, Office of the Security Council of the Government Office was tasked with creating a working group aimed at setting up a coordinated mechanism to counter malign information operations and increase situational awareness.⁶⁸ Although several public institutions⁶⁹ have established designated units focusing on hybrid threats, a lack of long-term political leadership and strong “resortism”⁷⁰ still contribute to

low situational awareness and interdepartmental cooperation.⁷¹ Surveyed experts identified departmentalism and a state culture that sees strategic plans produced merely for the sake of producing them as one of the bottlenecks to the creation of a better security system and the establishment of a whole-of-government approach towards counter measures.

🗨️ **The Slovak security system is like a headless octopus - each tentacle represents a branch with its own responsibilities and power, but there is no coordination, because the head is missing.**

Expert from National Security Authority

Corruption: two steps forward, one step back

Corruption within the state administration continues to be a systemic problem. Prosecutions of high-level public representatives, including the former Attorney General⁷² and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Justice,⁷³ indicate that the

system of governance, however, is improving. Over the past several years, 22 high-level civil servants have confessed to various crimes and many investigations are still ongoing.⁷⁴

On the other hand, the backlash against several prosecutions⁷⁵ reveal deep-rooted state-capture.⁷⁶ Despite the absence of legislation on lobbying,⁷⁷ a registration of “public sector partners” has been in place since 2017, requiring registration from entities entitled to receive state funding.⁷⁸ This initiative is a regional unicorn and a big step in the direction of improved oversight. Other anti-corruption measures, such as requirements for the declaration of conflicts of interest, the right to access information, and the mandate for public representatives to declare property have been in place but not effectively and evenly enforced.⁷⁹

Increasing state resilience

Public administrators, especially at the regional and local levels, demonstrate a poor level of threat perception regarding the malign activities of foreign actors and possess a limited toolkit.⁸⁰ While hybrid threats and propaganda at the strategic level were already recognized in the 2016 White Paper on Defence⁸¹ as a relevant security threat, an initiative to update national strategies in 2017 was unsuccessful, with pro-Kremlin politicians rejecting the changes as long as Russia was mentioned as a security threat.⁸²



Annual reports of intelligence services naming malign actors and their activities, nevertheless, have become more transparent and detailed.⁸³ The vulnerability of Slovakia has ultimately decreased through the eventual adoption of the new security⁸⁴ and defence strategies,⁸⁵ 16 years after their previous update. Both Russia and China are mentioned as security challenges in the new strategies. In 2020, the malign activities of Chinese⁸⁶ agencies utilizing Chinese ICT companies were identified by the Slovak Information Service.⁸⁷ Its former director, in a television interview, further emphasized the need to clearly specify the definition of critical infrastructure and enhance its protection.⁸⁸

“Slovakia is very vulnerable to foreign influence - we are able to react to activities conducted openly but our awareness and countermeasures significantly decrease with covert influence.”

Expert from public administration

“The security system, its settings and functioning, does not take into account information operations and many public institutions do not realize their employees are targeted via media and other information channels. This human element - personal attitudes of people working in the security apparatus - is neglected while it is reflected in their work and the institutions they represent.”

Expert from National Security Authority

A lack of situational awareness also stems from a deficit in specific analytical structures responsible for monitoring and analyzing foreign activities and hybrid threats and a “30 year old methodology”⁸⁹ for the assessment of the security environment. A majority of surveyed experts noted that the few public institutions that have developed specialized units are understaffed and their employees inadequately trained and experienced.

Additional limitations, confirmed by surveyed experts, include inefficient structures for the inter-departmental exchange of information and cooperation and the non-implementation of whole-of-government approach.⁹⁰

Processes aimed at developing more effective structures, nonetheless, have been set in motion. In December 2020, Office of the Security Council of the Government Office submitted a draft concept for the Coordination Mechanism⁹¹ to other ministries for review prior to its submission to the government. And the Ministry of Defense is finalizing the Action Plan for Coordination of the Fight Against Hybrid Threats, an initiative that plans with involvement of civil society.⁹²

“Slovak security and defense strategies were finally updated in 2021, after 16 years.”

Election integrity remains vulnerable

The integrity of elections and their protection against foreign interference remains a rather vulnerable area. While the foreign funding of political parties and election campaigns and the involvement of foreign actors in campaigns is officially prohibited,⁹³ intelligence services have previously warned that foreign actors are establishing entities and developing personal contacts in Slovakia. These relationships could be later used for hybrid influence⁹⁴ including electoral interference. As a majority of surveyed experts pointed out, the State Committee for Elections and Control of Political Party Financing⁹⁵ (independent election oversight body) lacks authority and capabilities (both the staff and expertise) to thoroughly investigate potential incidents of foreign interference or funding of political parties/candidates. And existing transparency measures are often not effectively enforced.⁹⁶

This lack of situational awareness and capabilities to investigate potential attempts of foreign interference in elections is apparent also in the views of surveyed experts who suspect that illicit cases have occurred over the past two years in Slovakia. No official attribution, however, could be provided. Bellingcat’s researchers, nevertheless, have put a spotlight on possible foreign support of far-right extremists⁹⁷

aiming to change the geopolitical orientation of the country through the collection of signatures for a referendum to leave the EU and NATO.⁹⁸

“The electoral system is prepared for traditional types of electoral fraud (e.g. ballot box stuffing) but not hybrid attacks.”

Expert from public administration

Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

33
/100



The information landscape in Slovakia has been affected by pro-Kremlin interests and narratives approximately since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, mostly through a vast network of outlets sharing manipulative content online.⁹⁹ These outlets and their networks of Facebook pages have enabled various narratives to penetrate and proliferate in the online information space, with some rhetoric spilling over into the mainstream media. While there is no direct ownership of the media by Russian or Chinese

actors, signs of indirect influence have appeared over the years. Despite the strong presence of high-quality independent media in Slovakia, the information landscape is rather vulnerable, especially due to the presence of information manipulation in the online space.



Media freedom in Slovakia

From the countries covered by the Index, Slovakia ranks best in the World Press Freedom Index, as 35th. Like most countries in the region, however, this marks a slide backward from 12th place in 2016.¹⁰⁰

Media freedom in the country has been affected by a series of developments including the 2018 murder (trial still ongoing) of Ján Kuciak, an investigative journalist, and subsequent revelations that other journalists had been under surveillance by oligarchs with the assistance of state institutions.¹⁰¹ Also, despite its status as one of the most trusted news sources,¹⁰² the public broadcaster (RTVS) was accused, in 2018, of meddling in the editorial independence of its journalists, resulting in twelve staff members quitting the job.¹⁰³

RTVS, more recently, was accused of sacking a journalist who had criticized a misleading evening news report about a fatality that had occurred following an individual getting the AstraZeneca vaccine.¹⁰⁴

Though the media is largely free of state and financial groups' influence and comprises a range of widely read and independent high-quality outlets,¹⁰⁵ attacks on the media and journalists from political officials and party leaders from almost all corners of the political landscape are becoming more frequent and undermine the role of the media in a democratic society.¹⁰⁶

Pro-Kremlin interests in the media

Both traditional and online outlets that provide serious coverage dominate the information space.

But the presence of online outlets spreading manipulative content has been rising and proving consequential. While the precise scope and reach of these outlets is unknown, the most popular outlet, Hlavné správy (Main News), is believed to attract around 500,000 regular readers,¹⁰⁷ representing up to 10% of Slovakia's population.

✦ **Mistrust towards mainstream media increased in Slovakia from 50% in 2020 to 60% in 2021.**

A project identifying websites spreading manipulative content, *konspiratori.sk*,¹⁰⁸ currently lists more than 200 Czech and Slovak outlets¹⁰⁹ as problematic. The amount of Facebook¹¹⁰ pages and groups contributing to spreading such content in the Slovak online information landscape, moreover, numbers in the hundreds.¹¹¹ The reach of the most popular posts from these outlets, furthermore, is comparable to the reach of viral posts from mass media outlets.¹¹²

The content disseminated by problematic outlets often espouse anti-liberal, anti-US, and pro-Russian rhetoric. This includes the framing of the EU as a bureaucratic body that dictates policy,¹¹³ NATO as an obsolete and/or aggressive tool of the US,¹¹⁴ and the notion of the “West” as decadent.¹¹⁵ These narratives are amenable to Kremlin interests and play into the hands of the Moscow’s influence.

As evidenced during the Slovak 2020 parliamentary elections,¹¹⁶ moreover, these narratives have continuously infiltrated into mainstream media discussions, with a range of political actors and “experts” playing the messengers. Narratives serving pro-Kremlin interests are, consequently, taking on a stronger foothold in some mainstream media outlets.¹¹⁷

Surveyed experts have confirmed this finding. Whereas 13 of 30 experts believe that pro-Kremlin actors and/or narratives find their way into mass media rather occasionally and generally as an error or the result of unprofessional journalism, 16 believe there are specific journalists, editors, or programs that regularly promote pro-Kremlin interests in the mainstream media.

Fake authorities and politicians, including members of parliament, are the most influential and thus dangerous in spreading disinformation. This is a huge problem, because false and hateful narratives that one was ashamed to publicly declare in the past, such as ‘the world is flat’ or racist statements against minorities, have become a part of the mainstream.

Expert from public administration

Indirect Russian influence

While no major media outlets are owned by Russian or Chinese companies, links of certain outlets to Russia were confirmed by the director of the Slovak Intelligence Service. He claimed the spread of disinformation in Slovakia is sometimes paid from abroad, most often by Russia, through relationship-building and direct payments to specific journalists.¹¹⁸ This indirect influence is generally difficult to map notwithstanding occasional revelations (e.g. a

Russian journalist with ties to Rossiya Segodnya [Russia Today] on the payroll of Hlavné správy and publishing pro-Russian articles under a pseudonym¹¹⁹ or the editor-in-chief of Zem a Vek [Earth and Age], a popular disinformation outlet, visiting the Russian Embassy¹²⁰).

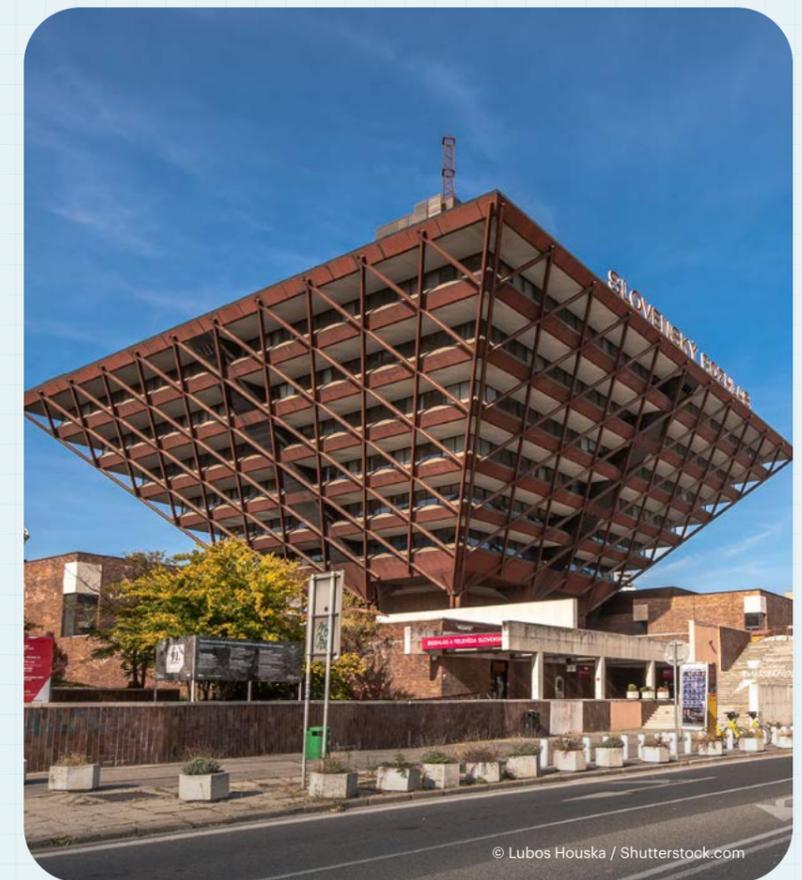


© Facebook page Slovenski branci

Social media pages & groups

Russian and pro-Kremlin narratives are most visibly pronounced on social media in the Slovak information space. According to expert survey, 14 of 30 respondents agree that pro-Kremlin actors occasionally succeed in shaping the discourse and/or opinions on social media and 15 of 30 believe they shape the debate significantly. As network mapping of Slovak Facebook conducted in spring 2020 indicates,¹²¹ pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-affiliated pages on Facebook form a visible network on the platform, with several pro-Russian or Russia-affiliated pages sharing content from disinformation-spreading pages and vice versa.

Chinese influence on the Slovak information landscape, meanwhile, has been rather limited, with political actors most vocal in spreading pro-Beijing narratives. Luboš Blaha, a member of parliament representing SMER-SD, ranks as one of the most prominent figures disseminating pro-Beijing and pro-Kremlin messages, achieving considerable virality on Facebook including approximately 800k monthly interactions on his posts in the last year.¹²²



© Lubos Houska / Shutterstock.com

The most important channel for spreading disinformation and pro-Kremlin narratives in Slovakia is Facebook, where disinformation pages often generate more interactions than pages of mainstream media.

Civic & academic space

Vulnerability score

25
/100



The civic space in Slovakia has found itself increasingly polarized over the past few years and has nearly reached political polarization levels of the “wild ‘90s”, a period characterized by the authoritarian rule of Vladimír Mečiar.¹²³

Mass protests that followed the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak¹²⁴ have re-awakened a longing for a return to the democratic values of the 1989 Velvet revolution and efforts to bring a “decent

Slovakia” into being have remained aspirational for some.

A substantial segment of the population, however, is also increasingly galvanized by anti-systemic and anti-democratic protests, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several such protests have been organized, culminating in attempts to enter the Slovak Parliament building,¹²⁵ the violent participation of football hooligans,¹²⁶ and the harassment of experts.¹²⁷

The hate-driven rhetoric of anti-systemic far-right parties, such as Kotleba-ĽSNS¹²⁸ and its spin-off Republika,¹²⁹ and some members of the former SMER-SD ruling party, which is mired in numerous high-profile corruption scandals, have contributed to these developments. These political parties all have documented pro-Kremlin leanings¹³⁰ and their current success is to a significant extent facilitated by a steady stream of disinformation¹³¹ and character assassination campaigns directed at political opponents on Facebook.¹³²

According to the vast majority of respondents in the expert survey, furthermore, a whole-of-society approach towards building societal resilience to foreign influence campaigns does not really exist or is not being implemented at all, leaving Slovakia’s civic space exposed and vulnerable to such attempts.

Civil society: vibrant yet vulnerable

Despite operating within an increasingly polarized political and civic space, Slovak civil society ranks as the second most sustainable, following only Czechia, of countries included in this research according to Civil Society Sustainability Index data.¹³³ Paradoxically, one of the reasons behind the vibrancy and

independence of the Slovak civil society relates to the country’s experiment with the post-Soviet authoritarian rule of Vladimír Mečiar. During this time period, civil society mobilized to play an instrumental role in campaigning to end Mečiar’s rule¹³⁴ and ever since continues to fulfil the vital function of a democratic watchdog.

Recognizing civil society’s democratizing potential, far-right and far-left populist forces, nonetheless, have increasingly demonized various pro-democratic NGOs,¹³⁵ initiatives, and their representatives. These groups have come to face strategic lawsuits against public participation (so-called SLAPPs),¹³⁶ public attacks,¹³⁷ smear-campaigns,¹³⁸ and threats.¹³⁹

🌟 Slovakia scores best in academic freedom from the countries covered by the Index, with a vulnerability score of only 4/100.



Extreme attitudes, encouraged by disinformation actors, have been present on the margins of the Slovak information space for many years. But they first entered mainstream political discourse following former Prime Minister Robert Fico's suggestion that mass protests in the wake of the murders of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová were organized by foreign-funded NGOs, a narrative he continues to perpetuate.¹⁴⁰ Efforts to demonize Slovak civil society have culminated in several so-far unsuccessful moves to pass legislation to label NGOs as "foreign agents" or "lobbyists" by Kotleba-LSNS¹⁴¹ and the Sme Rodina¹⁴² parties.

Civil society in Slovakia, it should be noted, is not universally pro-democratic¹⁴³ and some elements of it maintain links to the Kremlin. There are numerous organizations, some even with political ambitions, such as the neofascist SHO¹⁴⁴, which has cooperation agreements with several Russian organizations.¹⁴⁵ The paramilitary organization Slovenskí branci (Slovak conscripts), in fact, openly promotes pro-Kremlin interests and maintains a track record of successfully recruiting youth to its ranks.¹⁴⁶ According to a majority of the expert survey respondents, the Kremlin exercises significant influence on Slovak civil society through influential actors who successfully promote its narratives.

★ Currently, Confucius Institutes operate at three Slovak universities: **Comenius University, Slovak University of Technology** and **Matej Bel University**.



Corruption in academia poses a risk

The academic space in Slovakia is relatively free¹⁴⁷ although the country's higher education institutions do not figure into the top 100 world university rankings.¹⁴⁸ There are many reasons for this, including a lack of high-quality researchers and lecturers, high student-to-staff ratio, and corruption scandals involving the purchasing of fraudulent university diplomas.¹⁴⁹ Institutionally endorsed and covered-up cases of plagiarism have attracted intense media scrutiny, enveloping high-profile public figures including the leader of the SNS party,¹⁵⁰ the former Minister of Social Affairs and the Family,¹⁵¹ the Minister of Education,¹⁵² the Minister of Finance¹⁵³ and the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament.¹⁵⁴

The seemingly rampant corruption within the Slovak academic space represents a

significant vulnerability to foreign influence - the purchase of fraudulent academic titles can afford influence and visibility to individuals with disputable competencies and integrity. This systemic flaw, in turn, can be all too easily exploited by external actors.

In some cases, academic representatives promote the Kremlin's interests. The most notorious example concerns Ľuboš Blaha, MP for the former ruling SMER-SD party and also an employee of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.¹⁵⁵ His Facebook channel often disseminates polarizing content, disinformation, and pro-Kremlin propaganda.¹⁵⁶

Beijing's influence in Slovakia is much less known and according to the majority of expert survey respondents, limited. Its influence in the academic sphere is evident, however, through its Confucius Institutes, some of which have been established in Slovakia (starting as early as 2007).¹⁵⁷ In 2021, the Director of the Confucius Institute in Bratislava sent a threatening email to an expert from the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, Matej Šimalčík, for publishing a report on the Chinese presence at Slovak universities.¹⁵⁸

Although an isolated case at present, it highlights the precarious position of the expert community focusing on Beijing's influence in Slovakia. As only a small number of individuals are engaged in such research activities, silencing them through self-censoring practices can result in a lack of public awareness and discussion towards growing Chinese influence in the region.¹⁵⁹



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136 <https://e.dennikn.sk/2501626/dezinfoweb-hlavny-dennik-museli-skrtnut-zo-zoznamu-konspiratori-sk-taktika-carnogurskeho-mladsieho-na-sude-uspela/>

137 <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22232358/mi-movladky-zalozili-novu-platformu-upozornuju-na-tlak-extremistov-a-konspiracii.html>

138 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4573359982742518&set=a.213099772101916>

139 Statement published by the Chamber of NGOs of the Government of the Slovak Republic in reaction to attacks and threats against NGO representatives during the Slovak Presidential Election in 2019. https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/rada_vlady_pre_mno/rokovania/2019/18_rokovanie/Rada%20vlady%20pre%20MNO_2019-03-22_vyhlasenie%20Komory%20MNO.pdf

140 https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/fico-mali-sme-pravdu-sorosove-peniaze/543820-clanok.html?fb_comment_id=3884645774922635_3886345808085965

141 <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20796728/mi-movladne-organizacie-zahranicny-agent-kotleba-lsns.html>

142 <https://www.platformahlas.sk/nie-sme-zahranicni-agenti/>

143 The "dark side" of the Slovak (un)civil society has been described in detail in GLOBSEC's Vulnerability Index from 2017: https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GLOBSEC_Vulnerability_Index.pdf

144 Slovenské hnutie obrody (Slovak Revival Movement) was registered as an NGO up until the Slovak parliamentary election in 2020 when it transformed into a political party: <https://www.sme.sk/ps/4836/sho>; <https://dennikn.sk/709105/su-v-oblekoch-no-nezmenili-sa-new-york-times-si-vsima-nastup-nasich-neofasistov/>

145 Paramilitantné skupiny v krajinách V4, p. 9, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Paramilita%CC%81rne-skupiny-v-krajina%CC%81ch-V4.pdf>

146 <https://vsquare.org/a-uniform-for-a-patriot/>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20190401125937/http://sho.sk/priatelja>

147 According to V-Dem Academic Freedom Index data on Slovakia: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph/>

148 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/where-to-study/study-in-slovakia>

149 <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/349307-kupovanie-diplomov-skrvaju-vysoke-skoly-aj-za-externe-studium>

150 <https://dennikn.sk/1740217/policia-vysetruje-dankovu-rigorozku/>

151 <https://domov.sme.sk/c/6359637/richter-studoval-ine-titul-ma-z-prava.html>

152 <https://dennikn.sk/1965107/aj-grohling-ma-pochybny-titul-pocas-kollarovej-kauzy-utail-na-webe-svoju-diplomovku/>

153 <https://dennikn.sk/1980254/preco-je-matovicova-diplomovka-plagiat-a-preco-prorektor-uk-hovori-ze-nemala-prejst-video-a-vizualizacia/>

154 <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2168628-spolu-obvinuje-kollara-z-plagiatorstva-zlah-cil-som-si-to-nebolo-to-pekne-reagoval-sef-parlamentu>

155 https://www.sav.sk/?lang=sk&doc=user-org-user&user_no=6654

156 <https://dennikn.sk/2357089/vidime-americku-stopu-slovenski-zastancovia-putina-vysvetluju-vrbetice-podla-ruskej-sablony/>

157 <http://konfucius.sk/sk/uvod/>; <https://www.ucm.sk/sk/konfuciov-institut-pri-ucm/>





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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