

# **GLOBSEC** Vulnerability Index **2021**

Analyzing the  
vulnerabilities of eight  
Central European and Western  
Balkan countries towards  
foreign malign influence

[www.vulnerabilityindex.org](http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org)

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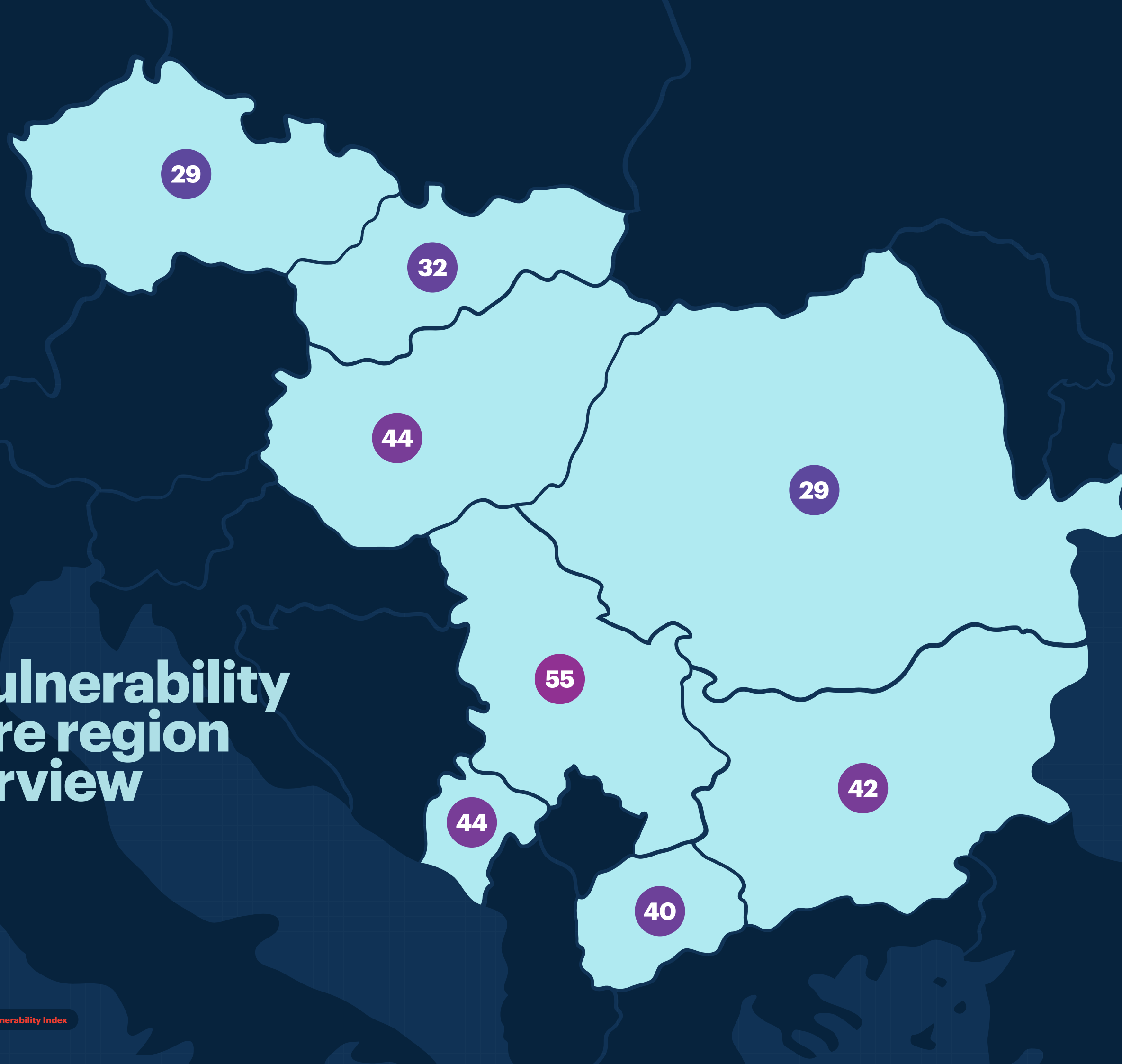
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## → Vulnerability score region overview







# ➔ 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 theory<sup>1</sup> to explain the analyzed countries; and how these conditions co-shape these countries' vulnerability to foreign influence.

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

➔ The classical realist argument that external conditions and actors interact with states' domestic actors and institutions, as there is no strict line between international and domestic politics<sup>2</sup>. Internal state factors and their resilience or lack thereof thus translate into higher susceptibility towards hegemonic influence, as evaluated in the country rankings in each of the five studied dimensions.



## The countries we cover

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Our methodological approach

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

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

## Consultants on measurement methods:

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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:

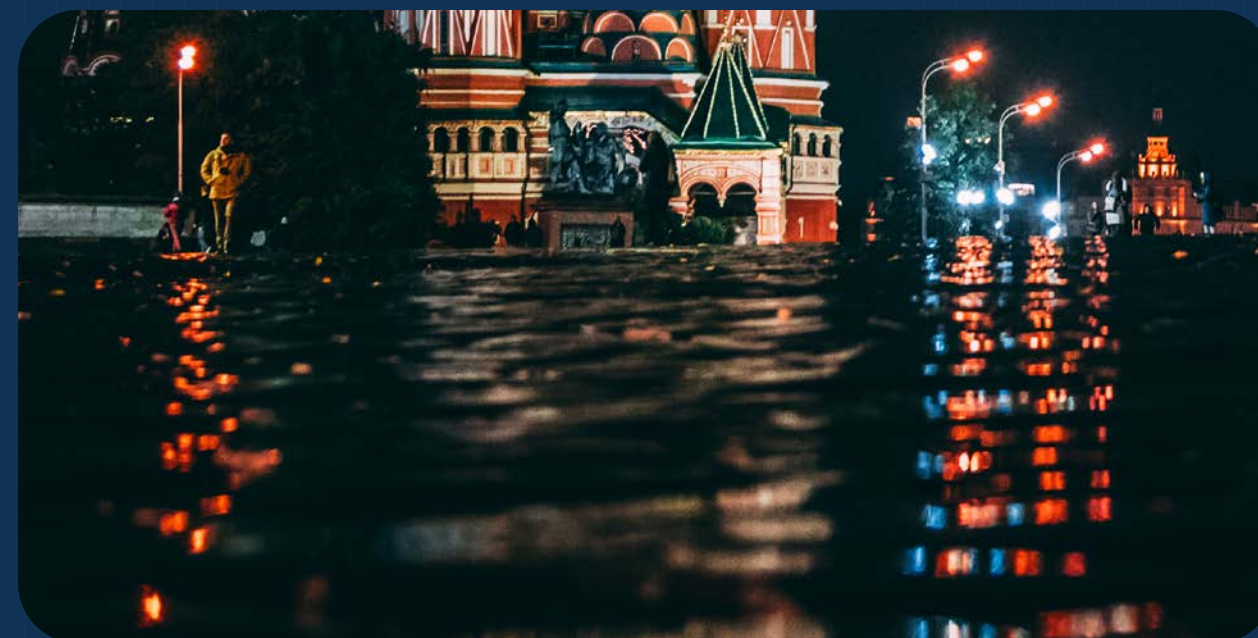
- 1 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index
- 2 V-Dem Academic Freedom Index
- 3 Civic space (based on V-Dem data)
- 4 Expert survey assessment of Kremlin's influence on civil society
- 5 Expert survey assessment of Beijing's influence on civil society



★ **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

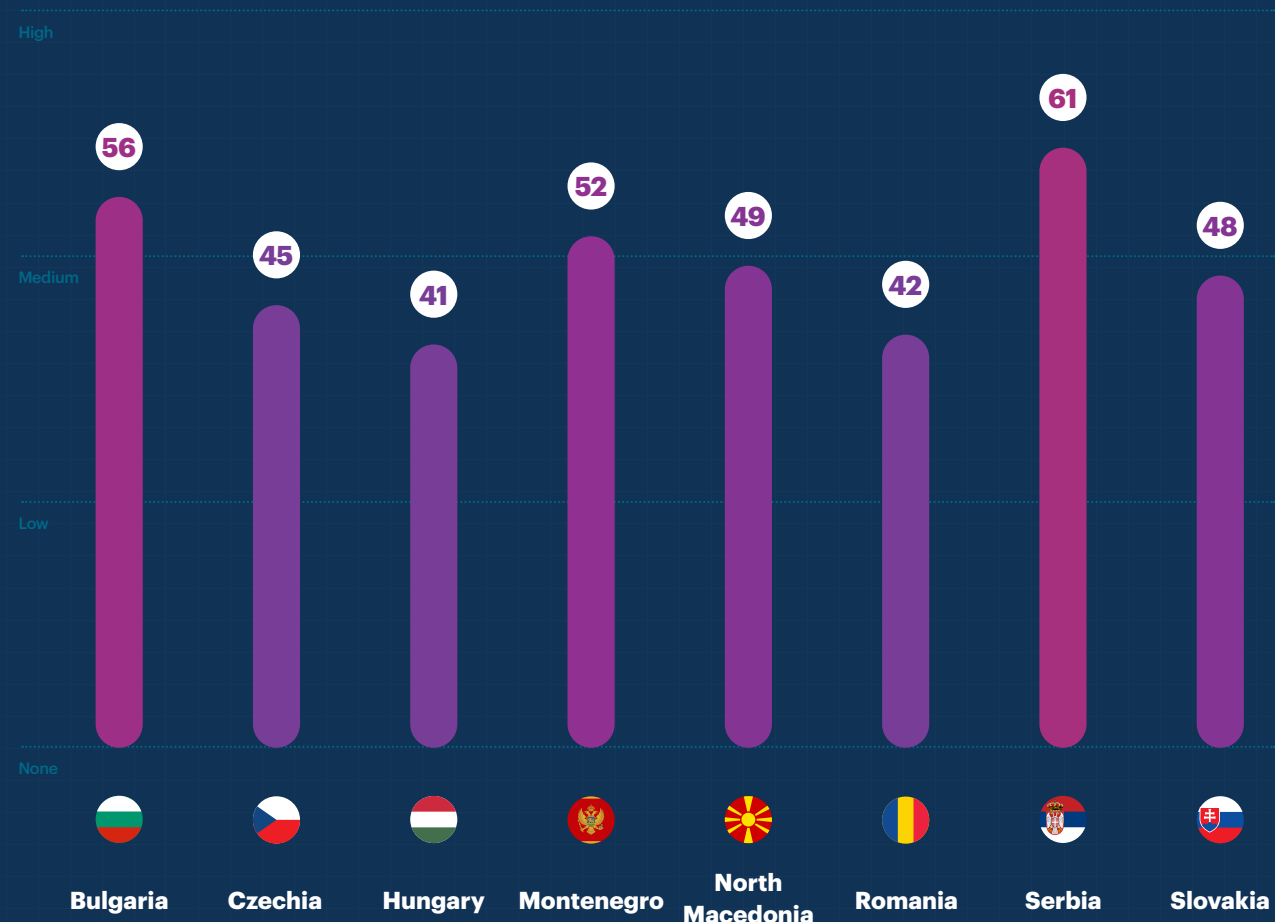


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina famously begins, *"Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"*.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

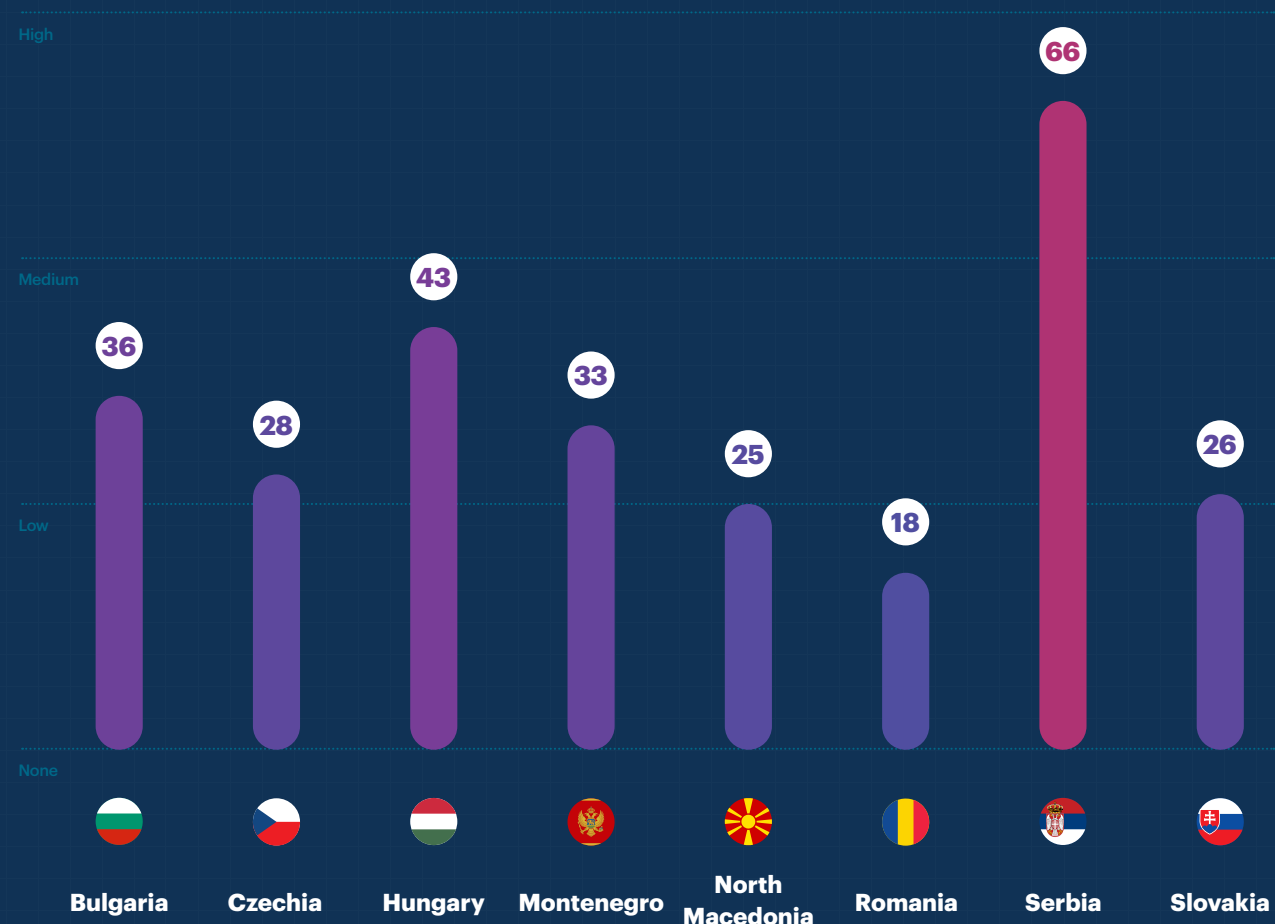
towards migrants and other minority groups. The inability to distinguish between “liberalism” as a concept and “liberal policies” contributes to the success of demagoguery and “othering” in further polarizing these societies. A total of 41% of respondents from analyzed countries think that liberal democracy 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.

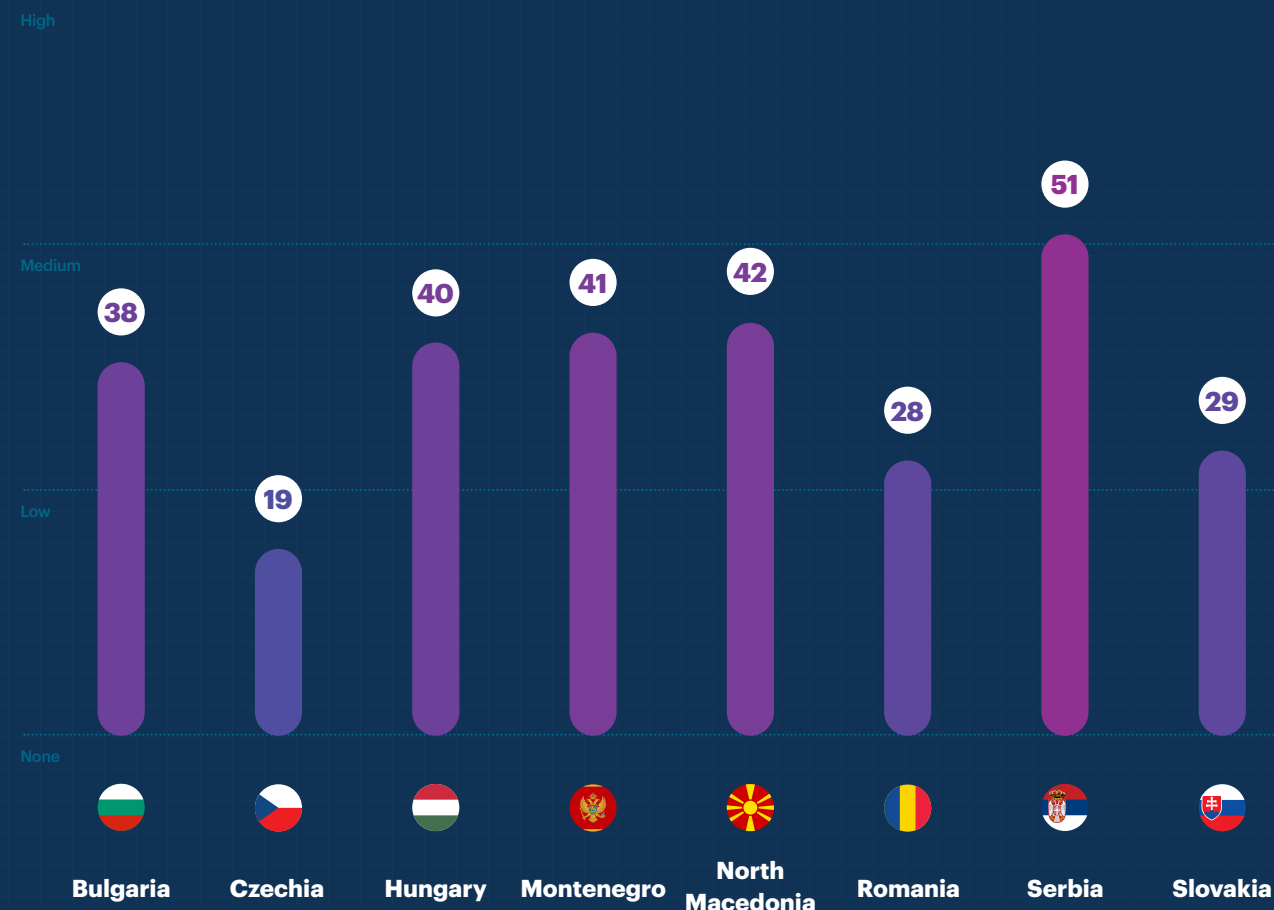
In terms of the extent to which Beijing and the Kremlin have been successful in promoting their interests through close cooperation agreements or political PR in the analyzed countries, the Kremlin still holds significant sway in Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, while promotion 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.



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

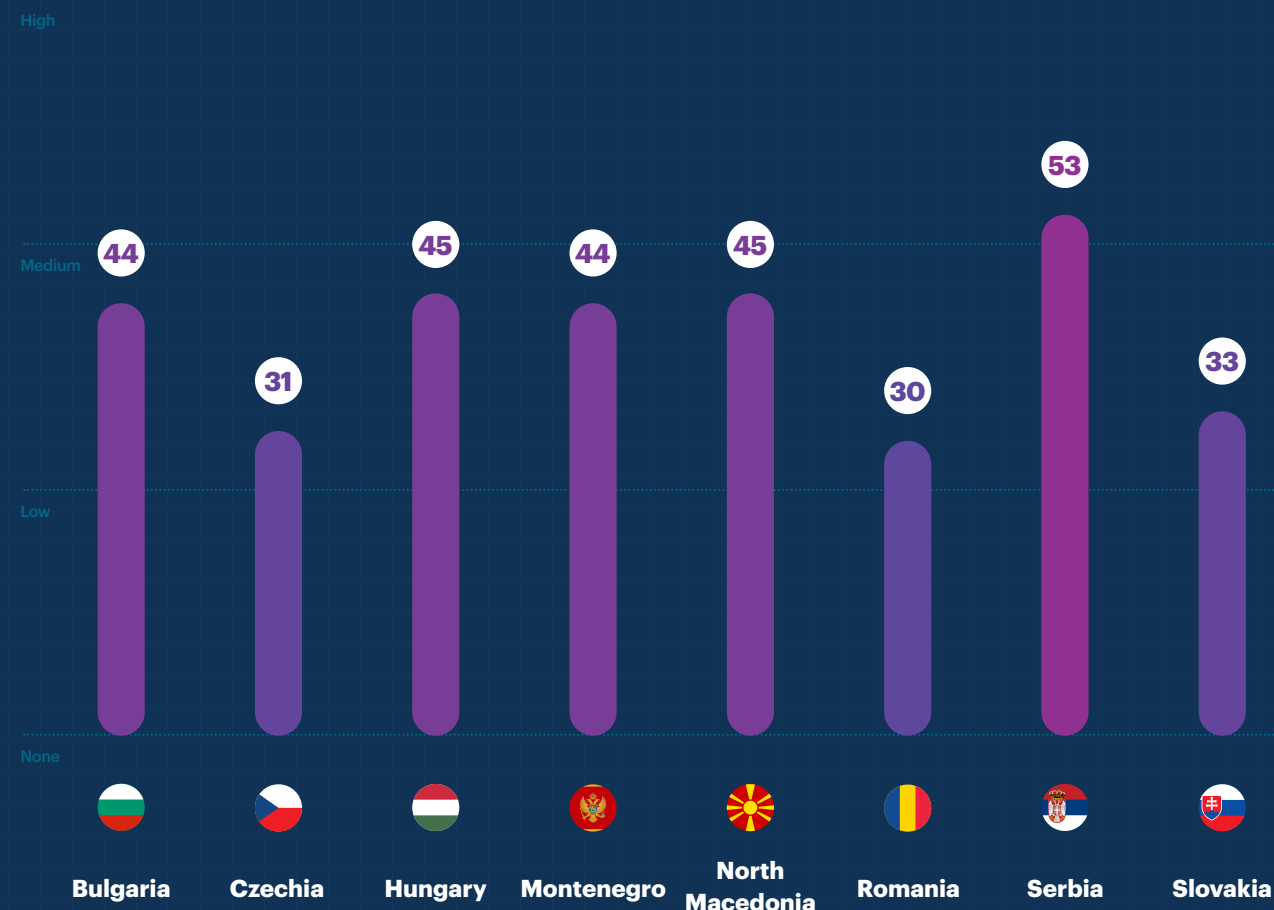
strategies across the region. Some countries (e.g. Czechia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia) clearly recognize the activities of foreign malign actors. Yet others (e.g. Hungary and Serbia) are reluctant to take a critical stance towards Russia and China and rather perceive them as strategic partners. 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.

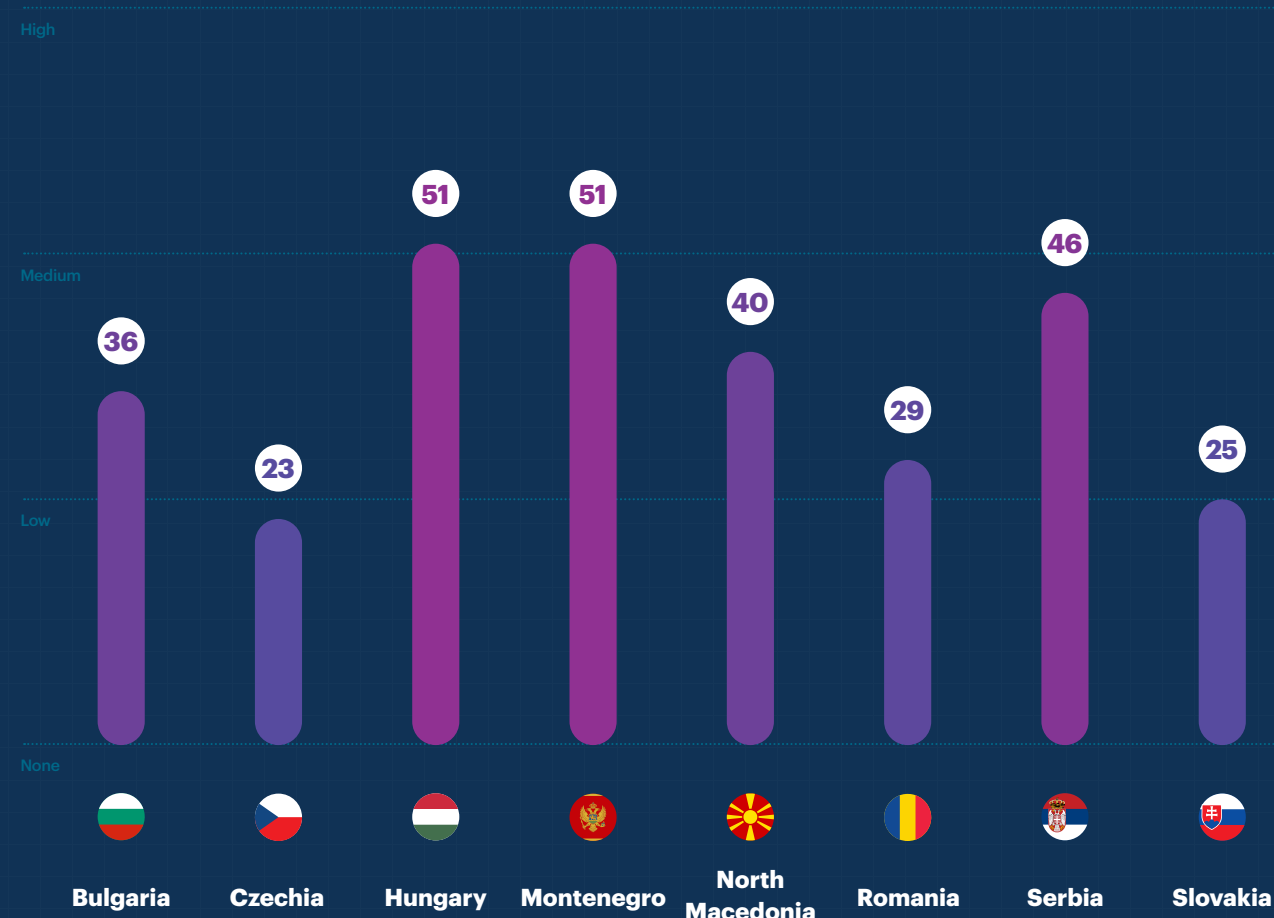
Also, perhaps unsurprisingly, the presence of disinformation in both the online and offline information space correlates with the presence and influence of pro-Kremlin actors and narratives in the media in the region. Given the information space in all monitored countries demonstrates varying degree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

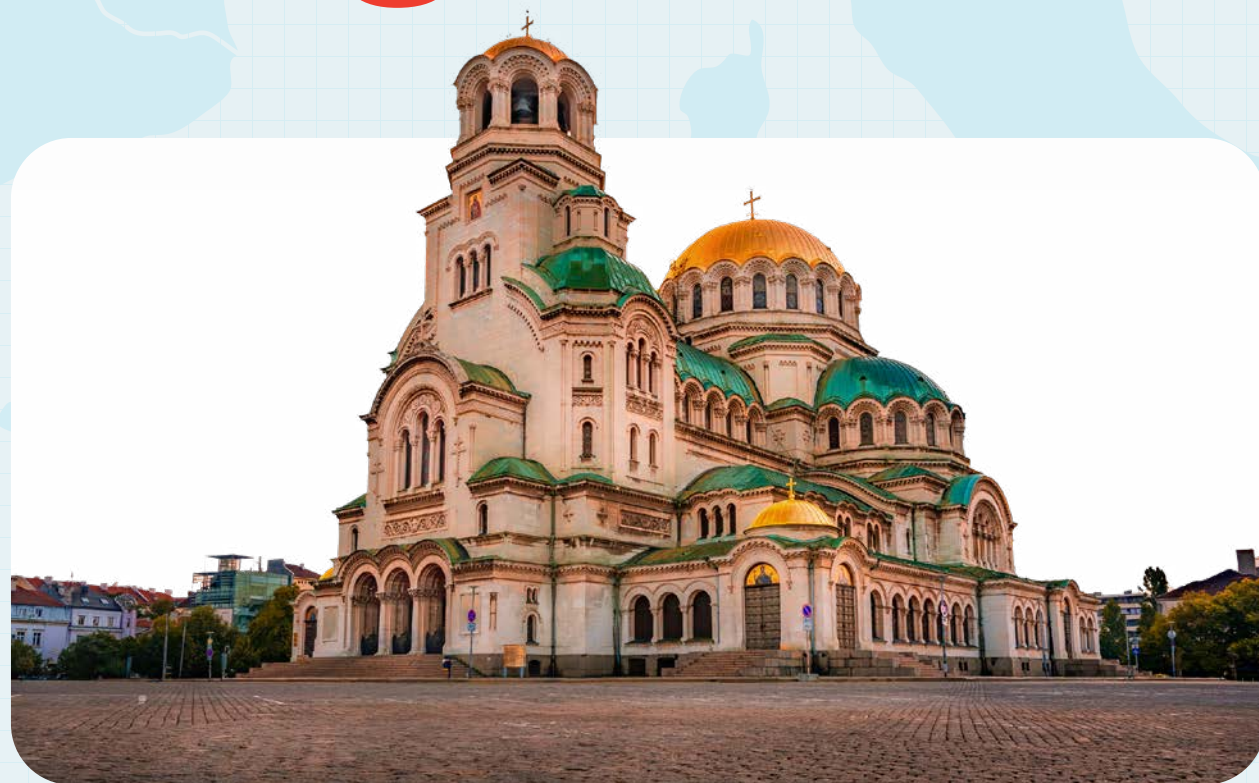
None of the countries analyzed can be considered to host truly sustainable civil societies. Sustainability is impacted by problems ranging from difficulties in securing funding to demonization campaigns aimed at democratic civil society actors and Kremlin-inspired legislative proposals to frame these 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 Bulgaria



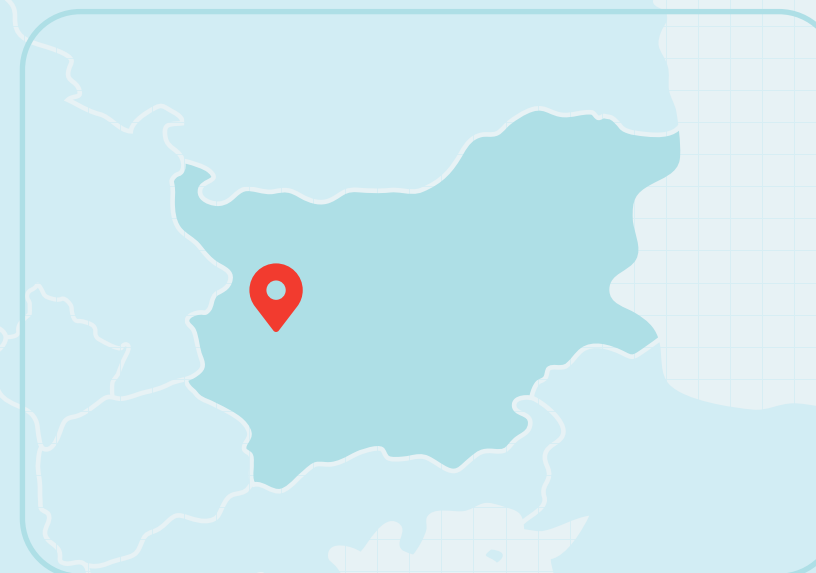
**B**ulgaria's vulnerability to malign foreign influence is readily visible in both public attitudes and the information landscape that contributes to the formation of public perceptions.

The country's deep-seated historical and cultural ties with Russia underpin this susceptibility. So too do the extensive pro-Kremlin influence in the media

sector and the ability of pro-Russian informal networks to influence Bulgaria's decision-making. Among the EU countries included in the Vulnerability Index, Bulgarian political parties were assessed as the most pro-Russian and least pro-NATO based on their public rhetoric. China is notably less visible in the public discourse, but given the country's growing economic interests in the region, it could become a major vulnerability in the future following or building upon Russia's playbook.

Despite these risks, several points of resilience buttress Bulgaria against foreign malign influence. The country's civic space endures

despite multiple political and social crises, providing the vital function of a democratic watchdog against frequent attacks and demonization campaigns. And although private interests have captured key democratic institutions, Bulgaria features a young but growing system of checks and balances that guarantees basic freedoms and civil liberties and provides the foundation for a stable democratic future.



↓ Vulnerability score

42  
/100

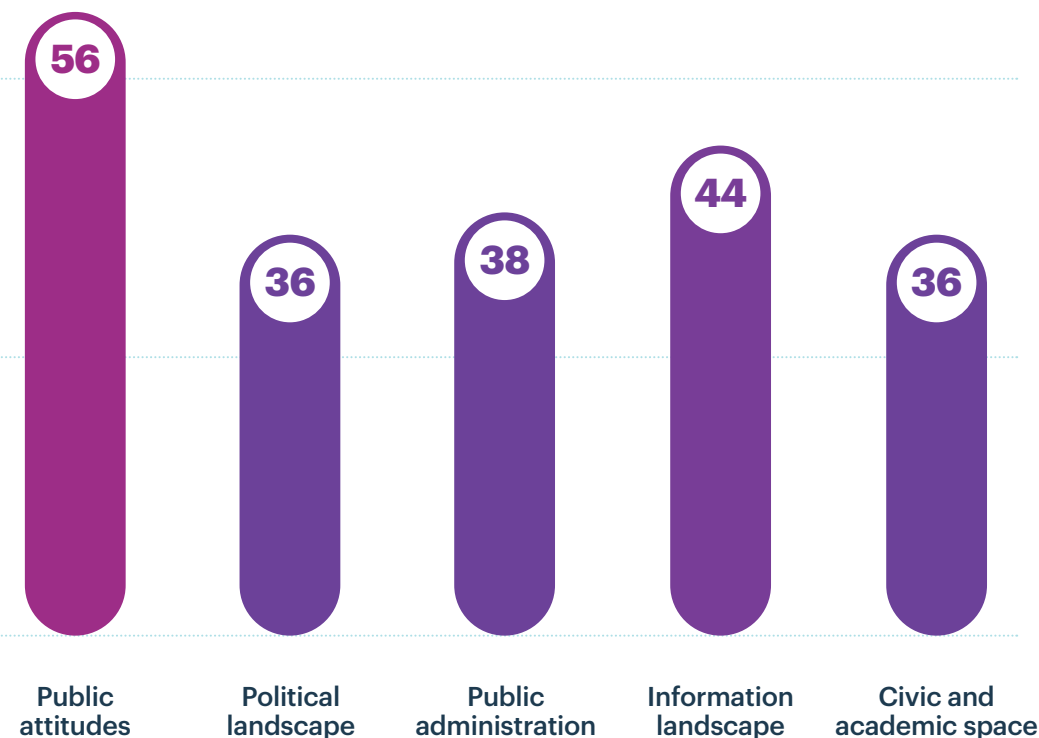
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None





# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

56  
/100

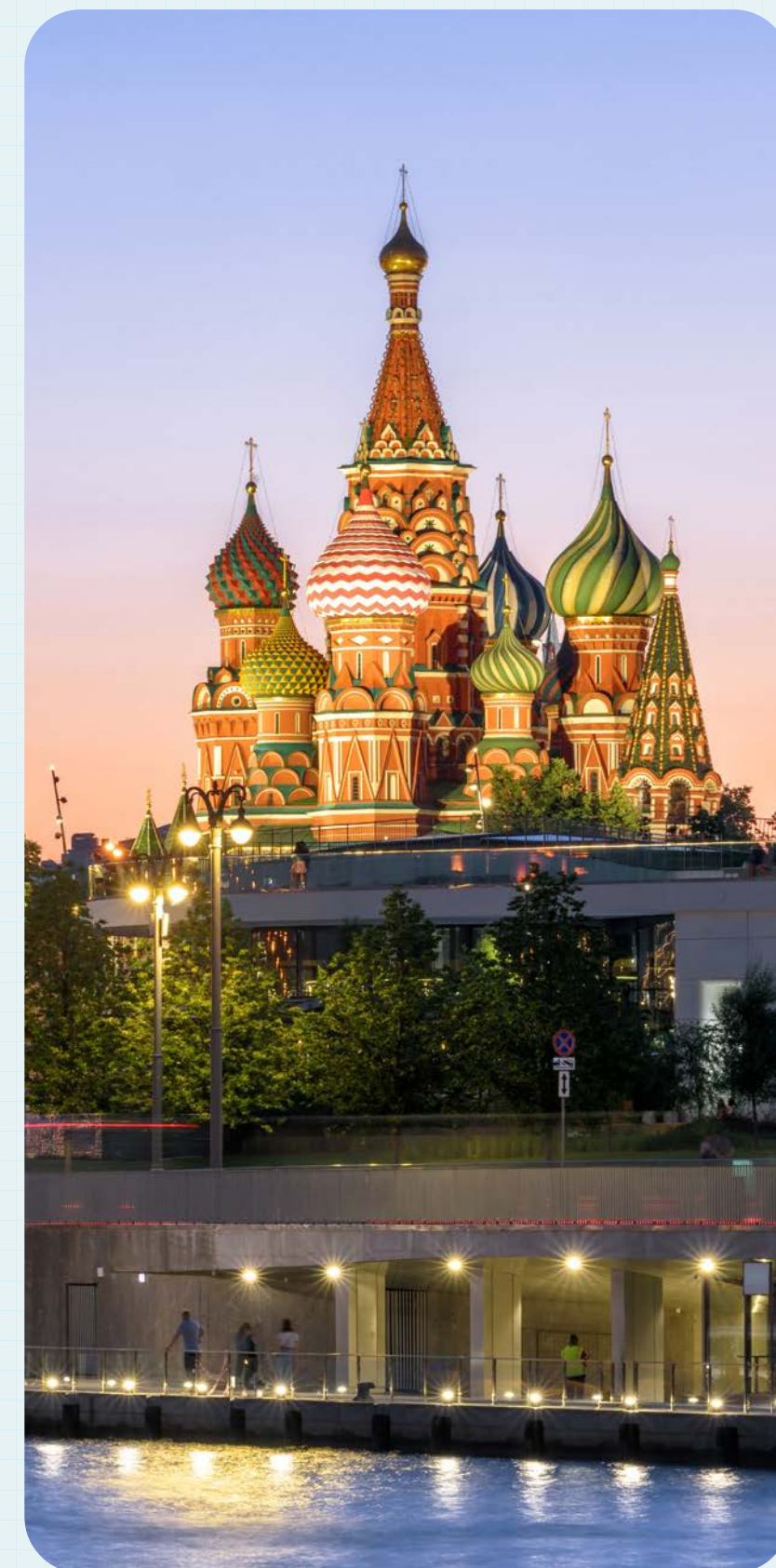
The Bulgarian public has long been vulnerable to malign Kremlin influence due to deep-seated historical and cultural ties,<sup>3</sup> susceptibility to conspiracy theories and disinformation<sup>4</sup> and a growing distrust in Euro-Atlantic integration, democratic institutions and liberal values.<sup>5</sup>



## Positive perception of Russia

While a majority of Bulgarians has consistently supported the country's membership in NATO and the EU since its accession to each organization in 2004 and 2007 respectively, an even greater majority holds favorable views towards Russia. In 2020, 84% of Bulgarians identified Russia as the country's Slavic brother nation and just 3% perceived Russia as a threat to Bulgaria (compared to 16% for the US).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 2021, 70% approved of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the highest support among the Central and Eastern European countries surveyed.<sup>7</sup>

Unmet expectations and social discontent linked to Bulgaria's uneven transition to democracy and market economy have contributed to growing distrust in the country's democratically elected governments. Most Bulgarians support democracy as a governance model in principle but are dissatisfied with how it functions. In 2020, just 20% of Bulgarians were satisfied with how democracy worked in their country, the lowest approval among the surveyed countries.<sup>8</sup> Other pessimistic attitudes abound too. A majority of Bulgarians, for example, think that oligarchs exert strong control over their government, remain skeptical that the country will improve regardless of the political figures in charge, and believe that democracy is dictated by elites who rule the world.<sup>9</sup> The antagonism of Bulgarians towards liberal values is often borne out of



the same conservative worldview promoted by Russian state-controlled media and renders the country particularly vulnerable to Kremlin influence operations.



## Ambivalence towards the West

Dissatisfaction with democracy also reflects unfavorably on perceptions about the West and Western organizations – they were, after all, expected to help provide solutions to Bulgaria's internal problems. Widespread anti-graft protests, which began in the summer of 2020, have contributed to a decline in EU and NATO approval, with both organizations criticized, including by pro-Western Bulgarians, for tolerating the country's endemic corruption issues.<sup>10</sup> Over 60% of Bulgarians see the EU as dictating policies to the country unilaterally (the most from six analyzed EU members).<sup>11</sup> Bulgarian society is also especially vulnerable to the type of anti-EU disinformation narratives that are consistently proliferated by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin entities and portray the EU as undemocratic and excessively bureaucratic.<sup>12</sup>



## Superficial understanding of democracy

★ **43% of adult Bulgarians believe that liberal democracy threatens their traditional values and identity.**

Focus group discussions with vulnerable groups in Bulgaria<sup>13</sup> conducted in early spring 2021 underlined the finding that democracy is widely accepted in its most basic sense as a multi-party system characterized by freedom of expression and regularly held free elections. But the discussions also suggested that there is less buy-in to the comprehensive idea of democracy as encompassing diversity, human rights, and civil liberties for all. Over the last few years, Bulgarian society has become more attracted to anti-liberal

beliefs including xenophobia, racism, and anti-LGBT+ attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Russian-grown propaganda is also exacerbating local prejudices against minority groups and liberal values in general.<sup>15</sup> Only 13% of Bulgarians indicated support for ensuring LGBT+ rights in 2020. Moreover, 43% of Bulgarians perceived liberal democracy as threatening Bulgaria's traditional values and national identity and 45% saw the West as promoting a morally corrupt and decadent lifestyle.<sup>16</sup>

## Pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation resonate

Bulgarians are susceptible to conspiracy theories and disinformation due to, among other causes, limited freedom, shoddy media quality,<sup>17</sup> and poor media literacy.<sup>18</sup> Disinformation narratives and false claims are disseminated by numerous pro-Kremlin entities including media outlets, politicians, and certain religious and non-governmental organizations.<sup>19</sup> The past decade has further witnessed a significant decline in media freedom due to the concentration of media ownership in the hands of politically-connected oligarchs with links to the Kremlin.<sup>20</sup> In the World Press Freedom Index, Bulgaria has been consistently ranked among the worst performing countries in the region since 2016 and recent studies show that most Bulgarians are aware of this unfavorable media landscape and do not consider media in their country to be free.<sup>21</sup>

Pro-Kremlin narratives are deliberately focused on exploiting Bulgarians' misconstrued beliefs about world politics, democracy, and liberal values and pro-Kremlin interpretations of history and nostalgia for the Socialist era.<sup>22</sup> Media articles spread by pro-Kremlin sources often claim that Bulgarians have chosen to ignore their shared history and culture with Russia to accommodate Western interests and norms. The disinformation narratives have also sought to persuade society that Bulgaria has seen little benefit from Euro-Atlantic integration, NATO forces are running rampant

across the countryside, and/or the EU is seeking to impose its liberal agenda values on the Bulgarian public.<sup>23</sup>

★ **46% think NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases.**

Conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives are a primary component of the Kremlin's strategy of influence and state capture in Europe, serving to undermine social and political stability, liberal-democratic values, and trust in democratic institutions and the Euro-Atlantic community.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, the Kremlin's information campaigns actively promote Russia as an alternative and viable axis of power to the EU and NATO, especially in terms related to the close cultural, linguistic, and religious ties between Russia, Bulgaria, and other Slavic nations in the region.<sup>25</sup>

## Beijing's activities under the radar

While public perceptions towards China are more ambivalent, Beijing was generally described in favorable terms in the focus group discussions conducted with groups vulnerable to propaganda.<sup>26</sup> China is largely seen through the prisms of its substantial economy, manufacturing capabilities, trading networks, and technological advancements and its population and territorial size. China has steadily increased its informational presence in Bulgaria but still primarily remains on the periphery of public opinion.<sup>27</sup>





# Political landscape

## Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

36  
/100



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The presence of a pro-Kremlin agenda in Bulgarian party politics comes through in a rather complex web, involving, on one side, direct influence from Moscow and, on the other, political parties seeking to attract voters and the support of key domestic businesspersons through pro-Kremlin policies<sup>28</sup>. Moscow, for its part, has utilized political opportunism and a flexible strategy towards direct political influence with shifting patterns of support for parties. The Kremlin seeks to influence parties across the entire

political spectrum in Bulgaria.<sup>29</sup> Domestic political support for Moscow, meanwhile, is fostered by state capture networks comprised of people from both Russian and Bulgarian oligarchic circles and holding considerable sway over political parties.<sup>30</sup> The extent to which the Kremlin is directly involved in influencing decision-making, nevertheless, remains unclear in part due to the opaque nature of these processes and weak public oversight institutions.

## Well-established political parties

While there are over 130 officially registered political parties representing a wide variety of political positions, only 12 parties and/or coalitions have entered the Bulgarian Parliament since 2016.<sup>31</sup>

Two groups of parliamentary represented political parties have been increasing Bulgaria's vulnerability to Kremlin influence. One consists of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), a splinter party from BSP representing a faction around former Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and former Interior Minister Rumen Petkov. BSP, notably, is a successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party and has never fallen below third place in a general election since 1990. It was the largest opposition force in parliament in the past two governments led by the Citizens for European

Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party. The Kremlin maintains cooperation agreements with BSP and ABV, and supports the parties publicly.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, neither of the parties espouses outright Euroscepticism or anti-NATO sentiments. Instead, the parties have leveraged their established political positions to essentially work alongside GERB, the United Patriots (UP), and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) to consistently promote large Russia-led energy infrastructure projects.<sup>33</sup> Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, BSP has also promoted the Sputnik V vaccine,<sup>34</sup> called for the lifting of sanctions against Russia<sup>35</sup>, and emphasized that the Istanbul Convention is antithetical to Bulgarian culture by restating numerous Kremlin-inspired narratives against the international agreement.<sup>36</sup>



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## Nationalist elements

The other vulnerable group consists mainly of smaller nationalist parties including Ataka, which has been part of the UP coalition and by extension part of the GERB-led coalition government from 2017 to 2021, and the Volya ('Will') movement. These groups have championed outright pro-Kremlin and anti-Western stances. Ataka's links to the Kremlin are well-documented and include an emphasis on close cooperation with the ruling United Russia party.<sup>37</sup> It has also been repeatedly alleged that the party receives financial backing from the Kremlin.<sup>38</sup> Ataka, notably, has been an important political player and influenced the appointment of key positions including the Minister of Economy.<sup>39</sup>

★ Bulgaria's political landscape is rather vulnerable to Kremlin's influence (58/100).

The UP coalition more broadly used its position of power to promulgate nationalist and anti-liberal messages regularly disseminated by pro-Kremlin media outlets.<sup>40</sup> The leader of the biggest group within this coalition, VMRO, and former Minister of Defense, Krassimir Karakachanov,





has denied that Russia is a threat, repeatedly refused to condemn the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policies, and criticized NATO and the EU for allegedly escalating tensions with Russia.<sup>41</sup>

Upcoming snap elections in November 2021 present a new opportunity for the Kremlin to expand its influence in the country through a relatively new nationalist grouping that is rising in the polls. The Revival party has been gaining ground each election since its founding in 2014. Though it only received 3% support in the July 2021 parliamentary elections, it is likely, according to current polls, to enter Parliament this time around.<sup>42</sup> The party actively disseminates Kremlin disinformation narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>43</sup> and has expressed strong opposition to Bulgaria's accession to the Eurozone. Revival is also a staunch supporter of closer economic and political ties with Russia and backs the Bulgarian withdrawal from NATO and the EU, which it describes as new colonial empires.

## Mainstream parties' ambivalence

Russian influence, however, has been most effective when channeled through mainstream parties such as GERB and MRF. Although they have routinely demonstrated their support for Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic integration and regularly voted in favor of sanctions and other deterrence policies targeting Russia at the EU level, they have also adopted a supportive posture towards Russia.<sup>44</sup>

The leaders of the two parties have, for example, been soft-spoken regarding the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy. GERB and MRF have, moreover, played a key role in paving the way for the Kremlin's capture of some of the most lucrative assets in Bulgaria, thereby making the country among the most economically vulnerable to Russian influence in Europe. With the support of MRF, the GERB-United Patriots coalition government embraced most recent large-scale Russia-led energy projects, TurkStream and the Belene Nuclear Power Plant.<sup>45</sup>



The political party, "There is such people" (ITN), led by Slavi Trifonov, a popular television host and showman, won the most seats in the July 2021 elections, but has refrained, as of yet, from providing a clear description of its foreign policy priorities. Despite a pro-Western posture, Slavi Trifonov has never condemned the Kremlin's malign activities in Bulgaria and has reiterated popular narratives about Russia's historical role in Bulgaria.

The Democratic Bulgaria coalition ranks as the most resistant mainstream political party to Kremlin malign influence. The party has adopted the most critical stance towards the Kremlin. Democratic Bulgaria's leader, Hristo Ivanov, is a strident supporter of a comprehensive overhaul of the judiciary and the creation of an anti-corruption legal framework that will close wide governance gaps that have undergirded Kremlin influence in the country.

## Corruption as a tool of influence

The Kremlin has been able to promote its strategic economic interests in Bulgaria by working, in particular, in tandem with oligarchic networks that have captured the most important institutions in the country. Both GERB and MRF have repeatedly been embroiled in corruption scandals, some linked to Russian projects, and have quashed governance reforms that would help address the country's vulnerabilities to malign Russian influence.<sup>46</sup> In June 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned one of the most influential MRF MPs, Delyan Peevski, under the Global Magnitsky Act for regularly engaging in influence peddling, bribing of government officials, embezzlement of public funds, and other acts of high-level corruption.<sup>47</sup>



✪ 16 of 22 experts surveyed think that parliamentary actors have so far been unsuccessful or only somewhat successful in promoting Beijing's interests in Bulgaria.

## Spies not welcome

At the same time, however, following considerable pressure from NATO partners, Bulgaria has increasingly turned to exposing and prosecuting Russian spies and Bulgarians conducting espionage for Russia over the past couple of years.<sup>48</sup> Nikolai Malinov, leader of the pro-Kremlin Revival of the Homeland party, was charged with spying for Russia in 2019. Konstantin Malofeev and Leonid Reshetnikov, that same year, were banned from entering Bulgaria due to their subversive activities and connections to Malinov. In 2020, furthermore, three Russians were charged with the poisoning<sup>49</sup> of a Bulgarian arms dealer (Emilian Gebrev), which occurred back in 2015. A total of six Russian diplomats were expelled from Bulgaria in 2020<sup>50</sup>.

## Beijing's political influence still limited

China, for its part, has been seen growing its economic and political presence in the CEE region over the past decade.<sup>51</sup> China has become more active in Bulgaria, for example, by leveraging the same political-economic networks that have enabled Russian disinformation to penetrate the information space.<sup>52</sup> Chinese political influence in Bulgaria, however, has generally remained limited, with China focusing its efforts on other countries and regions, such as the Western Balkans and Western Europe, a dynamic which is always subject to change.<sup>53</sup>



# Public administration

## Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

# 38

## /100



On pressure from the EU, Bulgaria has initiated a series of reforms to strengthen anti-corruption policies and the independence of the judiciary over the past six years, but none has resulted in any palpable change. In 2017 and 2018, Bulgaria carried out a comprehensive overhaul of its legal and institutional anti-corruption framework. However, the implementation of the new policies has been marred with political appointments that have infringed judicial impartiality and independence, and have turned anti-corruption institutions into political instruments with no democratic legitimacy. Key state bodies have gradually seen their independence whither. Left purposefully understaffed and under-budgeted, regulatory institutions have become easy prey to the capture of private interests.<sup>54</sup>

## Vulnerabilities to corruption

Country progress reports by the European Commission<sup>55</sup> and various corruption assessment reports<sup>56</sup> indicate that the capacity and quality of government institutions in Bulgaria have been progressing tepidly. In the Transparency International 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, Bulgaria was the lowest ranked EU country (alongside Hungary) at 69<sup>th</sup> of 180 countries globally. Around 48% of Bulgarians thought corruption had increased in the prior 12 months, one of the highest levels in the world concerning perceptions about the growth of corruption. Close to 50%, moreover, perceive the government as corrupt and 67% view parliament members that way.<sup>57</sup>

According to the European Commission's country reports, the effectiveness of the judiciary system has improved but the effectiveness of criminal investigations, the efficiency and accessibility of the judiciary through e-justice tools, and the overall low public trust in anti-corruption institutions remains a difficult challenge for Bulgarian authorities.<sup>58</sup> With regards to administrative corruption, studies underscore that 19% of Bulgarians claimed they paid a bribe for public services in the previous 12 months.<sup>59</sup>

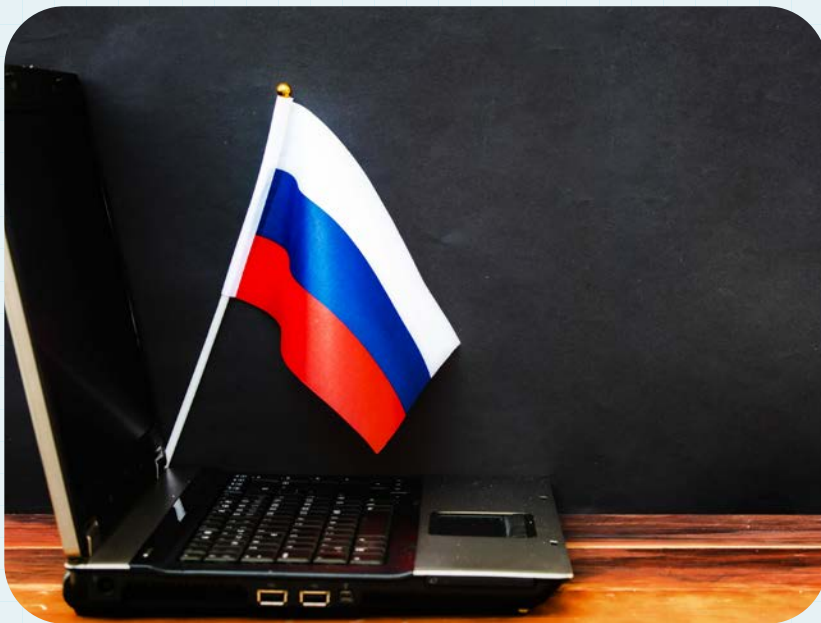
In attempt to strengthen anti-corruption policies, several existing institutions were merged to establish the Commission for Counteracting Corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (KPKONPI).<sup>60</sup> The Commission,<sup>61</sup>

however, has been deemed, by some, as partisan given that it has conducted investigations targeting opposition politicians, independent journalists, and even high-level members of the judiciary including the Chairman of the Supreme Court of Cassation.

★ According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Bulgaria is one of the most corrupt EU countries.







## Approach to hybrid threats

Government authorities are largely unaware of or choose to ignore the large extent of hybrid threats emanating from foreign authoritarian influence. Threat perception regarding the malign activities of foreign actors is practically non-existent on the regional/local levels of the public administration.<sup>62</sup> The Bulgarian public sector, consequently, is highly vulnerable, lacking systematic resilience mechanisms to withstand a potential hybrid operation. Interviews with governance and anti-corruption experts underscored that Russia has been exploiting and further exacerbating the dysfunctionality, inefficiency, and lack of transparency that characterizes key institutions (e.g. in energy, defense, transportation, and regional development ministries, anti-trust regulators or relevant parliamentary commissions).<sup>63</sup> This abuse of widespread

governance deficits in these institutions serves to expand Russia's economic and political influence. To achieve its strategic objectives, Russian companies entrench existing state capture networks that have an outsized influence over the country's decision-making.<sup>64</sup> Interviewed experts identified state capture as one of the key bottlenecks preventing the establishment of a comprehensive institutional approach to countering malign foreign influence towards government institutions and the country's politics and economy.<sup>65</sup>

Hybrid threats have been recognized as an important foreign policy and national security issue in strategic documents but no specific legal

framework has currently been put in place to counter the problem. The relevant policy framework for countering foreign influence rather only incorporates strategies offering little to no effective applicability. And strategy documents that attempt to define foreign influence or interference sparsely mention Russia or China at all<sup>66</sup>. Although the Bulgarian security services have reported on the activities of foreign malign actors including that of Russian intelligence agencies, there has been no effective prosecution of these operations (e.g. the cases of Nikolay Malinov,<sup>67</sup> Andon Mitalov,<sup>68</sup> and Emiliyan Gebrev<sup>69</sup>). That said, the security agencies of allied NATO and EU countries have provided increased attention to the matter, particularly in light of the espionage scandals concerning Malinov and Mitalov and action taken against Delyan Peevski under the Global Magnitsky Act (the cases, though not directly related to Russian influence, indicate increased US foreign policy interest in combating corruption in Bulgaria and the region). While Russia has been grudgingly put on the radar of selected Bulgarian law enforcement institutions over the past few years, Chinese activities have remained largely ignored, and Beijing is not perceived as a potential threat or security challenge by relevant security institutions.

★ **Beijing and its activities are not perceived as a potential threat or security challenge by relevant security institutions.**



## Election integrity

The integrity of elections and the countering of foreign meddling in elections remains a vulnerability concern, given governance gaps, even though foreign funding and the involvement of foreign actors in this space is officially prohibited.<sup>70</sup> No specific precautionary measures have been initiated to identify potential vulnerabilities and safeguard the election process. The level of election bribery, based on reports by the Central Electoral Commission,<sup>71</sup> remains especially high but these are related to petty corruption and make no mention of foreign interference. 16 of 18 surveyed experts pointed out that the independent electoral oversight body lacks the capacity, both in terms of people and knowledge, to investigate potential incidents of foreign interference or funding of political parties/candidates. Existing transparency measures, furthermore, are often not effectively enforced.<sup>72</sup>

★ **Majority of surveyed experts think that the Bulgarian electoral oversight body lacks the capacity to investigate potential incidents of foreign interference.**

# Information landscape

## Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

44  
/100



**B**ulgaria is one of three CEE countries covered by the Index plagued by a problematic media environment (the country ranked 112<sup>th</sup> in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index).<sup>73</sup> Yet societal mistrust of the mainstream media in the country declined from 54% in 2020 to 46% in 2021<sup>74</sup>. This shift is most likely connected to political developments, with Bulgaria undergoing a whirlwind of elections and successive caretaker governments in 2021. This process has seen the more than a decade-

long rule of the GERB political party come to an end and a marginal restoring of trust in the government and democratic institutions.

Ever since the 2008 financial crisis, however, reputable Western investors have gradually exited the Bulgarian media space. This departure enabled a few domestic oligarchic networks to concentrate media ownership.<sup>75</sup> Media revenue has also become more dependent on government public procurement contracts. Media outlets, consequently, have been transformed

into political tools used to besmirch political opponents, business competitors, journalists, and activists. This strategy is exemplified by the media-assisted creation and later demise of the fourth largest Bulgarian bank in 2014, CCB (KTB),<sup>76, 77</sup> and the largest betting conglomerate in 2020.<sup>78</sup>

## Lack of transparency

Although there is a legislative framework on media ownership transparency (the law on the Mandatory Deposit of Printed and Other Publications,<sup>79</sup> the Ministry of Culture's registry, and the Council of Electronic Media register for radio and audio-visual services), it has been poorly implemented and failed to prevent ownership concentration or the obfuscation of the ultimate ownership of media outlets.<sup>80</sup> Regulatory mechanisms, notably, were designed to purposefully protect some players and harm others on the market. A 2019 amendment, for example, imposed fines for non-disclosure of ownership that disproportionately impacted smaller media companies.<sup>81</sup> The

lack of information about the financing of media budgets is further exacerbated by the use of hard-to-trace corporate ownership structures, which include offshore-registered subsidiaries characterized by only nominal ownership.

Control over advertising has presented a particularly blunt instrument for media influence.<sup>82</sup> Media viewership data is contradictory on account of different methodologies (marketing vs. statistical) and inherent bias. People-metrics agencies cooperate with different media groups and there is a tendency to skew results in their favor.<sup>83</sup>

★ **Bulgarian information landscape suffers from relatively high information manipulation and disinformation contamination (55/100).**





The issue of transparency is also present when it comes to state advertising contracts. Since there is no specialized legislation on the distribution of state advertising to media outlets, favoritism, censorship and distortion abound.<sup>84</sup> Direct state transfers (subsidies)<sup>85</sup> and indirect subsidies<sup>86</sup> (such as tax exemptions or arbitrary public procurement contracts) to private and public/state-owned media (Bulgarian National Radio and Bulgarian National Television) make the media market highly dependent upon government support and can be used to provide preferential treatment to selected political actors. Lavish EU budgets for promoting European financial support to Bulgaria have also contributed to the capture of editorial content and policies of Bulgarian media. The government is able to conduct direct negotiations with digital media outlets, eschewing competitive procedures and enabling the government to use large communication budgets as a form of leverage vis-à-vis media outlets.<sup>87</sup>

The Bulgarian advertising market is dominated by ten large companies whose combined revenue of around BGN 300 million (~EUR 152 million) represents two-thirds of the turnover of the entire media sector.<sup>88</sup> Television generates the largest revenue streams<sup>89</sup> followed by online media (which increased its advertising intake by 25% year-to-year from 2018 to 2019),<sup>90</sup> and radio and print media (each with less than 5% of the advertising market).<sup>91</sup>



## Russian influence on the Bulgarian media market

The poor media environment and the lack of clear regulations on corporate involvement in media financing facilitate malign foreign influence that seeks to penetrate the Bulgarian media. Russia has leveraged its corporate ties to Bulgarian oligarchic networks, encompassing media outlets known to spread disinformation that can influence high-level decision-making.<sup>92</sup> Russian-owned companies lack a significant presence, in terms of a direct corporate footprint, in the media sector, but the Kremlin's indirect footprint can be seen in the editorial content of numerous Bulgarian media companies whose owners have developed strong political and economic links with Russia. Some major

newspapers (e.g. Standart), small television networks (e.g. Channel 3 and BSTV), and two political party newspapers (Duma, published by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and Ataka, published by the nationalist party of the same name) have staked out vehemently pro-Russian stances.<sup>93</sup>

Bulgarian government support for large-scale Russian projects, including the Belene nuclear power plant, South Stream, and the Turkstream gas-pipeline, moreover, has nudged mainstream and public media outlets into pro-Russian narratives as they vie to preserve government access. Russian cable television channels (e.g. Channel One Russia, TV

Center Russia, and Ohota I Rybalka) also find a popular audience among Bulgarians. Many of these Russian language channels are represented by the former BSP official Nikolay Malinov, who is also the Chairman of the National Movement "Russophiles", a sprawling network of loosely connected non-governmental organizations across the country.<sup>94</sup> The movement advocates the close alignment of Bulgaria with Russian cultural, political, strategic, and economic interests. Malinov has been awarded numerous state honors by the Russian Federation including the Order of Friendship in 2019 even as he was put on trial in Bulgaria for espionage.<sup>95</sup>

✪ 16 of 21 surveyed experts think that there are specific journalists, editors or programmes which regularly promote the pro-Kremlin interests in Bulgaria.

## China's growing media footprint

In terms of the dissemination of Chinese content, a few major examples stand out. China Today has become a recent addition to the Bulgarian newspaper market<sup>96</sup>, focusing entirely on Chinese domestic and foreign policy developments. The editor-in-chief of the newspaper is a prominent member of the BSP and owns and publishes several pro-Russian newspapers in Bulgaria.<sup>97</sup> The chair of China Today's editorial board, meanwhile, is none other than the last director of the Bulgarian communist party security services' political police (prior to 1989). One of the largest Bulgarian dailies, 24 chasa, further maintains a column, financed by Radio China International, specifically dedicated to China. Local media networks are becoming more receptive to Chinese (dis) information narratives, a pattern particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Outlets, like China Today, have sought to draw attention to the overlaps in Russian and Chinese positions in international affairs – this fits a broader coordination campaign between the global (dis) information strategies of Russia and China.<sup>98</sup>





# Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

36  
/100



The vulnerability of the civil society sector and Bulgaria's academic community to outside influence has increased in recent years. Bulgaria's Civil Society Sustainability Index score<sup>99</sup> has declined from 3.3 in 2016 to 3.5 in 2020, situating the country in the middle of the pack in Central and Eastern Europe. Bulgarian civil society thus remains vulnerable to outside influence relative to global benchmarks.<sup>100</sup>

## Demonization of civil society

Important actors from Bulgaria's civil society have been vocal in addressing state capture and authoritarian drift<sup>101</sup>, declining freedom of the press, and disinformation narratives propagated by local and foreign (mainly pro-Kremlin) groups. Yet numerous cases (potentially growing in number) involving politically motivated/backed pressure on CSOs have been reported.<sup>102</sup>

The entire liberal civil society sector has been demonized through targeted smear campaigns and opinion dissemination (e.g. from experts with extreme views and sometimes apparent Kremlin links).<sup>103</sup> A notable example concerns attacks on

the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018-2019, which gained direct support from several political parties.<sup>104</sup> Similar attacks led to the withdrawal of the National Strategy for Children 2019-2030<sup>105</sup>, which the government had prepared in collaboration with Bulgarian CSOs. The pressure campaign against CSOs has been most pronounced on gender issues and the LGBTI+ community. And the targeting, over time, has come to include the entire sector, with the role of CSOs as protectors of civil rights and service providers put under a threat.<sup>106</sup> The narratives deployed in these cases overlap closely with storylines either originating from or backed by Moscow.

★ According to 9 of 18 surveyed experts, Kremlin exercises rather significant influence on Bulgarian civil society.





## Role of the Orthodox Church

Russia is often presented to the public as bearing the flag of traditional Orthodox values and the clear alternative to Brussels (Western and CSO-supported) ideas. Bulgaria ranks among a few countries in the CEE region home to, like Russia, Orthodox Christianity as the most prevalent religious faith. Russian foreign policy has used this religious and cultural identity to exert soft power in Bulgaria.<sup>107</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church, in fact, has proven itself one of the most effective Russian propaganda tools in Bulgaria since Putin's rise to power 20 years ago.<sup>108</sup> The active participation of the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (IFUOCN) in Bulgaria since the late 1990s is emblematic of this relationship.<sup>109</sup> The IFUOCN was supposedly only created to bolster the Russian Orthodox Church's activities in other orthodox countries and streamline the friendship and unity of these countries.<sup>110</sup> Operating under the direct influence of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>111</sup> the organization, in Bulgaria, has primarily been responsible for the organization of events and the management of a religious website<sup>112</sup>. But many suspect that the organization, under the guise of religion and the defense of conservative values, has been seeking to extend pro-Russian propaganda and spread anti-EU and anti-US views.<sup>113</sup> The "Orthodox Book Week" in Varna, partially funded by IFUOCN, has been frequented by the



Foundation's Global Director, Valery Alexeev, who openly stigmatizes Western influence and Bulgarian membership in the EU.<sup>114</sup>

Soft power issues, such as cultural and education ties, have also become the focus of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria, as well as *Rossotrudnichestvo*,<sup>115</sup> which is a Russian education, culture, and science external support program. These institutions have been linked to the sponsorship of civic activities promoting often clear pro-Kremlin political propaganda. *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s activities are also generally linked to left-wing and some nationalistic political parties that advance a pro-Kremlin agenda.<sup>116</sup>

✦ 8 of 18 surveyed experts think that Russian Orthodox Church is a very influential actor facilitating Kremlin's interests in Bulgaria.

## Academic space as a vehicle for foreign influence

The Bulgarian academic space is highly dependent on government financing and remains generally underfunded compared to its CEE peers.<sup>117</sup> According to the Academic Freedom Index<sup>118</sup>, the Bulgarian academic space has declined over the past six years, a pattern particularly visible since 2019. Recent cases have revealed an increase in lecturers promoting anti-democratic and racist narratives<sup>119</sup>, corruption scandals involving the purchase of fraudulent university diplomas<sup>120</sup>, and institutionally endorsed and covered-up cases of plagiarism enveloping high-profile public figures<sup>121</sup>. A lack of adequate funding and governance deficits in the Bulgarian academic space render the system susceptible to malign foreign influence. This vulnerability pertains, in particular, to Russia, which has maintained a soft power role in academic circles in Bulgaria since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Similar concerns could come to characterize increasing Chinese financial support in light of the lack of stringent internal quality control.

China, for its part, seeks to wield influence through cultural and relationship diplomacy. This strategy is pursued through the strengthening of people-to-people relations among both national and local governments, reflected in, for instance, academic sector

partnerships. China has sought to cement a foothold in the Bulgarian academic space by opening Confucius Institutes in Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo. The relationship began in 2006 through the establishment of a partnership between Sofia University and the Beijing University of Foreign Languages backed by the Chinese Ministry of Education. In December 2013, the Confucius Institute at Confucius Institute in Sofia was even bestowed a special status as a "Model for Development" of other Confucius Institutes<sup>122</sup>.

✦ Although its academic space is vulnerable to foreign influence, Bulgaria scores rather well in the Academic Freedom Index (10/100).







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# Focus on Czechia



**C**zechia, since 1989, has developed into an open and inclusive democracy able to react to a diverse set of challenges including foreign influence

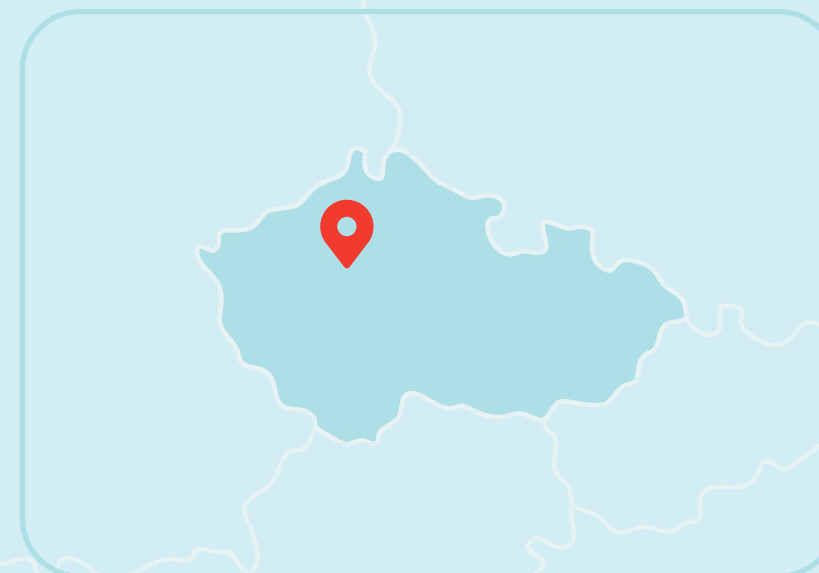
The adoption of pertinent laws and the establishment of several relevant institutions on these matters reflects this shift. The country's resilience, notably, lies primarily in the quality of the state administration, a vibrant

civic space, and a free academic environment.

Russian and Chinese influence is present in the country, exemplified in the Russian involvement in the Vrbětice explosion, the quarrel over the Koněv statue, and Chinese attempts of media ownership. These developments, nevertheless, have spurred pushback from the government and political figures. Proponents of cooperation with Russia and China, for their part, have generally failed in pursuing this agenda and their influence on decision-making remains limited.

The country's greatest vulnerability concerns the public's

long-standing Euroscepticism – Czechs view the EU least favorably of all societies in the region. These lukewarm perceptions of the EU could be exploited in the future, primarily through the information space where pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing interests operate and score occasional successes. But the country maintains the foundation necessary to withstand these moves. Czechia, in the near-term, will benefit from opportunities to further develop its resilience following the 2021 parliamentary elections, which witnessed the success of political parties cognizant of the threats posed by foreign malign influence.



↓ Vulnerability score

29  
/100

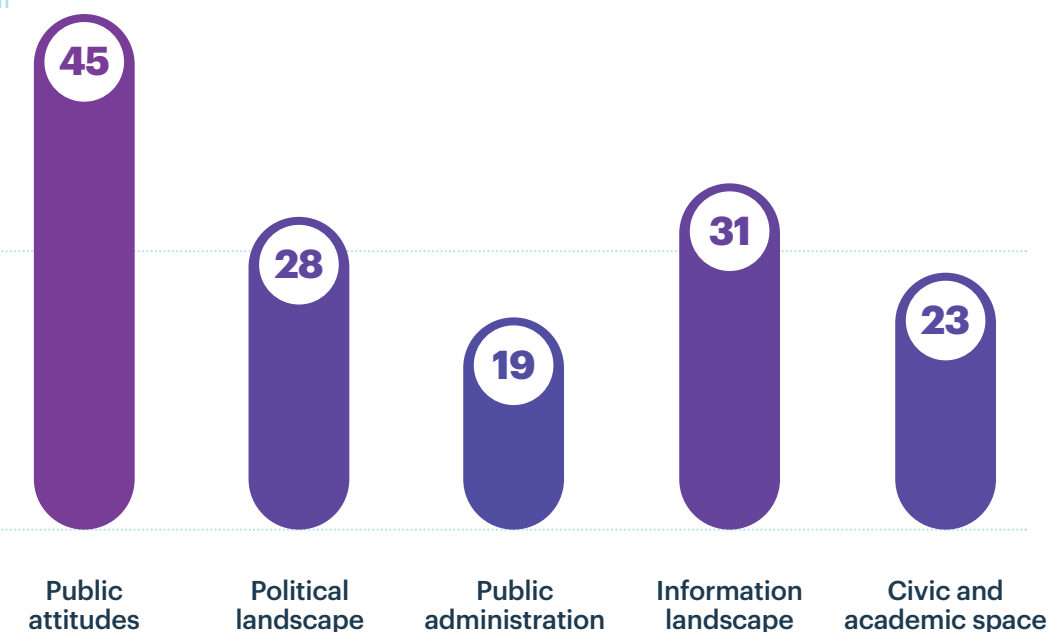
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None





# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

# 45

/100



**S**ocietal values and attitudes are central factors influencing susceptibility to foreign malign influence. Czechs, for their part, are generally inclined towards prioritizing their country's national sovereignty and wary of entities aiming to dominate the Central European space. In evaluating their relations with other states, Czechs tend to pragmatically emphasize economic benefits and largely express skepticism towards all ideological projects. Any steps perceived as pursuing the latter are likely to produce strong pushback.

Some segments of the population tend to react assertively, for example, to activities seen as advancing the import of Western liberal values. The rather narrow-minded approach of Czechs to contemporary global challenges and an inward-looking political debate could incentivize passivity, disinterest in foreign policy, and the desire to maintain a neutral position in conflicts. This mindset marks a key vulnerability of the Czech public and undermines the country's commitment to Western structures.

## No one will tell us what to do

The Czechs, undoubtedly, would prefer to chart their own course. According to GLOBSEC Trends 2021, 58% of Czechs perceive their country as situated between West and East and many refer to Switzerland as a role model.<sup>3</sup> These choices reflect the values that Czechs identify as important, including sovereignty, economic pragmatism, and cautious attitudes towards more powerful states and entities. They also underscore a rather complicated relationship with the European Union – the bloc is generally perceived unfavorably and judged to be a bureaucratic institution inflicting harm on the Czech economy through regulations and ideologically-driven projects. Yet only 21% of Czechs would vote to leave the EU if a referendum was held. Soft Euroscepticism, characterized by cynical attitudes towards EU activities and a feeling of powerlessness, is more common. This political backdrop has discouraged politicians from engaging actively in EU policymaking processes or investing energy and capital into explaining the benefits of membership. A certain distance, meanwhile, is also discernable in the relationship between Czechia and the United States, which is seen as a strategic partner by only 25% of Czechs. The US is also perceived increasingly negatively – Washington is identified as aggressive in its foreign policy and judged to be unable to solve problems at home. Criticism of the West, notably, is constituted



by ideological undertones - some voters associate the US and EU with failed ambitions to create multicultural societies and the imposed export of values that endanger Czech traditions. Translating this worldview into political action, however, is complicated by the Czech pragmatic approach to foreign policy and the prioritization of economic issues and other possible benefits that comes through these relationships. This is manifested through the relatively high support that NATO garners (72% of Czechs would vote to stay in the institution in a hypothetical referendum scenario), with the organization considered an important guarantee of the Czech Republic's national security and sovereignty.

★ **58% of adult Czechs think their country belongs to neither West nor East and should rather be somewhere in-between.**



## Russian influence well recognized

Russian attempts to influence Czech public attitudes also come up against formidable roadblocks including the past. The invasion by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 still strongly resonates in the public consciousness and is used as a point of reference when framing current events, such as the annexation of Crimea.<sup>4</sup> The perception that Russia represents a security threat (38% of Czechs share this view according to CVVM sociological agency research from June 2021<sup>5</sup>) was only further reinforced by revelations that GRU, the Russian secret service, was involved in the explosion at the Vrbětice military depot. This incident likely has dampened any prospects for an improvement in Russia's image in Czechia for the foreseeable future. Aside from security concerns, Czechs hold little regard for Russia in the socio-economic sphere, witness the minimal demand for the Sputnik V vaccine (only 5% of Czechs would prefer it<sup>6</sup>). Societal groups supporting Russia – such as so-called “communist nostalgics”, “panslavists”, and right-wing extremists – find themselves on the fringes of public debate.<sup>7</sup> A larger segment of the population, however, could be persuaded to back cooperation with Russia, spurred by economic benefits and/or disillusionment with the West.

★ **Czechs are particularly wary of Beijing's growing influence, with 87% disagreeing that the Chinese regime could be an inspiration to Czechia.**

## Unsuccessful strategies

Over the past several years, China has sought to benefit from the welcoming approach of Czech politicians. Beijing has attempted to improve its image, for example, through commitments of large investments. These promises, nevertheless, have failed to materialize and Chinese authorities have alienated certain segments of the electorate through its overreliance on relations with controversial figures (e.g. President Miloš Zeman) and its use of a heavy-handed approach in its attempts to influence public debate. The entry

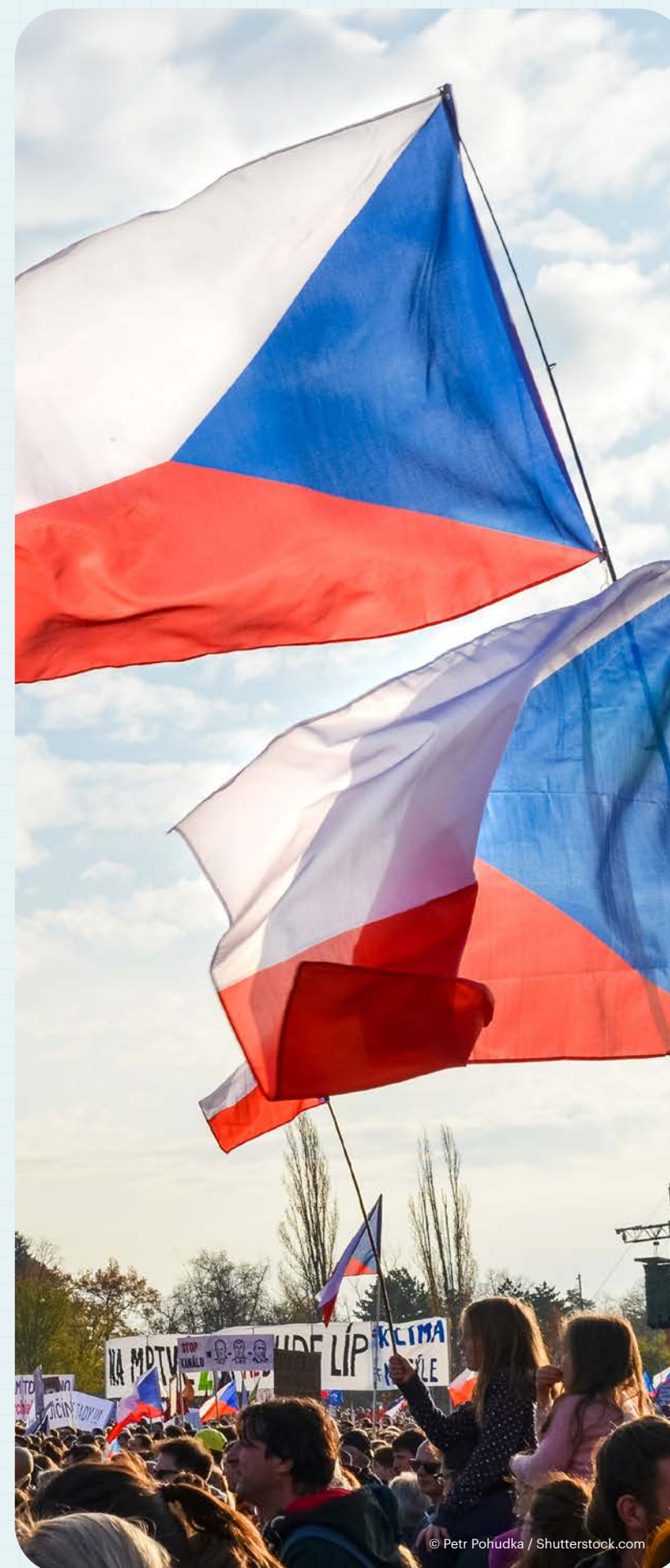
of Beijing into domestic political debate is reflected in the fact that 51% of Czechs perceive China as a security threat. Due to the above-mentioned factors, the Czech society still favors a rather neutral approach (68% of Czechs would prefer the EU to remain neutral in any conflict between the US and China), an orientation that China could exploit.



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## Choosing democracy

Czechs see democracy as the most preferable political system. At the same time, they view the current situation with skepticism and do not trust political elites. Certain segments of society would back adjustments to the current system to improve its efficiency (e.g. a majoritarian electoral system or a strengthened presidency). Authoritarian regimes find little overall appeal but score some points in presenting themselves as efficient and able to secure the socio-economic needs of their populations.



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# Political landscape

## Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

28  
/100



It is normal for a mid-size export-oriented country to be closely linked with foreign countries that seek to develop ties with the society, the political class, as well as presence in the media. These activities, however, must be distinguished from foreign interference. In analyzing Czech vulnerability to malign foreign influence, it is necessary to also recognize that domestic support can also be genuine, stemming from similar values, or pragmatic reasons (e.g. ambitions to secure good economic ties).

At the same time, other segments of the population are extremely wary about the interference of Russia and China in Czech affairs, constraining the maneuvering space of these countries.



## Role of Andrej Babiš and Miloš Zeman

The Czech political landscape has been dominated by Andrej Babiš, leader of the ANO political party and prime minister (at the time of writing).<sup>8</sup> Despite his pragmatism and lack of a comprehensive foreign policy strategy<sup>9</sup>, he supports the membership of Czechia in Western institutions. His government has, additionally, enacted several decisions seeking to limit the vulnerability of the country to the influence of foreign authoritarian regimes. These policies include the exclusion of Russian and Chinese companies from the strategic tender for the construction of a new nuclear plant in Dukovany<sup>10</sup> and significant limitations put on staffing numbers at the Russian embassy following revelations about GRU involvement in

★ **President Miloš Zeman's approach to China was the most favorable from all analyzed political parties and actors.**

the explosion of the Vrbětice ammunition depot.<sup>11</sup> President Miloš Zeman, who is generally sympathetic to Russia and China and has invested considerable energy into the improvement of ties with the two countries, also features as a crucial political figure.<sup>12</sup> Zeman's pertinence is only further reinforced by the alleged ties of his closest advisors to Russian business circles.<sup>13</sup> It is important, however, to note

that the Czech presidency, Zeman's primary tool for shaping public debate, is confined to mostly ceremonial powers.<sup>14</sup> His confrontational and contrarian approach – despite being rather unproductive in influencing actual decision-making – creates potential vulnerability though in undermining consensus and contributing to a lack of clarity about the strategy of Czech foreign policy.





## Chinese promises fail to materialize

China was recognized as a pragmatic economic opportunity a decade ago at a time when export to non-EU markets was defined as a priority in the national economic strategy.<sup>15</sup> The Czech government's continuation of this approach saw it willing to make political concessions to attract Chinese investments. Needless to say, despite these efforts, the promised investments mostly failed to materialize, a fact that had to be acknowledged even by their most ardent proponents including the Social Democratic Party and President Zeman.<sup>16</sup> The placement of narrow economic interest above national security concerns was vehemently criticized by right-wing opposition parties whose members also pioneered the establishment of more robust contacts with Taiwan.<sup>17</sup>

★ **China threatened the Czech Senate Speaker over his visit in Taiwan in 2020.**



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## Kremlin's limited influence

Unlike Beijing, the Kremlin can utilize its long-term familiarity with the region and appeal to genuine pan-Slavic sentiment, "communist nostalgia", and concerns about German influence,<sup>18</sup> narratives speaking to topics embraced by the Czech Communist Party.<sup>19</sup> Russia also benefits from its established role as a counterweight to the Western culture and value system found unappealing to certain subsets of Czech society. Russia, therefore, can be a beacon for

conservatives apprehensive about the deterioration of "traditional values" and the alleged Western importation of "neo-Marxism" or the "LGBT ideology".<sup>20</sup> These voters are also politically represented by the right-wing Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party which openly advocates for Czexit.<sup>21</sup> However, it is important to note that the two political parties mentioned above are smaller players on the Czech political scene (after October 2021 elections, the Communist Party did not get into the Chamber of Deputies and SPD with 9.5% election result will take 20 of 200 seats in the parliament). The Kremlin, consequently, can only draw on a limited number of ideologically aligned politicians.

## Consensus over friends and foes

Czech resilience against foreign state influence is further underlined by concerns expressed on the matter across the entire mainstream political spectrum. This consensus was exemplified, by the decision to establish the Permanent Commission on Hybrid Threats in the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>22</sup> This advantage of a common approach – contrary to the ambition of particular politicians to use foreign policy issues for gaining popular support – represents an important element of national resilience against foreign influences. Another key aspect of Czech resilience is a consensus with regard to the support of the NATO membership among mainstream political parties.

The relationship of political elites to the European Union is more complex, with the bloc often deployed as a strawman to galvanize voters, witness the migration quotas issue utilized by actors across all political stripes.<sup>23</sup> Yet genuine discussion about leaving the EU is off the table. Political elites, could be susceptible to underestimating possible risks concerning malign foreign actors due to a lack of expertise or even interest in foreign policy. The Vrbětice explosion and Chinese warnings about an official trip to Taiwan are emblematic of the fact that foreign actors are seeking to exert power.<sup>24</sup>

★ **The Chamber of Deputies established the Permanent Commission for Hybrid Threats in 2020.**

🗨️ **Czech politicians are generally able to recognize when somebody is trying to or not trying to influence them. Whether it's a tobacco lobbyist or, I don't know, an Egyptian ambassador, they understand that those people are not meeting them because of their splendid company, but because they want to put something in their heads.**

**Director of Czech think-tank**, focused on foreign policy issues

they could be the target of foreign influence. And the likelihood that they will respect warnings from relevant domestic institutions, consequently, remains high.



A significant number of Czech politicians, however, can draw on a solid institutional background in secret services or relevant ministries in cases where attempted foreign interference concerns them personally. This is largely dependent on the personal profile of the given politician. But as one interviewed expert pointed out, Czech decision-makers are broadly aware that



# Public administration

## Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

19  
/100



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The Czech public administration, bolstered by strong institutions, a proactive civil service and relatively open state policy, boasts the greatest level of resilience of countries examined. At the government level, countering the influence of malign foreign actors has generally fallen under the purview of the country's intelligence services, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense and specialized departments (such as the Cyber Forces Command of the Armed Forces<sup>25</sup>). Over the past year, multiple

state institutions have released several strategies addressing security developments, namely the National Security Audit and National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference, whereas the issue of foreign interference is also addressed by the Permanent Commission on Hybrid Threats in the Chamber of Deputies. A long-standing problem concerns the lack of coordination and communication among these institutions, complicating the configuration of effective responses to emerging security threats. A more

general challenge pertains to the lack of political guidance stemming primarily from the low interest of government officials in foreign policy and security. The inability of government to formulate strategic objectives vis-à-vis authoritarian states hampers the fulfilment of existing strategies and/or the meaningful development of government capacities.

★ Czechia is the least corrupt country from 8 analyzed countries, according to the Corruption Perception Index.

## Absence of lobbying regulation represents a blind spot

The Czech Republic ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the Corruption Perceptions Index in 2020, with its score worsening by five points since 2012. This outcome, though, was still good enough to put Czechia first among countries examined from the region.<sup>26</sup> A substantial vulnerability is constituted by the lack of regulations governing lobbying activities despite ongoing debate and legislative efforts related to this issue. According to experts interviewed,

politicians focus mostly on the legislative dimension of the topic and ignore other problematic areas such as the municipality and regional levels. The lack of proper legislation has contributed to the absence of a transparent registry of entities involved in lobbying activities. At this point, the only publicly available registry has been assembled by lobbying associations on a voluntary basis, rendering it incomplete.<sup>27</sup> A more general problem related to corruption concerns the insufficiently investigated informal influence of domestic businessmen on decision-making including policy towards authoritarian states.<sup>28</sup>





## Strategic infrastructure and money laundering

The key target of foreign influence are strategic projects focused on the development of critical infrastructure. In recent years, government institutions have started to prioritize the issue by, for example, issuing a warning against the involvement of the Chinese company Huawei in building 5G networks<sup>29</sup> and adopting a law on screening foreign investments in strategic economic sectors.<sup>30</sup> Interviewed experts pointed to a general lack of publicly available data about foreign investments as problematic. This is closely related to another significant vulnerability of the Czech Republic - money laundering. The Czech Republic is not the target destination of these activities but frequently serves as a transit country where changes of ownership take place - Czechia could even be one of the largest centers for these transactions in Europe according to some studies. The current restrictions

are apparently insufficient for averting these activities, enabling the Czech financial system to be misused by authoritarian states.<sup>31</sup>

“An obstacle in devising any regulation on lobbying is that it is difficult to clearly define lobbying activities. There are blurred lines between corruption and lobbying and between lobbying and academic/think-tank activities.”

**Activist** focused on corruption

## Loopholes in electoral regulation pose a vulnerability

The interviewed experts did not recall any proven and significant case of foreign interference in the past several Czech elections. However, Czech authorities take this possibility seriously. For instance, before the 2021 parliamentary elections, an interdepartmental working group was established tailored specifically to this problem. The unit is tasked with combatting moves, such as cyber-attacks or disinformation campaigns, that could put the reliability of electoral processes at risk.<sup>32</sup>

However, these measures only apply to disinformation related to electoral processes, leaving unaddressed the possibility that political parties could be targeted by smear campaigns.

A more significant vulnerability of the election system lies in the financing of individual parties. Though these processes are regulated, the enforcement of existing laws remains problematic. The requirement that transparent accounts be established, for example, can be bypassed by financing political subjects via associations governed under less stringent regulations. This scenario indeed occurred in the 2018 presidential elections during which Miloš Zeman's campaign was, in part, funded through the association “Friends of Miloš Zeman”.<sup>33</sup> The public was kept in the dark concerning the amount of money expended on

the campaign and the identity of the donors. And the bureau responsible for overseeing party financing proved to be particularly ineffective, with Zeman not facing any serious consequences for the campaign's lack of transparency.<sup>34</sup> A similar vulnerability lies in the participation of third parties in elections – the official registry is usually overlooked and not enforced. Even after registration, limited options are available to investigate whether groups represent a front to acquire funding from abroad (which is forbidden in all elections except for presidential campaigns).<sup>35</sup>

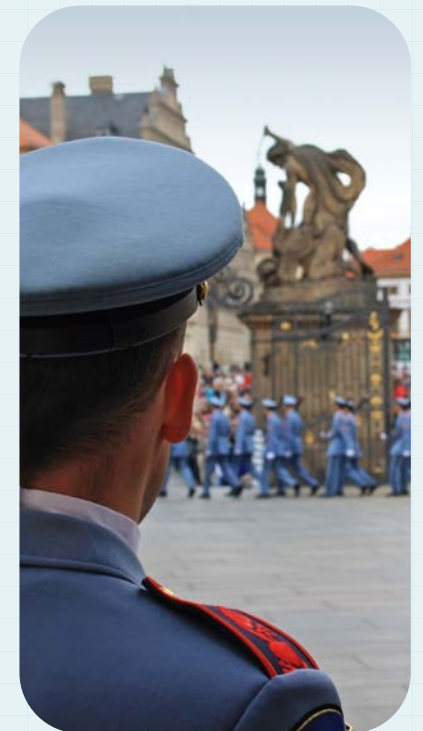
“Real life reactions and policy changes (in the security area) are not a priority of the government and there is also little political will to carry them out.”

**Journalist** focused on foreign policy and Central Europe

## Commitments awaiting implementation

Government institutions share the ambition to implement the latest developments in national security and adjust their capabilities to evolving threats. In 2016, a complex National Security Audit was published, with chapters focusing on the influence of foreign powers, hybrid threats, and cyberthreats.<sup>36</sup> While some of the recommendations were put to use, such as the establishment of the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats under the Ministry of Interior<sup>37</sup>, political elites showed limited willingness to support the fulfillment of all goals recommended by the Audit. State institutions have recently developed other successful initiatives tackling new security challenges such as the National Cyber and Information Security Agency<sup>38</sup>, Cyber Forces Command<sup>39</sup>, and legislation on investment screening.<sup>40</sup> These institutions work rather well despite their limited access to resources, stemming from a lack of political elite interest in security matters. In 2021, the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference was adopted.<sup>41</sup> Although the document covers the issue comprehensively, implementation again could suffer. This problematic cycle of planning, issuing strategic documents, and failing to fully implement them due to a lack of coordination and political will represents a threat to the development of truly robust Czech resilience, according to interviewed experts.

“In 2021, the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference was adopted.”





# Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

31  
/100



Czech journalists are facing similar challenges to those affecting the industry globally in seeking to chart out a sustainable economic model for the digital age. These financial challenges render reporters more vulnerable to the whims of local influential business men who may seek to buy out media outlets and use them to their advantage.<sup>42</sup> The personal integrity of journalists becomes paramount in this climate in determining the extent to which they bend to unwarranted demands. The Czech information landscape, overall, benefits from trusted and influential public broadcasting services.<sup>43</sup> It too, however, is facing significant political headwinds. The digitalization of the information space has undergirded the creation of numerous media projects focused on specific ideological and/or social issues. Foreign authoritarian regimes – mainly Russia – have already sought to exploit this fragmentation by using the conspiratorial and anti-establishment media ecosystem to put its stamp on public debate.<sup>44</sup>

These maneuvers to influence the Czech information space, however, have been met with resistance from a Czech journalism community that has dedicated significant attention to the issue.<sup>45</sup>

## Business influence

The weakening of media houses, combined with the departure of Western owners from the market, has allowed Czech influential businessmen to acquire control over all-important private outlets. This long-term development is, perhaps, best symbolized in the acquisition of Mafra, an influential media group, by billionaire and Prime Minister (at time of writing) Andrej Babiš in 2013.<sup>46</sup> The process was seemingly brought to its conclusion through PPF's 2020 purchase of the television station Nova.<sup>47</sup> Czech influential businessmen make no secret of the fact that the acquisitions are not merely business investments. As pointed out by Marek Dospiva of the PENTA financial group, ownership provides "assurance that it will be more difficult for anyone to irrationally attack us."<sup>48</sup> These expectations, nonetheless, tarnish the independent watchdog role of the media and pose a detrimental variable to the democratic political system.

## Public broadcaster preserves reliability

Public debate also suffers from increasing fragmentation of the digital media space, a development that has permitted the emergence of fringe projects tailored to narrowly-defined social and/or ideological groups. Despite these changes, media consumption habits generally remain relatively fixed, with television news still representing an important information source.<sup>49</sup> The public broadcaster continues to be the key player in the Czech information space, and remains largely independent and a reliable source.<sup>50</sup> Its independence, however, came under scrutiny in recent years when several members of its supervisory board called for the resignation of the director of Czech television due to an alleged conflict of interest.<sup>51</sup> According to interviewed experts, this accusation was rather intended to provide a pretext

to enhance the influence of government officials over public media. Any action therein would mark a significant setback to democracy in the Czech Republic.

“The strong position of Czech television in the media market is fairly unique not only compared to other Central European countries but also in the context of Europe as a whole.”

Academic researcher focusing on media in Central Europe



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# Journalistic standards

The decline in trust, which has seen the populace turn wary towards the media generally, affects all Czech media to a certain extent.<sup>52</sup> Surveyed experts, however, pointed out that this vulnerability can also be laid at the feet of journalists themselves. One source comes from self-censorship in media houses owned by local influential businessmen - this occurs when journalists report on affairs connected to the owners of their respective outlets. Another critical issue concerns the ideological bias of journalists - some are unable to properly cover problems plaguing people in rural and economically underdeveloped areas. This hindrance, in turn, can challenge journalists in developing trust among certain segments of the population. According to interviewed experts, this general sentiment about the non-impartiality of the journalistic community has likely been reinforced by controversial and/or misjudged statements from reporters on social media. Some journalists struggle to navigate whether their social media accounts are private or serve the promotion of their outlet, which can be a potential risk to the reputation of the entire media.<sup>53</sup> This could include, for example, the use of nicknames by politicians as occurred in 2018 on Twitter when a journalist called Tomio Okamura, chairman of Freedom and Direct Democracy, "Pitomio".<sup>54</sup>

99 The long-term influence of Russian propaganda is limited only to a specific segment of the population. In my opinion more dangerous is their capability to conduct short-term information operations effectively supporting their specific policy objectives.

Analyst focusing on information operations



# Pro-Russian networks

Foreign actors maintain a certain degree of influence within the Czech information space that allows them to conduct influence operations. Russian narratives, for example, proliferate through Sputnik's Czech affiliate to a web of approximately 40 conspiratorial and anti-system websites.<sup>55</sup> These fringe outlets can reach roughly 25% of Czechs seeking out an alternative to media mainstream sources. Pro-Russian propaganda, furthermore, is disseminated through more personalized channels including chain mail, private Facebook groups, and/or internet forums. These platforms attract upwards of around 10% of Czechs, all engaged in sharing and/or consuming content that they consider otherwise censored.<sup>56</sup>

★ Sputnik.cz had over 2.6 million views in April 2021 according to SimilarWeb.

# Future challenges

Beijing's foothold over the Czech information space was previously secured through a Chinese share in the ownership of the media company Empresa Media, with research finding that outlets owned by the company indeed tended to be more favorable to China than the Czech mainstream media.<sup>57</sup> Despite the fact that Chinese companies withdrew their stake in Empresa Media, this tactic could be employed by foreign actors again against a backdrop where most media houses are confronting a precarious economic climate. Any such move, however, is unlikely to go unnoticed - journalists pay considerable attention to foreign influence and bring attention to it in public debate.<sup>58</sup> This is not to say that space for further improved coverage is lacking. Mainstream outlets, for example, became a primary source of conspiracy theories regarding the sabotage of the Vrbětice ammunition depot by the Russian secret services. These institutions uncritically cited entities with a dubious reputation and failed to contextualize the story.<sup>59</sup>



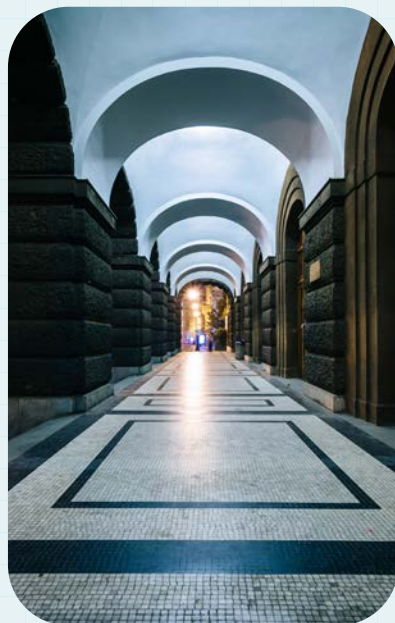


# Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

23  
/100



**C**zech perceptions concerning developments over the past thirty years in the country differ widely, contributing to societal fragmentation and obstacles to finding common ground on a unified national vision for the future. Despite this backdrop, civil society has flourished, evidenced by the numerous NGOs that have sprung up and served as vehicles for improving the lives of different communities and decision-making.

Though foreign malign actors typically use different channels for exercising their influence, it is still possible to find some NGOs that do the bidding of these regimes and rally their supporters.



## Fragmented society

The fragmentation of Czech society has become readily apparent over the past few years, witness the rough and tumble political campaign during the 2018 presidential elections. The STEM 2021 research project *One society, different worlds*, found that the creation of different political camps is associated with polarizing figures (such as current president Miloš Zeman) and reflects different

perceptions of the post-1989 Velvet Revolution trajectory of the country (including integration into Western institutions). This situation complicates the formulation of a common vision for future development, though no detrimental effect on the support for democratic political system itself results from fragmentation. The population is generally supportive of NGOs perceived as important actors (according to a 2019 survey, 75% of respondents either sympathize with or even occasionally financially support civil society actors).<sup>60</sup>

“ The ability for government institutions and civil society to cooperate varies depending on the area and openness of government employees to the dialogue. We lack formal channels that would frame this communication.

NGO worker

★ 26% of Czechs, according to a 2019 survey, actively support civil society.<sup>61</sup>



## Thriving NGOs

The grassroots inclination to self-organize has become habitual for citizens. In 2018, the number of registered non-governmental organizations amounted to 142,000, with 117,000 people (2% of all employees) working in the sector.<sup>62</sup> This robust dynamic allows the civil society to shape the lives of various communities and take an active role in the policy-making process. Interviewed experts, however, pointed out that, despite the growing network of NGOs, the whole sector still lacks the ability to speak with one voice and lobby for its interests. To a large extent, government institutions are devoid of established channels facilitating cooperation with civil society, resulting in uneven quality and dependence on personal connections. This represents a potential vulnerability - NGOs

★ In 2018, 142,000 NGOs with 117,000 employees were registered in Czechia.

would otherwise be able to detect threats that go under the radar of public institutions (this has occurred, for example, with respect to disinformation).<sup>63</sup> Apart from occasional criticism related to specific issues, mainstream political parties acknowledge the importance of NGOs. Fringe parties, by contrast, see some segments of the civil society (especially those focused on refugees and human rights) as an attractive boogeyman. The rhetoric of these parties gains

resonance with only a limited part of the population though (only 12% of Czechs are active opponents of NGOs<sup>64</sup>) and has failed to translate into concrete political action.

✚ Because civil society is essentially everywhere, it might be invisible at first glance. But, in fact, it plays an important role in a number of areas and it is often able to react to crises even quicker than state institutions.

Former director of a prominent NGO

## Pro-Russian sympathizers as a potential gateway

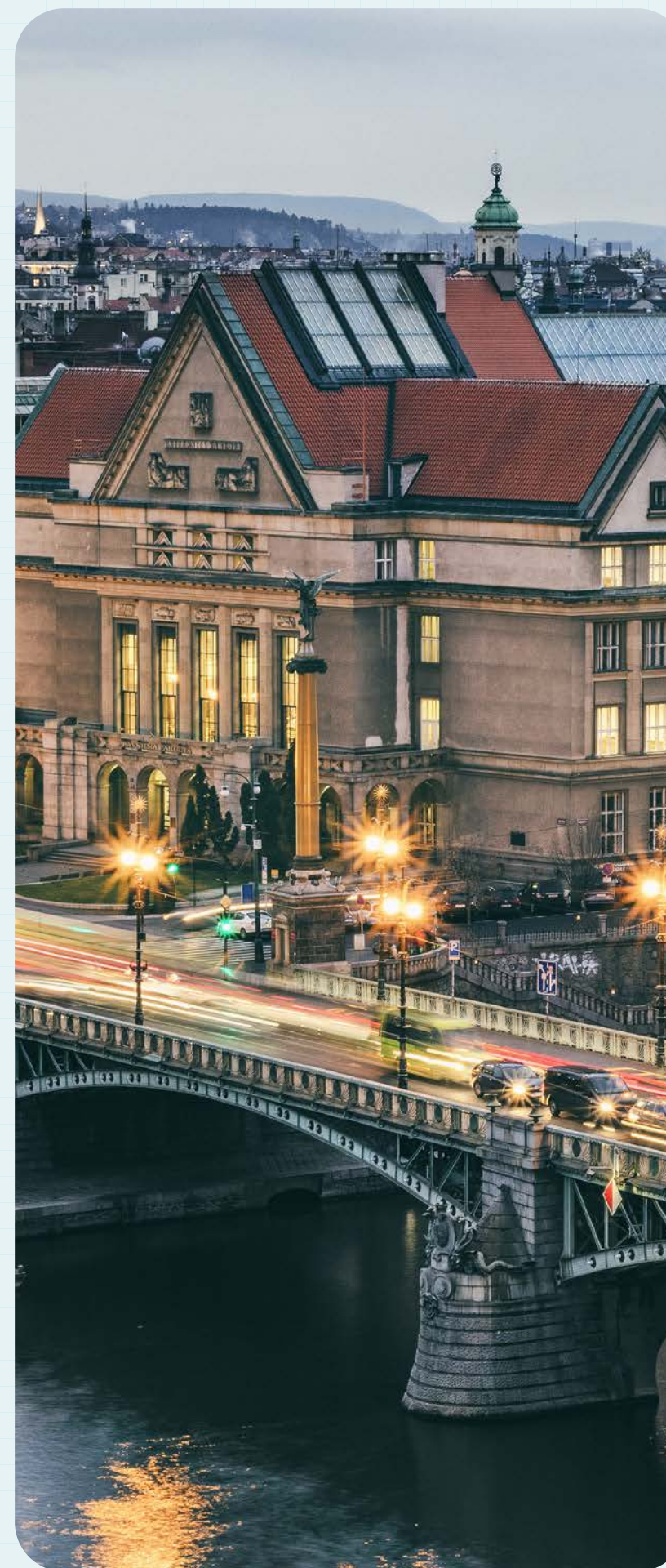
The influence of authoritarian states on Czech civil society remains muted - the promotion of the interests of these actors comes more easily through business or political lobbying according to interviewed experts. Russia could, nonetheless, benefit from the significant Russian-speaking community living on Czech territory, officially numbering 40,000 people.<sup>65</sup> This subset of the population was mobilized post-2014 and the annexation of Crimea found

some support from this group. Interviewed experts, nevertheless, note that this activation was rather short-lived and confined only to a smaller part of the community. More relevant civil society actors susceptible to foreign influence include NGOs gathering Russian sympathizers, such as Pan-Slavists or people nostalgic for the communist era. The self-organized militias established around 2015 to tackle threats related to anticipated migration waves represent a special case. People

associated with these entities created the Representation of the Donetsk People's Republic in 2016 (the Czech court disbanded the organization the following year)<sup>66</sup>, and they are suspected of providing guidance to volunteers who fight on the side of the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The Czech police is currently investigating whether these militias trained their members to conduct terrorist activities on Czech territory.<sup>67</sup>

## Chinese research influence

Chinese influence on civil society, meanwhile, is conducted through institutions that seek to shape its image favorably. The establishment of two Confucius Institutes in cooperation with local universities are emblematic of the approach.<sup>68</sup> Another attempt to influence Czech expert debate on China concerned the secret funding of a conference and research activities at Charles University - this development ballooned into a public scandal that saw several academic employees dismissed.<sup>69</sup> The Ministry of Interior, likely in response to the incident, published a manual against foreign influence for academic staff.<sup>70</sup> The think-tank Asiaskop (previously Sinoskop), established in 2019 with the aim of balancing polarized debate about China, stands out as an exceptional case. The institution, whose reliability was questioned by other sinologists, turns out to be funded by Home Credit, a company that boasts vast business interests in China.<sup>71</sup>







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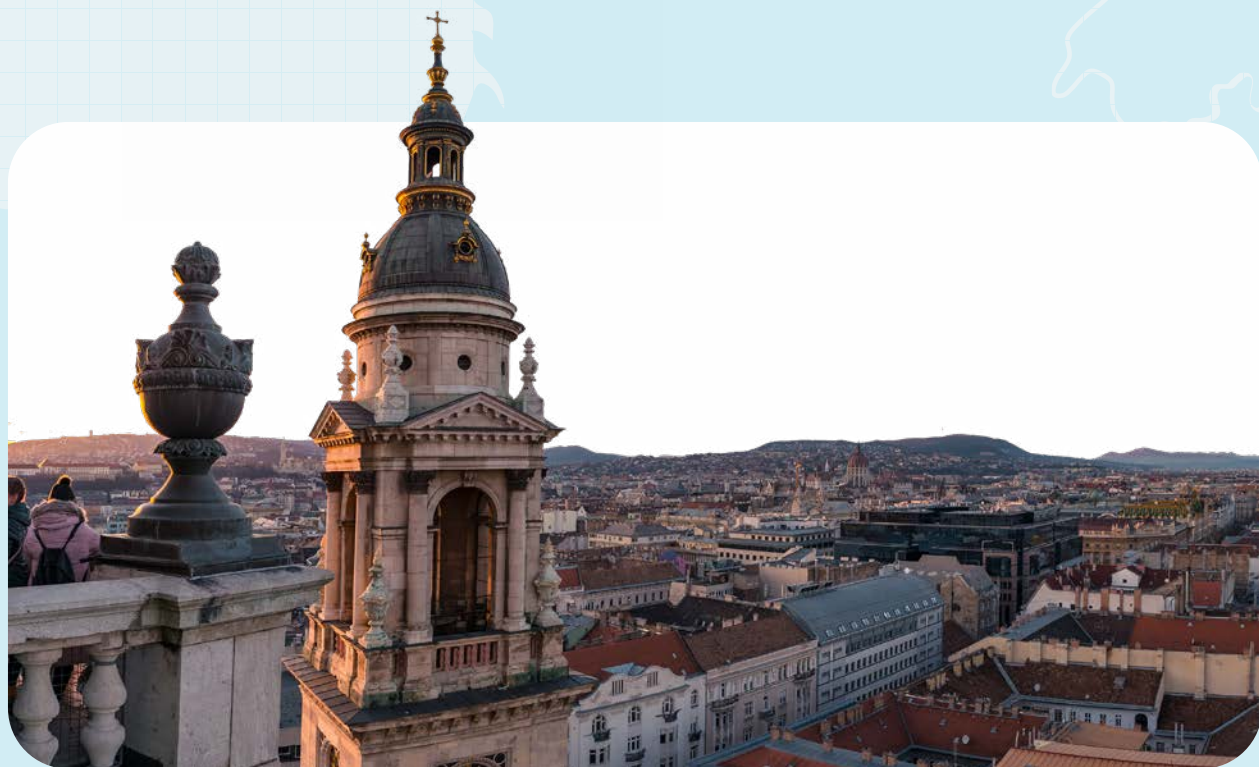
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# Focus on Hungary



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

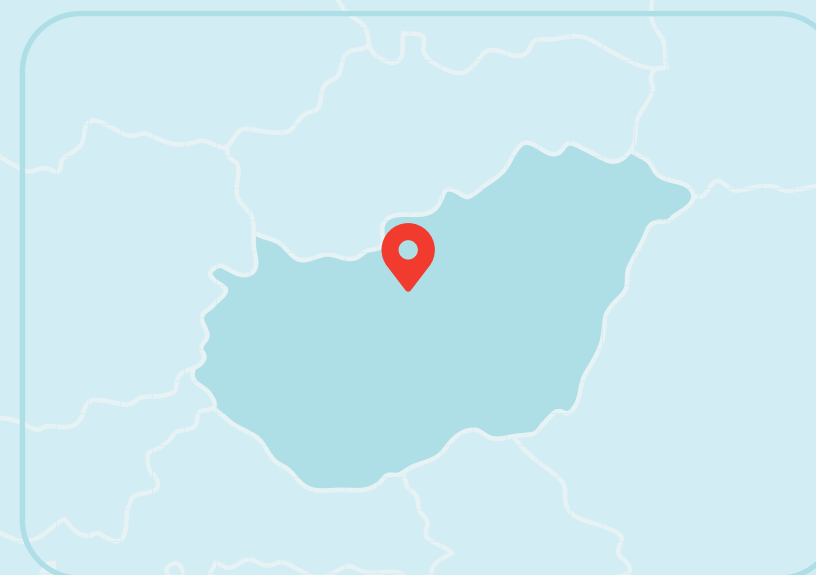
Government control over certain segments of the public sphere, in particular, has contributed to extreme political polarization and a severely weakened civil society, academic space, and information environment. Leading mainstream

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

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

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

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



Vulnerability score

44  
/100

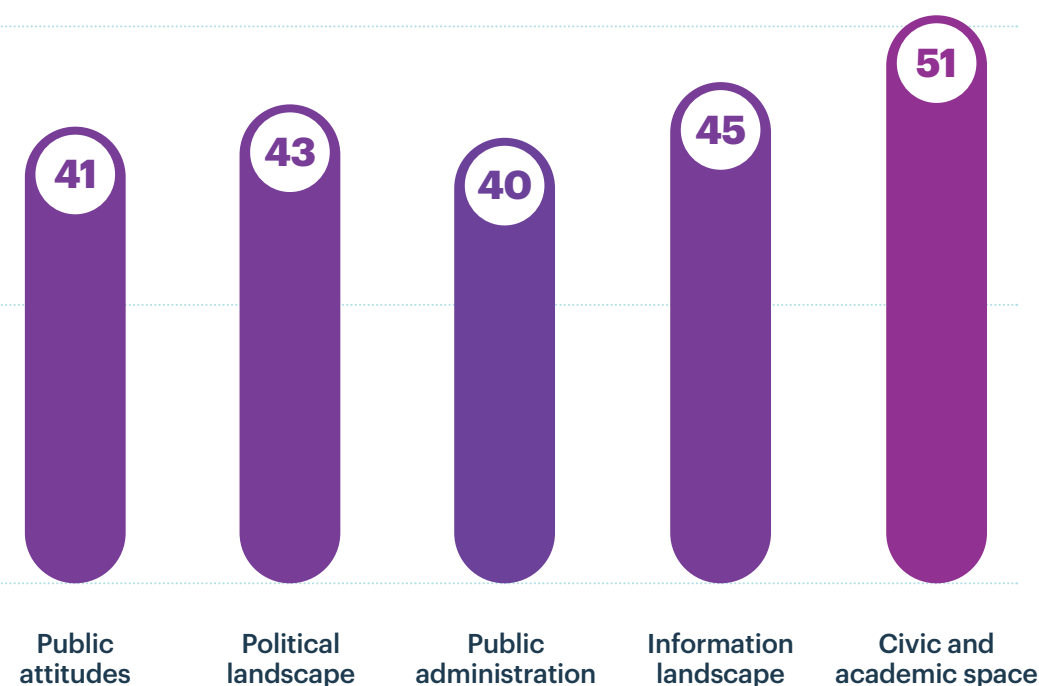
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None





# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

41  
/100



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

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

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

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

## The birth of grassroots support for the Kremlin's interests

Hungarians, responding to historical experiences, were traditionally rather skeptical towards Russia<sup>8</sup> due to Russian and Soviet forces, respectively, repressing the Hungarian

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

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

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

**Male, 37,**  
Hungarian focus group participant



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## A shift in 2010

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

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

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

Russia as a political, economic, and military powerhouse. This conclusion is underscored by Political Capital's research that found Hungarians highly overestimating the weight of Russia in world affairs.<sup>17</sup> Both Russia and China are depicted by media outlets as Hungary's friends, development models to emulate and crucial economic partners<sup>18</sup>, which can foster a perception that relations with these countries could bring increased prosperity to Hungary too. The constant overemphasis on the real or perceived military and economic power of Russia and China without any reference to the possible threats they pose (e.g. data access via Huawei 5G networks, dominance over certain

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



## Perception of democracy

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

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

✪ In 2018, 51% of Fidesz voters said Hungary should have closer ties with Russia.<sup>21</sup>

## Top-down influence on public attitudes

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

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

✪ In spring 2021, 68% of Hungarians were optimistic about the EU's future, while only 30% were pessimistic.<sup>22</sup>





# Political landscape

## Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

43  
/100



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

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

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

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

The country's EU membership is one of the few areas where the Hungarian ruling party's official policy and the opposition bloc find agreement. Minister for the Prime Minister's Office Gergely Gulyás, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, and Minister for Families Katalin Novák, among others, have all affirmed their support for EU membership.<sup>24</sup> Some voices within or close to Fidesz, however, such as House Speaker László Kövér,<sup>25</sup> also openly oppose EU membership.<sup>26</sup> Two political parties officially favor Hungary leaving the EU –far-right Mi Hazánk<sup>27</sup> and the far-left Workers' Party<sup>28</sup>, but neither appears likely to earn seats in the National Assembly.<sup>29</sup>

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

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

has launched multiple anti-EU campaigns based on manipulative claims<sup>30</sup> operationalizing the EU dictate narrative. House Speaker László Kövér has put this storyline to work: "We did not join an empire, we had enough of that when we were a Soviet client state, colony."<sup>31</sup>

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

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



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# Uncontested NATO membership

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

Opposition parties, meanwhile, are also supportive of NATO, according to their joint preliminary program.<sup>33</sup> The two extra-parliamentary parties, Mi Hazánk<sup>34</sup> and the Workers' Party, alone are advocating for leaving NATO.

Hungary has generally fulfilled or sought to meet its

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

**Viktor Orbán,**  
Prime Minister, 2018

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

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

## Eastern threat is close to the government's heart

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

🌟 **In 2017, Viktor Orbán predicted that due to transformations in the world, the EU-Russia relationship would improve.**<sup>41</sup>

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

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

## Pivot to China?

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

🗨️ **China should not be scolded by developed nations on human rights and the market economy.**<sup>44</sup>

**Viktor Orbán,**  
Prime Minister, 2017

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



## A common approach to Russia and China

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

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

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

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



# Public administration

## Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

40  
/100



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

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

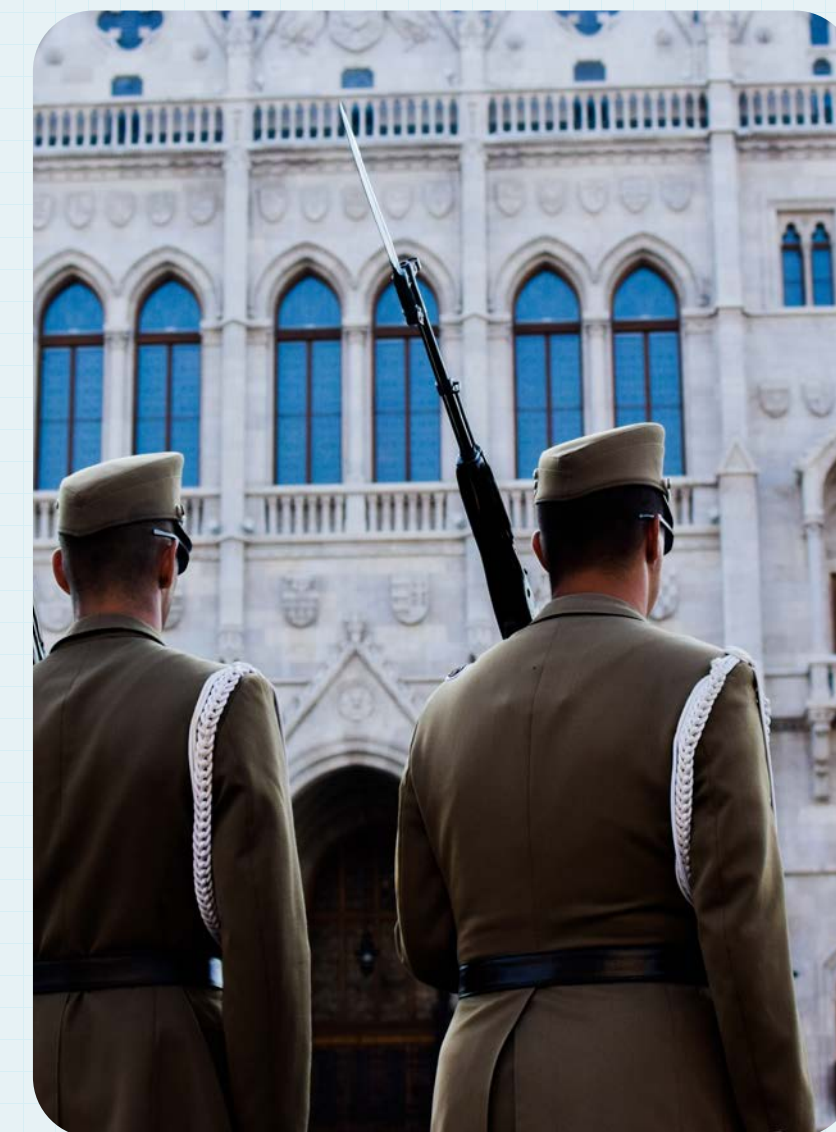
The European Commission's 2021 rule of law report on Hungary further put a spotlight on increasing concerns about judicial independence in the country including the selection of the president of the country's highest court (Kúria), despite the negative opinion of the National Judicial Council, and the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

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

## A severe lack of information on malign foreign influence

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

The 2020 National Security Strategy<sup>58</sup> lists EU and NATO membership as factors strengthening national security and pledges to maintain NATO cohesion and strengthen the EU's role in defense policy. While acknowledging "tensions" in the West-Russia relationship and China's increasing "resoluteness" on the international scene, it calls for pragmatic economic cooperation and dialogue on both counts. Information operations are mentioned only briefly in the document. The 2021 National Military Strategy<sup>59</sup> also acknowledges hybrid warfare and information operations as threats but withholds mention of any





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

★ **Hungary's ineffective lobbying law was repealed on January 1, 2011.<sup>60</sup>**

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

**Expert** on public administration

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

## Only combating low-level corruption

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

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

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



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

## Election infrastructure at risk

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

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

★ **The new election website crashed during the 2018 elections despite previous warnings that it would be unable to withstand the election night.<sup>66</sup>**

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

State institutions cannot generally be considered resilient to malign

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



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# Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

45  
/100



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

## Government's control of media

Fidesz-KDNP efforts to extend its grip on the media sector have also been apparent in the country's rankings on the World Press Freedom Index, with Hungary falling from 23<sup>rd</sup> place in 2010<sup>69</sup> to 92<sup>nd</sup> in 2021.<sup>70</sup> The ruling party has pursued a host of measures to restrict media independence in the country including legislative moves aimed at creating media oversight bodies packed with Fidesz loyalists subsequently aiding

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

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

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



★ **The manufacturer of Pegasus said they can sanction states abusing the product.<sup>78</sup>**



# The Kremlin's lack of interest in Hungarian fringe media

The results of the expert surveys suggest that significant space is given to pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing actors in both the public and mainstream media: 28 of 29 responses noted that some space is given to pro-Kremlin interests in public media outlets and 26 of 29 said the same about mainstream sources. One interviewed expert noted that this is likely due to the fact that respondents consider KESMA outlets as mainstream even though they solely disseminate Hungarian government views on relations with Moscow and Beijing. Another brought attention to the fact that the Chinese ambassador to Hungary has recently published several opinion pieces in pro-government dailies<sup>79</sup> and Magyar Nemzet recently published a long and friendly interview with Russian FM Sergei Lavrov.<sup>80</sup> These opportunities enable Russian and Chinese officials to disseminate their messages directly to the Hungarian population.

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



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

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

The number of pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing outlets is rather limited. Among these are News Front, supposedly connected to Russian intelligence services<sup>83</sup>, Orosz Hirek<sup>84</sup> or Moszkva tér<sup>85</sup>, which is edited, among others, by Gábor Stier, a long-time pro-Kremlin foreign policy journalist

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

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

# A vulnerability that offers an opportunity

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

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

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





# Civic & academic space

## Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

51  
/100

Hungary has become increasingly politically polarized over the past few decades,<sup>90</sup> leading to “tribalism”, a process that involves people rallying around the leader of a tribe and rejecting other groups. This phenomenon is especially impactful among supporters of Fidesz and the Democratic Coalition, the largest opposition party at the time of writing the report.<sup>91</sup> This political polarization, highest from the surveyed countries<sup>92</sup>

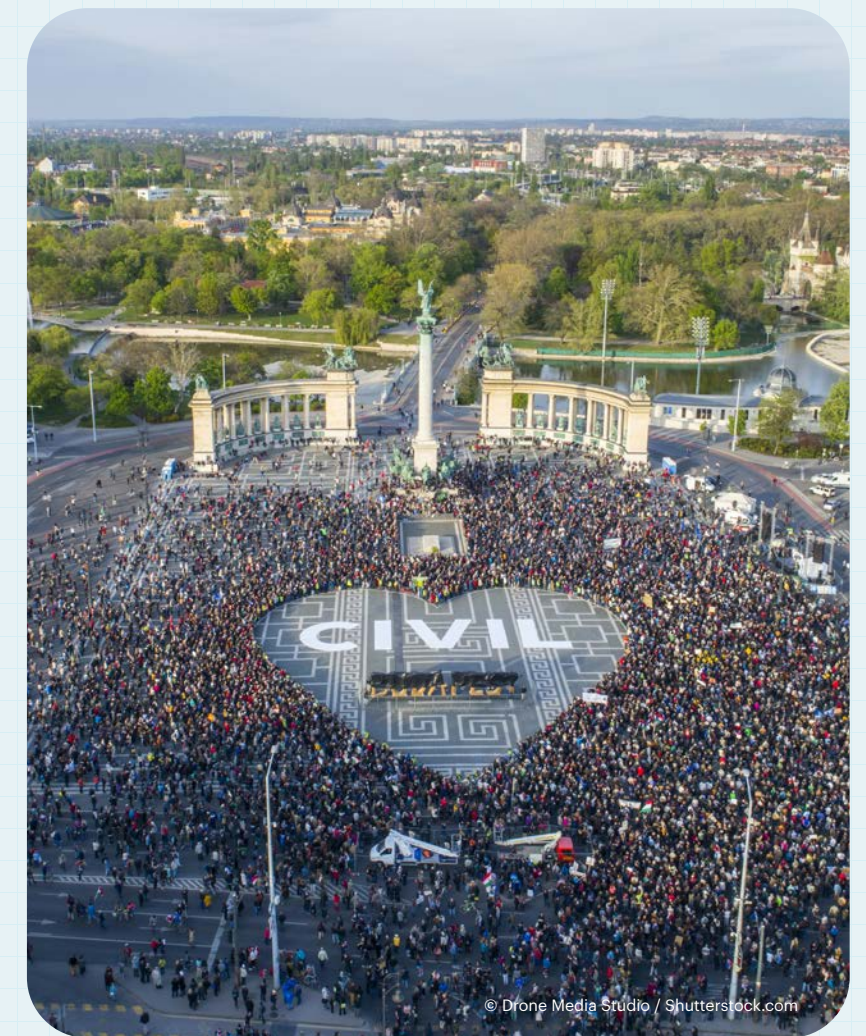
and fueled by multiple political processes following the country’s democratic transition,<sup>93</sup> has shaped the civic space too. Hungary, at present, is essentially divided into a pro-government and an independent civic sphere. The former is committed to supporting any and all governmental measures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

role even as it lacks meaningful access to public resources<sup>94</sup> or forums to pursue cooperation with state institutions, especially following the approval of the lex-NGO proposal.<sup>95</sup>

✦ Hungary lost access to EUR 214.6 million of Norway Grants funding due to a lack of agreement on the management of subsidies.<sup>96</sup>

## Lex-NGO

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



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

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

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



## Government NGOs spread pro-Kremlin views

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

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

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



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## China might shine in the academic space

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

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

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

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

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

Even as the government has fostered cooperation with Fudan University, Central European University was forced to relocate and cease most of its activities in Hungary following a legal battle initiated by the adoption of the lex-CEU law.<sup>117</sup> Government arguments voiced against CEU - alleged “ideological education”<sup>118</sup> and concerns about its effects on the competitiveness of Hungarian universities<sup>119</sup> - have not been raised in connection with Fudan University.

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





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**80** <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2021/08/szergej-lavrov-sikerkepletunk-kiallta-az-ido-probajait>

**81** See, for instance: <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/09/05/lajkbajnoksag-41> These sites are often referred to as the “grey zone” of propaganda.

**82** [https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2400](https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=2400)

**83** Visualising Influence: Information bubbles and ideological proximities on Czech, Hungarian & Slovak Facebook, p. 16, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/globsec\\_pc\\_visualising\\_influence.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/globsec_pc_visualising_influence.pdf) or [https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2017-02/bundestag-elections-fake-news-manipulation-russia-hacker-cyberwar?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2017-02/bundestag-elections-fake-news-manipulation-russia-hacker-cyberwar?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)

**84** [www.oroszhirek.hu](http://www.oroszhirek.hu)

**85** <https://www.facebook.com/moszkvatercom-222935035147780> His page has a little under 4,000 followers on Facebook - his potential to influence the Hungarian public discourse through the page, consequently, is rather low.

**86** <https://valdaiclub.com/about/experts/474/>

**87** <https://www.facebook.com/crihungarian> This site has a follower count of about 76,000.

**88** [https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2400](https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=2400)

**89** <https://atlatszo.hu/2017/09/26/juszt-laszlo-majdnem-a-russia-today-magyar-arca-lett>

**90** <https://www.v-dem.net/en/news/polarization-global-threat-democracy/>

**91** Beyond Populism Tribalism in Poland and Hungary, p. 43, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_beyond\\_populism\\_study\\_20180731.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_beyond_populism_study_20180731.pdf)

**92** <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>

**93** [https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20210720\\_fenyegetesek-es-parhuzamos-valosagok-igy-durval-a-politikai-diskurzus-a-lengyel-es-magyar-videken](https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20210720_fenyegetesek-es-parhuzamos-valosagok-igy-durval-a-politikai-diskurzus-a-lengyel-es-magyar-videken)

**94** <https://infojog.hu/ligeti-miklos-a-koz-erdeku-adatok-megismerhetosegenek-bukta-toi-20151-61-25-29-o/>

**95** <https://index.hu/belfold/2021/04/03/idohuzasra-jatszik-a-kormany-nem-modositotta-meg-a-lex-ngo-t/>

**96** <https://www.norway.no/en/hungary/norway-hungary/news-events/news2/nincs-megalapodas-magyarorszaggal-az-egt-es-norveg-alapokrol>

**97** <http://nol.hu/belfold/maradnak-oslo-hu-okotarsa-1579429>

**98** <https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/a-magyar-civiltorveny-evolucioja-az-oroszera-hasonlit-238845>

**99** <https://helsinki.hu/en/repealing-the-lex-ngo-important-step-but-more-is-needed/>

**100** <https://444.hu/2017/01/18/azok-a-regiszep-idok-amikor-a-fidesz-istenitette-a-most-al-civille-minositett-szervezeteket>





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**110** <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/09/08/szfe-mome-modellvaltas/>

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

**112** <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/az-europai-parlament-bizottsaga-elott-az-szfe-ugye-meghallgatjak-a-vitazokat/30913683.html>

**113** <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/mcc-vezetok-kozpenz-orokos-tagok-kuratorium/31045524.html>

**114** <https://kormany.hu/hirek/strategiai-megallapodast-kotott-a-kormany-a-fudan-egyetemmel>

**115** <https://www.vg.hu/kozelet/2021/08/ujabb-lepest-tett-a-kormany-a-fudan-egyetem-campusanak-megepítéseert>

**116** <https://www.portfolio.hu/ingatlan/20210517/egymasnak-feszult-a-fovaros-es-a-kormany-a-fudan-egyetem-es-a-diakvaros-ugyeben-483532>

**117** <https://verfassungsblog.de/legally-sophisticated-authoritarians-the-hungarian-lex-ceu/>

**118** <https://444.hu/2021/05/27/a-fidesz-ervei-a-kinai-kommunista-part-egyetemet-ert-kritikakra-a-ceu-rosszabb-volt-es-gyurcsany-is-terrorral-lepett-fel-az-allampolgarok-ellen>

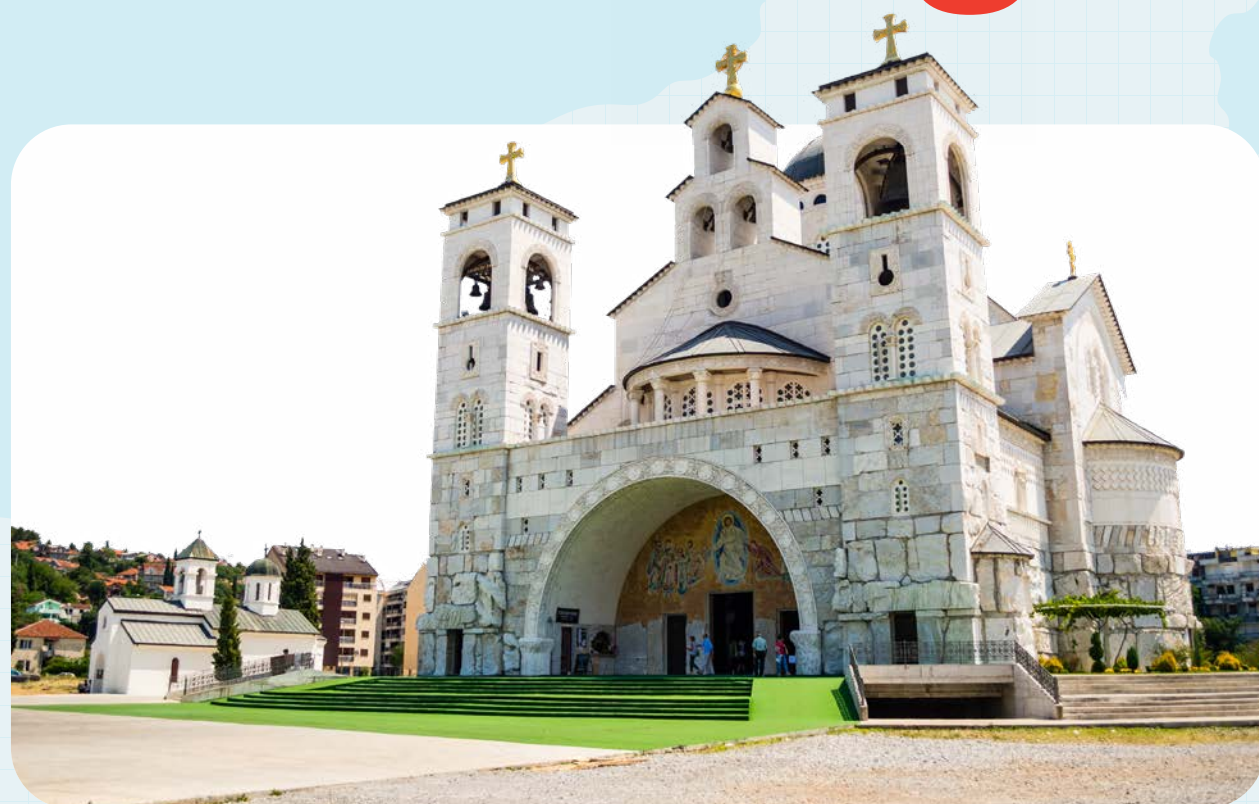
**119** *ibid.*

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





# Focus on Montenegro



**M**ontenegro displays worrying signs of vulnerability to foreign influence. Although civil society is rather free and active in the country, it is ravaged by social and political polarization and violence associated with it. These patterns have been

further amplified by moves from the Kremlin and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Polarization is reflected in public opinion too, with substantial segments of society aspiring to join the EU, while also exhibiting enthusiastic pro-Russian sentiment and an uncritical view towards China. These latter attitudes come despite the clear risk of economic dependence caused by a massive infrastructure loan from China. Vulnerabilities stemming from public perceptions

are also shaped by the quality of the information space, which is affected by politically motivated disinformation.

Despite these problems, Montenegro's greatest source of resilience pertains to its democratic political vision oriented towards the EU and NATO. Its relatively robust system of checks and balances provides further prospects for democratic growth in the future.



Vulnerability score

# 44

/100

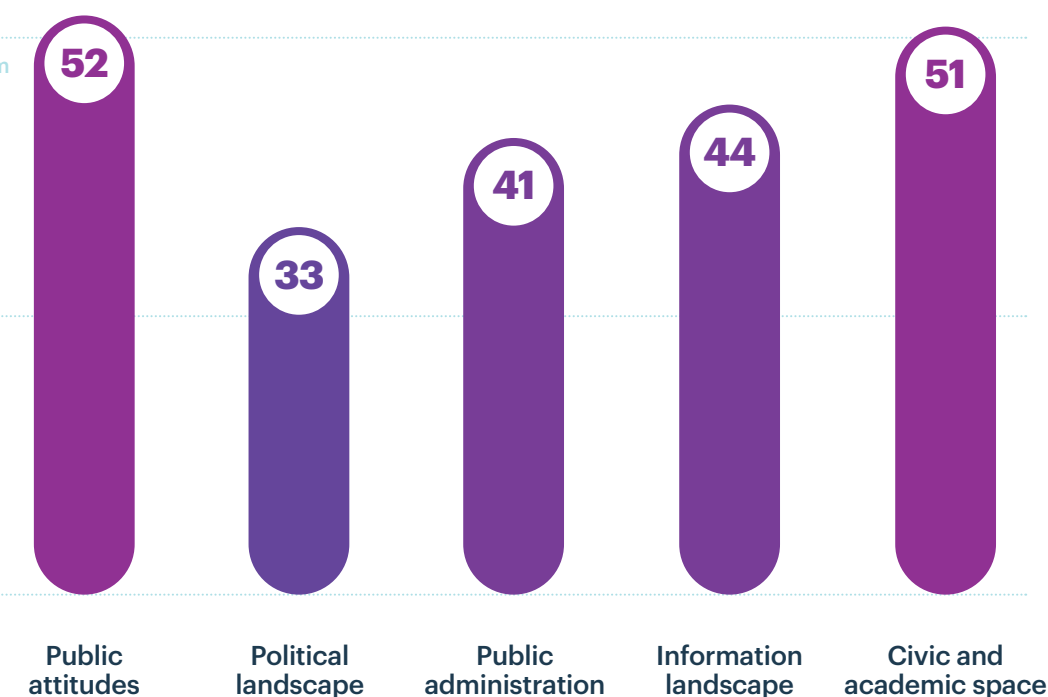
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None





# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

# 52

/100



Montenegro's relatively low support levels for NATO, prevalent buy-in to disinformation and conspiracy theories, and rather conservative leanings all make the country vulnerable to foreign influence.

According to the GLOBSEC Trends 2020 public opinion survey, 65% of respondents in the country believe that the LGBT+ community represents an immoral and decadent ideology and 50% think that liberal democracy threatens their traditional values and national

identity.<sup>3</sup> Significant social polarization and divisions have created further space for foreign influence to seep in and take advantage of some societal groups.<sup>4</sup>

The Kremlin's influence in Montenegro, in this vein, is primarily exerted through the politics of identity (so-called 'Slavic brotherhood'), economics, and religion.

## The role of the church

The Orthodox Church in Montenegro is a powerful political actor and its promotion of 'traditional values' supplements Kremlin interests by feeding into broader anti-Western and anti-EU narratives in Montenegrin society.<sup>5</sup>

A survey of Defacto Agency from July 2021 showed approximately 43% of the Orthodox population in Montenegro identifying as a part of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), whereas 21% identified with the Montenegro's Orthodox Church and 35% were not willing to express their opinion.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of the SOC has made itself readily apparent over the past year.<sup>7</sup> Following the adoption of a law on freedom of religion, requiring the registration of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and of ownership of property prior to 1918 when Montenegro joined Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church held protests attended by tens of thousands of citizens across the country.<sup>8</sup> The SOC proved its political muscle by mobilizing more people to the streets than any political party has ever managed. It also succeeded in persuading the government to reverse direction and retract the law. According to opinion polls, more people in Montenegro trust the SOC than any other institution in the country, apart from the education system.<sup>9</sup>



★ 43% of the Orthodox population in Montenegro identifies as a part of the Serbian Orthodox Church.



## Demography

Demographic factors are a further driver, with the Serb population in Montenegro (29%) embracing more pro-Russian leanings. Whereas 72% of the population in Montenegro see Russia as “traditional Slavic brother nation”, 78% believe the same in regions with a larger ethnic Serbian population.<sup>10</sup>

The Kremlin has been disseminating narratives that purport robust connections between Russia and Montenegro based on a shared Slavic culture

and history. Serbia, another close “Slavic brother”, is playing an important role in shaping the discourse too. Numerous Serbian media outlets extend their reach into Montenegro, with some spreading narratives in line with pro-Kremlin interests.<sup>11</sup> Moscow has also intensified its foreign policy activities, reflected in the frequent visits and meetings of Russian officials with their Montenegrin counterparts and vice-versa<sup>12</sup>.

“ The pro-Kremlin narratives in Montenegro are much stronger than pro-Beijing ones because of the cultural and religious ties between Russia and Montenegro. Many people claim that the country should follow their “Orthodox brothers”, epitomized in Russia. In the Balkans, it seems that the cultural, national, and religious nexus sometimes proves to be much stronger than economic ties (e.g. the strong influence of Russia vs. the weak influence of China).

Expert on Montenegrin politics

★ **63% of adults in Montenegro would prefer to join the EU in a referendum**, the other 40% is concerned the EU might negatively impact the country’s traditional values, identity and sovereignty.

## EU perceived positively but unknown

EU membership has been one of the key incentives spurring Montenegrin society to modernize. While Montenegrins generally hold a positive view of the EU - 63% would vote to join the EU in a referendum – there is an overall lack of knowledge about the organization (this is partly due to a lack of strategic communication from the EU).<sup>13</sup> The bloc is also primarily seen through the prism of Montenegro’s accession process - some see it as an opportunity to improve the rule of law in the country even as others view it with skepticism due to the lengthy nature of the talks.<sup>14</sup> Concerted campaigns by Russia and China on the vaccine diplomacy front, meanwhile, have found an attentive audience in Montenegro. With the EU slower to assist and less assertive in the promotion of the aid it provided, Kremlin and Beijing influence in the country intensified over the past year.<sup>15</sup>

## NATO membership as a divisive issue

Montenegro is divided over its membership in NATO. In GLOBSEC 2020 polling, only 45% of respondents expressed their backing for it, with 50% preferring to leave the Alliance. The negative stance towards NATO is associated with the country’s close relationship with Serbia and the trauma of the 1999 NATO intervention in the region. The US is also mostly perceived through a NATO lens, diminishing the image

of Washington in the country.<sup>16</sup> This conclusion is bolstered by the finding that 55% judge NATO to be an aggressive organization and a tool for the US to control other countries.<sup>17</sup> Polarized opinions concerning NATO are exploited by pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation campaigns which seek to further demonize the Alliance in order to turn public opinion against membership in NATO even more.<sup>18</sup>



## China’s money talks

Attitudes towards China are based largely on foreign investments<sup>19</sup> and not well informed. They also lack balanced discussions weighing their potential negative impact on Montenegro’s democracy and any potential strings attached.

Numerous political parties and officials have often named China as Montenegro’s strategic partner<sup>20</sup> and this perception is mirrored in public attitudes (15% of respondents perceive China as a key strategic partner for their country).<sup>21</sup>

Weak public institutions, pervasive corruption, and nepotism were generally recognized by the focus groups<sup>22</sup> as internal threats fostering societal divisions especially between pro-Western and conservative Orthodox segments of society. Citizens of Montenegro have, throughout history, preferred strong leaders and political parties. Frustrations with persistent shortcomings of the democratic system can steer people closer to the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin, with the disillusioned pulled in by the lure of an alternative system that has seen a perceived strong leader allegedly revitalizing the Russian government and economy.

A history of instability and economic turmoil, nevertheless, still motivates a substantial proportion of the population to pursue aspirational goals including alignment with countries with developed democratic systems and the better living standards they provide.

# Political landscape

## Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

33  
/100



**M**ontenegro is home to a complex and polarized political landscape - this has been especially true since the 2006 independence referendum.<sup>23</sup> Parliamentary elections in the summer of 2020 led to a change in government - after three decades of uninterrupted rule by President Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), Zdravko Krivokapić became the new Prime Minister as leader of a broad coalition of parties<sup>24</sup> (Black on White<sup>25</sup>, Peace is Our Nation, and For the Future of Montenegro). Krivokapić led the

"For the Future of Montenegro" bloc representing the Democratic Front (DF) and the Socialist People's Party (SNP). There are currently nine parliamentary parties and 81 members of parliament in the current convocation of parliament.<sup>26</sup>

The coalition is composed of several parties that hold conflicting views on foreign policy. The current leadership of DF and one member from the Coalition for the Future of Montenegro, for example, are known for their close ties to Serbia and Russia and their

exploitation of societal divisions and pro-Russian sentiment in the country, playing in the hands of the Kremlin's interests.<sup>27</sup> The government also maintains stronger connections to the Serbian Orthodox Church, which campaigned against DPS, exerts social and political sway, and regularly voices pro-Kremlin views.<sup>28</sup>



**Montenegro started the accession process to the EU in 2005.**

## EU integration process as a driving force

Montenegro is still participating in the EU integration process and seeking to fulfil all criteria.<sup>29</sup> Mostly positive attitudes are expressed towards the EU in the country across the political spectrum and parliamentary parties.

To confirm these priorities, following the 2020 parliamentary elections, newly elected Prime Minister Krivokapić selected Brussels for his first official visit, validating the Montenegrin Euro-Atlantic orientation in meetings with EU Council and NATO leaders.<sup>30</sup>

The prime minister's trip was not applauded by all including Andrija Mandić, one of the leaders of the Democratic Front: *"The Prime Minister, especially accounting for the effort exerted by the Serbian people to achieve this victory, should first visit Belgrade."*<sup>31</sup>

While the new government signed a coalition agreement affirming Montenegro's commitment to joining the EU and strengthening its ties with NATO<sup>32</sup>, the government's foreign policy course has been contested, with various parties voicing differing attitudes towards NATO and policy towards Russia.<sup>33</sup>





## 50:50 on NATO

Montenegro, from independence to the 2015 receipt of an invitation to join NATO, has invested considerable time towards reforming its entire defense and security system and preparing the country for accession to the Western collective security approach.<sup>34</sup>

The debate on Alliance membership picked up steam as the accession process progressed and came to reflect the numerous broader disagreements and animosities characterizing Montenegrin society. In the debate, the traditionalist and modern narratives of Montenegrin politics collided.

Montenegro officially became the 29<sup>th</sup> member of NATO on June 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, with membership a topic underscoring vehement societal<sup>35</sup> and political polarization. NATO is associated, on the one hand, with enhanced security for a small country with no army and perceived as positively impacting tourism and the economy. Ardent disapproval of NATO integration, however, is voiced by mostly right-wing political circles.<sup>36</sup>

The president and former government espouse strong pro-NATO leanings. The current coalition, meanwhile, harbors a more complex stance that varies by partner. Former Prime Minister Duško Marković noted that by joining NATO, Montenegro fulfilled one of the country's most important foreign policy goals.<sup>37</sup>

“In a time of multi-layered, complex challenges for our societies, we remain uncompromisingly loyal and committed to the values and strategic goals of the Alliance.”<sup>38</sup>

**Milo Đukanović,**  
President of Montenegro,  
2020

While DF, the largest party in the current coalition, is composed of several smaller parties, its leaders mostly express unfavorable views about NATO. Nebojša Medojević, a founding member and leader of the Movement for Changes (PzP), is a notable exception though. Generally, he is a stronger advocate of Montenegro's NATO membership<sup>39</sup>.

“NATO is a force and an opponent of freedom, and Montenegro did not deserve to be part of a pact that oppresses and humiliates other nations.”<sup>40</sup>

**Andrija Mandić,**  
president of the New  
Serbian Democracy  
and leader of the then  
opposition DF, 2019

One of the advocates against the membership was the Serbian Orthodox Church which hosted a gathering of like-minded people in 2016 in Podgorica.<sup>41</sup> A film about the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 was played at the event - mentions about Russia as a “brotherly” state, meanwhile, was met with applause.

★  
**Montenegro became NATO member in 2017.**

## Stronger pro-Russian attitudes in the government

The Kremlin can find numerous allies and supporters among the political class in Montenegro. Political parties, like NOVA, Real Montenegro, and the Democratic People's Party (DNP), staunchly defend Russian president Vladimir Putin<sup>42</sup> and often criticize government and EU policies on Russia. The DPS and its partners, conversely, previously used its government pulpit to accuse Russia of foreign interference in domestic issues<sup>43</sup>. The 2016 coup plot (now the subject of a retrial in court) is a prominent case in point.<sup>44</sup>

Political actors that perceive Russia as a partner of Montenegro mostly emphasize the past by promoting narratives that underline Moscow's role as Montenegro's Slavic brother and ally in the fight for “traditional values”.<sup>45</sup>

“Montenegrin people owe a lot to Russia because Montenegro wouldn't have existed in the time of the Ottoman empire if it wasn't for Russia. The first thing that the new government will do is abolish sanctions on Russia.”<sup>46</sup>

**Andrija Mandić,** leader of  
New Serbian Democracy,  
during a meeting with  
President of the Russian  
Duma Sergei Naryshkin,  
2016

Montenegrin President Milo Đukanovic has accused Russia of interfering in the country's 2020 August 30th elections through the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC):<sup>47</sup> “It must be understood that there are more geopolitical players. We have China, Russia, India, Brazil. We have to register all that. Russia had a platform for its actions and interference in the region, and now in Montenegro the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has done a service for Greater Serbia but also Russian imperialist interests in the Balkans.”

## Turn away from China

Since gaining a *vymazme* At the same time, since gaining independence in 2006, Montenegro has signed 17 cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding with China. The first agreement was signed in August 2006 and focused on economic and trade cooperation. A Memorandum of Cooperation was also signed within the Belt and Road Initiative during the first Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in 2017.<sup>48</sup> All these cooperation agreements were signed under the Đukanovic governments.

A major highway project that saw the country taking out credit from a Chinese bank and employing Chinese construction companies was, nevertheless, perceived as

a threat by some focus group participants, a position shared by the government. The newly formed government has asked the EU to come to the country's rescue and purchase the Montenegrin debt from China.<sup>49</sup>

“Please help us to return that money, to exchange the loan for a loan with a European bank... to end the Chinese influence.”<sup>50</sup>

**Dritan Abazovic,**  
Deputy Prime Minister, 2021



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# Public administration

## Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

41  
/100

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**M**ontenegro's public administration demonstrates some susceptibility to foreign influence, particularly in the areas of electoral resilience, civil liberties and corruption.<sup>51</sup> Public administration reform has been ongoing for some time now in the country,<sup>52</sup> however, the results of this process are yet to be experienced by the public. Ambitious strategies, legislative action, and numerous projects have so far failed to deliver the desired impact towards building an efficient and transparent

administration.<sup>53</sup> The optimization of public administration and implementation of the right to free access to information are critical points that have not been fully achieved.<sup>54</sup> Detrimental political and financial influence on Montenegro is present due to systemic shortcomings and a lack of resilience to so-called corrosive capital and its negative impact on the rule of law.<sup>55</sup>

## Ongoing reforms

In March 2021, the Montenegrin government established the Public Administration Reform Council, which held its first session in July.<sup>56</sup> The Public Administration Reform Strategy, which should be adopted in the last quarter of 2021 and address susceptibility to political influence, nepotism, clientelism, and a lack of professional capacities,<sup>57</sup> continues to be devised through an inclusive process involving a large number of focus groups and operational teams comprising local and international partners from the public, civil society, and private sectors.

## State capture and corruption as a key challenge

A key challenge for Montenegro remains the need to effectively combat organized crime<sup>58</sup>, corruption, and state capture (particularly at the highest levels).<sup>59</sup> Still, the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International ranks Montenegro 67<sup>th</sup>, the best ranking among the three Western Balkan countries included in the research.<sup>60</sup>

State capture, incompetence and corruption were voiced as major internal threats to security and the democratic system during focus group discussions<sup>61</sup> and have

been recognized as a challenge by the European Commission too<sup>62</sup>.

Also, slow investigative proceedings and courts can lead to decades long processes.<sup>63</sup> Some transparency measures and reforms have been initiated including, for example, a lobbying legislation in 2014, but according to Transparency International, the fact that only 14 lobbying certificates were issued by 2019 and only 6 registered in 2018 signals weak implementation and the existence of lobbying activities conducted outside of the legal framework.<sup>64</sup>



“ We are all jeopardized by corruption, criminals, liars... I am talking about politicians and criminal groups.

Focus group participant

★ The Corruption Perception Index ranks Montenegro 67<sup>th</sup>, the best ranking among the three Western Balkan countries included in the research.



## Phantom voters and a coup

Montenegro's election processes are vulnerable both to domestic and foreign malign influence. Numerous problems have been routinely reported: the provision of services and benefits in exchange for votes, the abuse of social and other benefits and subsidies, and allegations of pressure applied to voters.<sup>65</sup>

During the 2016 parliamentary elections, Montenegro was targeted by foreign adversaries (of Serbian and Russian origin) via a sophisticated influence operation that sought to prevent the country from joining NATO<sup>66</sup>. The ploy involved a coup d'état and a planned attempt to assassinate the pro-Western then-PM Đukanović and seize parliament.<sup>67</sup> In May 2019, the court found 13 perpetrators,

including two alleged Russian military intelligence operatives and Montenegrin opposition politicians linked to the Kremlin, guilty of "terrorist acts" and undermining the constitution.<sup>68</sup>

In 2019, in preparation for the 2020 election, the government requested the assistance of NATO's first Counter-Hybrid Support Team.<sup>69</sup> However, these measures failed to prevent more than fifty thousand "phantom voters" from being registered and casting votes without a valid address in some municipalities.<sup>70</sup> The EU Commission 2021 report also highlighted concerns over voter registration and called for thorough investigation by the competent authorities.<sup>71</sup>

The inability of the electoral oversight body to monitor and avert attempts to influence democratic processes in the country was confirmed by 15 of 19 surveyed experts. Despite the apparent foreign interference in the electoral processes over

the past few years, competent institutions have done little.<sup>72</sup>

While suspicions were raised about Russian interference in the 2016 parliamentary elections<sup>73</sup>, the 2020 elections were assessed as free and fair by ODIHR reports. The election was preceded, however, by political turmoil over the aforementioned religious legislation and the Serbian Orthodox Church. President Đukanović, in response, accused Serbia of meddling in the Montenegrin election.<sup>74</sup>

★  
**Montenegro scores 52/100 in the election integrity indicator.**



## Resilience to foreign influence

The attempted coup in 2016 and Montenegro's high indebtedness towards China from the financing and construction of a controversial highway project<sup>75</sup> underscore the active presence of Moscow and Beijing in the country. But the situational awareness towards foreign interference among state officials varies depending on the foreign actor concerned. While 17 of 25 surveyed experts declared that several public institutions are aware of Kremlin's influence, little, if anything at all, is known about Beijing's influence. 10 of 19 surveyed experts also suggested that the public administration

lacks sufficient specialized capacities with the necessary expertise to monitor and analyze influence operations and hybrid threats.

Key security strategies and documents address the issue of foreign influence in a relatively sufficient manner, but more frequent updates would be prudent.<sup>76</sup> Neither the security nor defense strategies, however, make mention of Russia or China.

In March 2021, the Center for Democratic Transition submitted a proposal for the establishment of a special committee against foreign influence to the Parliament of Montenegro, modeled on the Special Committee for Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the EU (INGE), which operates within the European Parliament.<sup>77</sup> Formation of a

special committee to deal with this issue is an adequate reaction to the long-standing inaction of the competent institutions in this area. Although the citizens of Montenegro in the last few years have witnessed political, media and economic interference and influences, more or less intense, from all countries in the region and beyond, this topic has never been systematically approached but used only for daily political debate.<sup>78</sup>

In May 2019, Montenegro in its "efforts to build and strengthen national capacities" became a member of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.<sup>79</sup>

The commitment to develop national capabilities to counter hybrid threats and foreign influence and the close cooperation between the country and regional and international partners to successfully overcome such security challenges was reiterated earlier this year by Rajko Pesic, director general of the Directorate for Defense Policy and Planning at the Ministry of Defense.<sup>80</sup>

★  
**Montenegro addresses hybrid threats and a need for resilience-building in its key strategic documents.**



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# Information landscape

## Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

44  
/100



The pandemic and political-religious turmoil has further worsened the state of the media in Montenegro, with one wave of misinformation after another.<sup>81</sup>

This media landscape reflects a polarized society and that comes through, most of all, during tumultuous political and social times in the country. The parliamentary elections in Montenegro, held in August 2020, and the local elections held in Niksic in March 2021 once again underscored that the media is mostly divided across political parties, hindering

the publication of accurate and objective information.<sup>82</sup>

Although leading Russian media lack a registered newsroom in Montenegro, the pertinence and efficiency of Russian propaganda has not been diminished.<sup>83</sup>

## Media freedom in Montenegro

The World Press Freedom Index<sup>84</sup> has been granting Montenegro a relatively steady score since 2016. According to their most recent report, Montenegro ranks 104<sup>th</sup> of 180 countries in media freedom. A 2020 European Commission report further concluded that the media scene continued its highly polarized dynamic and that self-regulatory mechanisms remained weak. An enlarged volume of regional disinformation permeated society in the aftermath of the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and during the 2020 electoral campaign.<sup>85</sup>

Progress in addressing violence against journalists and the media is still very limited. Important cases, including the 2004 murder of the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Dan and the 2018 shooting of an investigative journalist, remain unsolved.<sup>86</sup>

In 2020 alone, there were 16 cases of attacks and threats to the safety of journalists. The three arrests and two physical attacks became a popular topic across social media networks according to the data of the Media Union of Montenegro.<sup>87</sup>

V-Dem, similarly scrutinizing media pluralism, classifies Montenegro as somewhere in-between a diversified and non-diversified media space, putting the country in a rather vulnerable position.<sup>88</sup>



🗣️ Journalists are in an unenviable position, from freedom of speech, salaries, to attacks on them. Everyone gives themselves the right to treat journalists as they wish and the biggest culprit is the policy of impunity.

Expert from the media sector

★ According to 20 of 23 surveyed experts, presence of conspiracy theories and disinformation is quite high in Montenegro's public media.



## Pro-Kremlin interests in the media

Predominantly pro-Serbian and pro-Russian online media has been on the rise in Montenegro in recent years.

Some of these websites primarily operate on social media networks and distribute mostly pro-Serbian stories and generally eschew criticism of the current government. They include, among others, Bunt<sup>89</sup>, 24 časa<sup>90</sup>, and Pogled<sup>91</sup>. The latter attracts approximately 50 thousand followers on Facebook.<sup>92</sup>

Pro-Russian media, on the other hand, openly support and spread pro-Kremlin narratives. IN4S<sup>93</sup> (with around 50 thousand followers on Facebook) and Borba<sup>94</sup> are prominent examples. According to research conducted by the Center for Democratic Transition, IN4S is one of the top media outlets responsible for disseminating disinformation.<sup>95</sup>

Even though neither China nor Russia directly owns any media outlets, 16 out of 23 respondents in the expert survey said that there are specific journalists, editors, and/or programs which regularly promote pro-Kremlin interests both in state-owned and other mainstream media. And 12 agreed that Russia is directly or indirectly influencing the mainstream media to a significant extent.

The content shared on pro-Kremlin outlets is full of sensationalism, misinformation, and false information and correlates to narratives promoted

by Moscow and Belgrade. The material, furthermore, tends to glorify Russia and Vladimir Putin, depicts the West (especially NATO) negatively, and emphasizes alleged connections between the Montenegrin and Russian people.<sup>96</sup>

Another distinct feature concerns the significant influence of the Serbian media stemming from the shared language between Montenegro and Serbia. Serbian media outlets are accessible on all cable TV providers and Serbian tabloids have a sizable footprint. In addition to that, Russian media, like Sputnik News, openly support Kremlin's interests in the entire Western Balkans region. However, a significant share of influence takes place on social media networks.



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✪ 19 of 23 surveyed experts think some journalists and editors regularly give space to pro-Kremlin actors in the media.

## Future challenges

While Chinese influence is not vast in the information space, a point verified by interviewed experts, Beijing has sought to strengthen personal relationships with some journalists by inviting them to exchange programs and visits.<sup>97</sup> As a result, some media write predominantly positively about China. Beijing's tactics could thus be, for now, characterized as a strong PR.

Also, V-Dem index data assessing government control over the digital space show that the internet is a relatively free space. Low scores on media diversity and polarization and high scores on the presence of information manipulation and disinformation online make the digital space vulnerable and susceptible to foreign influences.<sup>98</sup>

✪ Beijing's influence on mainstream media in Montenegro is quite limited according to 15 of 23 surveyed experts.





# Civic & academic space

## Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

51  
/100

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The civic space in Montenegro is rather active and free but faces polarization like other aspects of society. Freedom of peaceful assembly is widely respected in Montenegro - frequent protests and religious gatherings have taken place over the past two years. The adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion<sup>99</sup> at the end of 2019 set in motion mass protests led by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)<sup>100</sup> that continued to August 2020<sup>101</sup> and the defeat

of the ruling DPS government for the first time in over 30 years. The polarization in the country and growth of nationalism and clericalism represent genuine threats that could jeopardize the civic character of the country.<sup>102</sup>

## Serbian Orthodox Church

Montenegrin divisions run primarily along nationalist lines. The Serbian Church, in particular, is recognized as a key means through which Serbian influence can be exerted on a country that declared its independence 15 years ago. The newly formed government consists of non-partisan ministers<sup>103</sup> even as many of them informally maintain close relations with the SOC. The current parliament, moreover, approved amendments to the freedom of religion law to nullify the contested sections that had sparked SOC protests in the country.<sup>104</sup>

Deepening polarization has also galvanized Montenegrin nationalists, culminating in

violent clashes with the police in Cetinje in September 2021 during the inauguration of the new SOC Metropolitan. As Cetinje is regarded as Montenegro's old royal capital, the protesters (encouraged by President Đukanović) claimed the inauguration was an insult to the country's sovereignty.<sup>105</sup>

Numerous violent incidents have taken place in Montenegro over the last couple of years. Feuds between party activists<sup>106</sup>, attacks<sup>107</sup> on political activists and officials<sup>108</sup>, and a flood of online hate speech have also raised grave concerns about growing conflict in Montenegro.

★ 13 of 20 surveyed experts think that the church plays a rather or very significant role in promoting Kremlin's interests in Montenegro.



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## Civil society's role is well recognized

Montenegrin civil society has remained at a stable score of 4 (scale of 1-7 whereby 1 equals enhanced civil society and 7 equates to a civil society that is impeded) since 2012 on the Civil Society Sustainability Index<sup>109</sup>.

There are no influential NGOs in Montenegro that openly promote Russian or Chinese interests, a conclusion shared by surveyed experts, a majority of whom claimed they did not have knowledge about Russian or Chinese GONGOs in the country apart from the Confucius Institute in Montenegro<sup>110</sup>.

While half of experts noted that there is no overt Kremlin influence on Montenegrin civil society, 13 of 20 agreed that the church is influential in promoting pro-Kremlin interests in the country.

Even though slander campaigns have been launched against NGO leaders in the past, CSOs can freely operate in Montenegro. A whole-of-society approach is, on paper, integrated into state policies and government authorities have reiterated their commitment to cooperate with NGOs. Many CSO representatives, however, do not feel their views are taken into consideration in policy-making processes.<sup>111</sup> Several incidents, furthermore, have witnessed CSOs raise concerns over political pressure following their voicing of criticism of state policies.<sup>112</sup>

CSOs in Montenegro, nonetheless, also enjoy considerable opportunities to criticize government policies, promote their work, and communicate with the public through the media.<sup>113</sup> Some NGO leaders have recently been appointed<sup>114</sup> to the country's anti-corruption council.

At the same time, research from the Center for Civic Education indicated that the education sector, together with non-governmental organizations and the private sector, are perceived as the least corrupt, which indicates high trust in the civil society.<sup>115</sup>

There are certain extremist groups, that said, connected to the SOC operating in Montenegro but their influence remains limited.

★ 10 of 20 experts surveyed believe the Kremlin's influence on the civil society in Montenegro is limited.



## Academic space needs fixing

In 2019, the Montenegrin Parliament adopted the Law on Academic Integrity. The legislation delineates the principles of academic integrity expected of teachers, associates, students, and other professionals involved in higher education, identifies violations of the law, and sets procedures for the protection of academic integrity aimed at preserving and improving the quality of higher education.<sup>116</sup> The Academic Freedom Index, nonetheless, has consistently ranked Montenegro at a score of 0.5 (on a scale of 0 to 1)<sup>117</sup>, putting it next to last on academic freedom among examined countries.

Revelations, in 2017, that the Institute for Education had copied considerable sections of the Croatian curricula spurred heated discussion in Montenegro.<sup>118</sup> A few weeks later, amendments to the Criminal Code recognized plagiarism as a criminal offense.<sup>119</sup>

The Law on Freedom of Religion protests saw around 100 representatives of the academic community and civil activists from Serbia appeal to authorities to amend the legislation as soon as possible. The group called for the start of a dialogue between the state and representatives from all traditional religious communities in Montenegro and a subsequent agreement between the government, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the EU Commission to permanently resolve the matter concerning the operations of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>120</sup> A group of

Montenegrin professors publicly defending the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro took part in protests against the Law on Freedom of Religion and founded, in July 2020, a non-governmental organization called "We will not give away Montenegro".<sup>121</sup>

★ Montenegro ranks relatively lows in terms of academic freedom (49/100), which is not fully respected in the country according to the Academic Freedom Index.





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**119** <https://www.paragraf.me/dnevne-vijesti/01092017/01092017-vijest1.html>

**120** <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/416434/akademska-zajednica-poslala-apel-da-se-rijesi-kriza-u-crnoj-gori>

**121** <https://www.cdm.me/politika/ne-da-ju-crnu-goru-crnogorcima/>

# Focus on North Macedonia



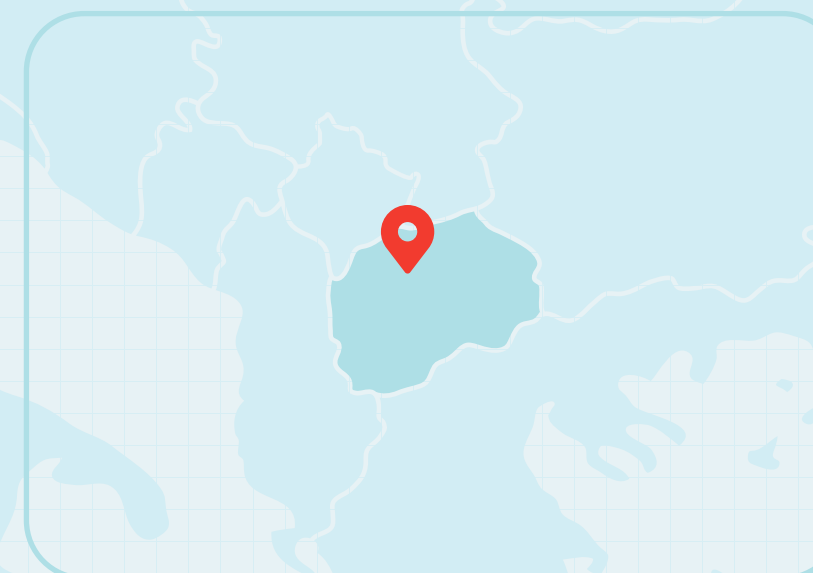
**N**orth Macedonia can be classified as the most resilient of the Western Balkan countries examined by the Index. Its society, however, finds itself polarized into antagonistic political camps and remains vulnerable.

While a majority of the population still supports the drawn-out EU accession process underway since 2005, views sympathetic to authoritarian rule and the Kremlin and Beijing play a significant role too.

These attitudes are reinforced through an information space largely susceptible to foreign influence through both covert and overt media ownership and certain programs and individuals promoting the Kremlin's interests. The media landscape further suffers from a lack of diversity

with the information environment affected by disinformation and manipulation campaigns.

North Macedonia's political backdrop, by contrast, marks a strong point of resilience. Despite the presence of political actors serving the interests of Moscow and Beijing and growing frustration concerning the EU accession process following numerous setbacks, political elites led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev remain committed to membership in Euro-Atlantic structures.



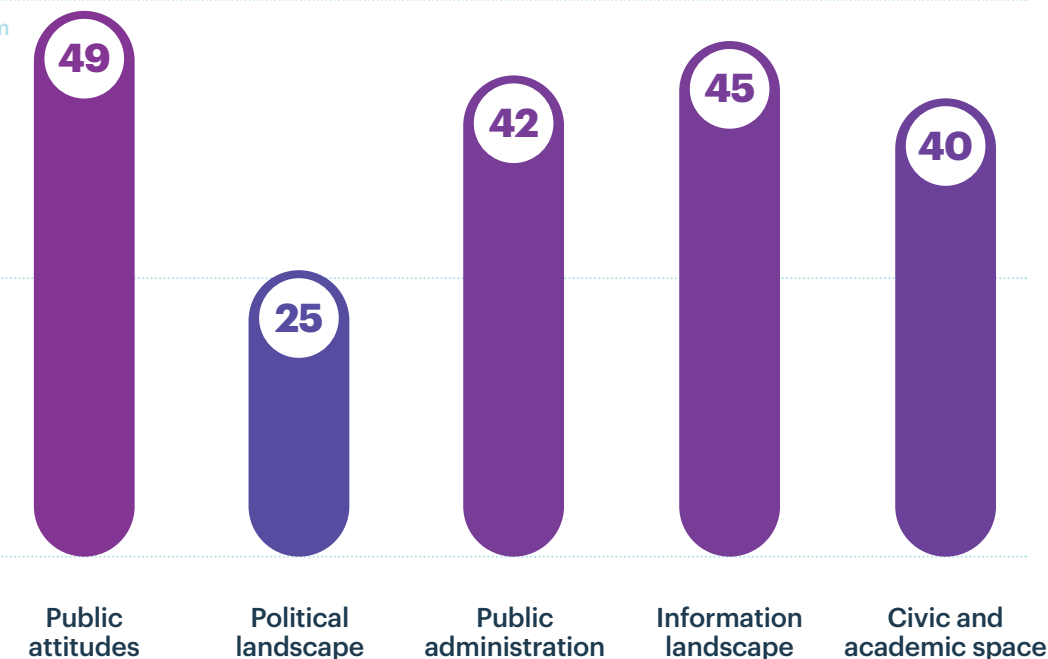
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None





# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

# 49

/100



**E**U and NATO membership garner the greatest support in the Western Balkans region in North Macedonia (more than 70% are in favor)<sup>3</sup>. Yet the country's long journey towards joining the Euro-Atlantic family has opened the door for various pro-Russian narratives to gain resonance among Macedonians. A majority (66%), according to the GLOBSEC Trends 2020, view Russia as a Slavic brother and 58% consider Russia's military power to be far greater than that of any other country in the world<sup>4</sup>.

The intensification of pro-Kremlin influence and manipulation has always coincided with periods of strife concerning North Macedonia's Western ambitions. Excessive societal fragmentation on identity issues with neighbors<sup>5</sup>, strident political polarization<sup>6</sup>, and ethnic and religious rifts<sup>7</sup> render the already fragile democratic society an easy target all too prone to malign foreign influence. The fact that China is not perceived as a threat only exacerbates the overall vulnerability of the country.<sup>8</sup>

## Perception of partners

Macedonians perceive the West as a key strategic partner (including the EU at 31% of respondents and Germany at 42%)<sup>9</sup> across multiple areas including the economy. China, meanwhile, is not generally identified as a key partner by society even though most crucial infrastructure investments in the country are financed by Beijing<sup>10</sup>. This dynamic, nevertheless, has notably shifted during the pandemic, with Beijing becoming North Macedonia's largest donor and supplier of vaccines<sup>11</sup>. Russia, for its part, has traditionally refrained from exerting itself economically in North Macedonia, a pattern that explains the society's preference of the West over the East on economic matters.

Russia, however, is still perceived as the "big Slavic brother" among Macedonians (66%) - buoyed by its cultural, historical, ethnic (e.g. Pan-Slavism), and religious (e.g. Christian Orthodoxy) ties<sup>12</sup>. The Kremlin's foreign policy, consequently, is oriented towards playing "powder keg" games, exploiting these sensitive issues. This approach is pitted against a "West" (mainly NATO and the EU) that is allegedly playing Russian roulette by instituting complicated conditions and a lengthy Euro-Atlantic path for North Macedonia.

“We are the small ones, they are the big ones, it depends on us how we position ourselves to be partners.”

Focus group participant,  
male, 51





## Long accession process

The prolonged accession procedure to join NATO, spurred by the “name issue” among other topics,<sup>13</sup> and repeated vetoes of EU enlargement talks by neighbors has fostered disappointment in the country. This disillusionment, combined with the ultimate concessions on the identity issues (i.e. the name change) as a quid pro quo for membership<sup>14</sup> in these organizations, has rendered a subset of Macedonians vulnerable to Russian influence. This group has become susceptible to manipulation, conspiracy theories, and disinformation spread by both domestic and foreign actors.

Pro-Kremlin backers have, in fact, amplified the effects of their propaganda and disinformation activities by exploiting vulnerabilities, close ties, and unfavorable opinion towards the West and NATO<sup>15</sup>. Russia, in this vein, has continued to effectively utilize various instruments of political influence, including its economic and investment power<sup>16</sup>, to foster positive sentiment among vulnerable societal groups hopeful that future economic cooperation and partnership with Russia can be a possibility.

## NATO integration did not please the Kremlin

The integration of North Macedonia into NATO fulfilled the country’s long-term foreign policy goal and marked an important milestone for regional stability against a backdrop of local tensions and a turbulent history. NATO, together with the EU, represent among a handful of topics that attract broad approval in the country (apart from far-right supporters and movements who consider the name change as a price too

high to pay for membership)<sup>17</sup>. Alliance membership is perceived favorably, garnering greater support than prospective EU accession. This finding, notably, comes against further recent setbacks regarding the start of negotiation talks with the Union.

The Kremlin has not hidden its dissatisfaction with the country’s accession to NATO, representing yet another blow to Moscow’s aspirations to maintain influence in the Western Balkans. The application, in fact, spurred Moscow to voice opposition to the country’s name change and back protests against it.<sup>18</sup> Through an official ministerial communication, it sought to evoke strident emotions and exploit an already polarizing issue to turn people against the West.<sup>19</sup>



★ **72% of adult respondents would vote to stay in NATO** if a referendum was held in North Macedonia, a country that joined NATO in 2020.

## EU membership still desired

According to GLOBSEC Trends 2020<sup>20</sup>, 78% of Macedonians would favor EU membership if a referendum were held. The accession to the EU is perceived, by many, as a vehicle through which internal ethnic disputes can be resolved, thereby bringing forth stability and the opportunity for the country to improve its democratic processes. According to the focus groups discussions, some segments of society judge the EU accession unfavorably - they see it as just being about unnecessary conditions and unjustified demands. Threat perceptions were, moreover, apparent on identity matters. EU membership, in this vein, lends itself to being viewed as a trade-off and the result of national political volatility<sup>21</sup>. Fears that EU integration will entail a loss of identity particularly stem from the Prespa Agreement and Bulgarian veto.<sup>22</sup>

A majority of Macedonians, furthermore, are dissatisfied with democracy and the political system in their country<sup>23</sup>. This sentiment is undergirded by perceptions that domestic politics has changed little over the past 30 years, exemplified by persistent corruption, weak institutions, and nepotism. There is a tendency to view everything as politicized and democracy as underdelivering<sup>24</sup>, with politicians perceived as working exclusively for their own interests rather than the benefit of all people.

★ **The EU is perceived as one of the most important strategic partners of North Macedonia by 31% of adult respondents.**





# Political landscape

## Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

25  
/100



The political landscape in North Macedonia reveals high levels of fragmentation on both domestic and foreign policy issues. This chasm is primarily apparent between the two largest political parties in the country (VMRO-DPMNE<sup>25</sup> and SDSM<sup>26</sup>) but some new emerging far-left parties are roped in too (Levica and its affinity towards both China and Russia). Smaller parties from all segments of the political spectrum typically align with the bigger political groupings and amass minimal influence on decision-making

process. The Ohrid Framework Agreement<sup>27</sup>, that said, transformed the political system into a bi-ethnic power-sharing model and vastly increased the political influence of Albanian parties (DUI, Besa, Alternativa).

## Pro-EU attitudes reaching their limits

The 20-year long impasse over the name dispute with Greece<sup>28</sup>, which prevented North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, was finally resolved with the Prespa Agreement<sup>29</sup>. The name change was proposed as the only solution to move talks forward on EU and NATO integration, which has been the primary foreign policy goal of the country since its independence.



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99 There is no alternative but the Europeanization of North Macedonia and EU membership, primarily because the values of the Union mean a better and prosperous future. The Western Balkan countries, which are a kind of island left in the EU, are left to chance to face their influences.<sup>30</sup>

Zoran Zaev,  
Prime Minister, 2021

Euphoria regarding the EU almost completely vanished once it became clear that the name change was not enough to join the Union following French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to block the country's accession talks<sup>31</sup>. This move angered even political leaders backing EU membership<sup>32</sup> - leadership accordingly changed their rhetoric and warned of dangerous consequences to an already fragile region.

The foundation of support was further tested by a Bulgarian veto<sup>33</sup> concerning issues regarding Macedonian identity and history, spurring an anti-EU protest<sup>34</sup>.

Even though attitudes of public figures have turned somewhat sour towards the bloc, the EU orientation of the country is still on display through their decision-making processes<sup>35</sup>. Anti-EU politicians, nonetheless, have been galvanized and become more vocal in their stances.

✪ The Prespa Agreement paving the way for EU accession was signed in 2019.





“ The EU is stuck in a 20th-century mindset and petty internal squabbles have left it unable to meet the challenges of the current century, from mass migration to digital crime bosses [...] the European Union is leaving its door open for Chinese and Russian strategic encroachment in the Balkans because of its abject failure to engage and invest in the region. Until recently, we had not seen any Russian investment in Macedonia. But as Europe is withdrawing – or rather not keeping its promises about making the Balkans part of the European Union – it’s like an invitation from the EU to come and fill that space.”<sup>38</sup>

**Gjorgje Ivanov,**  
former President, 2017

“ We must restore the faith of the people that we, as a nation, can survive without the EU and without NATO.”<sup>36</sup>

**Dimitar Apasiev,**  
leader of Levica, 2019

Nearly all Macedonian political parties clearly state a pro-EU orientation in their manifestos.<sup>37</sup> However, EU skepticism, linked to the aforementioned issues, is generally discernible in practice.



## Cherished NATO

The country’s active and long-standing cooperation with the US, the EU and NATO have all contributed to a very positive perception of NATO in North Macedonia, which has been reflected in supportive rhetoric and actions of country’s key political representatives.

Membership, pertinently, has always been perceived in a twofold way: (1) as the most formidable military security guarantee available, especially vis-à-vis its neighbors, and (2) as a glue for a society that is ethnically deeply divided. NATO accession, therefore, was a significant leap forward and filled a security vacuum that existed beforehand.

A majority of politicians have publicly pronounced their backing of North Macedonia’s NATO membership. Criticism of the Alliance or the country’s membership in it, meanwhile, is generally perceived as staking out a position against the national interest and could jeopardize electoral support. Critics, nonetheless, exist including Dimitar Apasiev, leader of the far-left Levica and one of the most vocal opponents of NATO in the country.<sup>39</sup>

## Different paths of the Kremlin’s influence

According to surveyed experts, both parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors were only somewhat successful in promoting pro-Kremlin narratives, while all interviewed experts agreed that Russian influence is present in the country on many levels. Russia primarily employs the “Slavic brotherhood” motif and the Orthodox church to bolster its influence in the region<sup>40</sup>. President Ivanov’s 2016 personal invitation extended to Russian Bishop Tikhon Shevkunov,

who is unofficially considered the clergyman to Russian President Vladimir Putin, for a two-day visit to North Macedonia to attend religious events together was emblematic of this pattern<sup>41</sup>. A year later, Ivanov visited Moscow where the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, at a solemn ceremony, presented him with an award, “His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexei II”, in recognition of his efforts to strengthen inter-Orthodox relations.<sup>42</sup>

★ The vulnerability score of political entities’ attitudes towards Russia is 43/100.





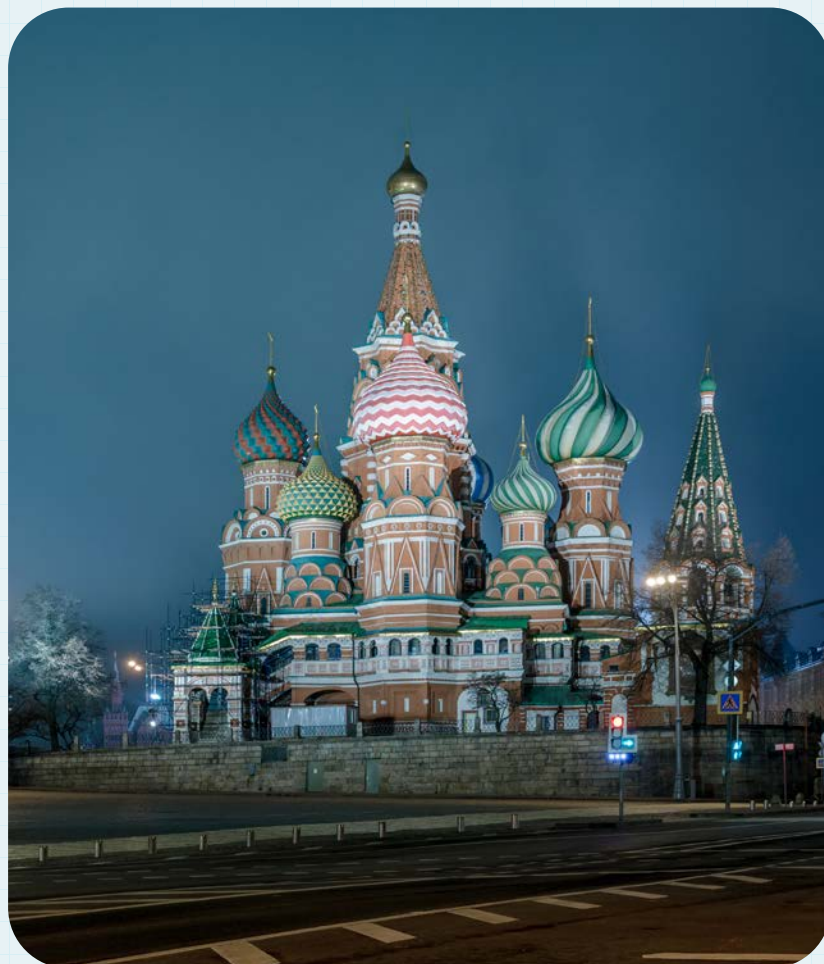
The Russian presence has been unmistakable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The Serbian donation of Sputnik V vaccines to North Macedonia,<sup>43</sup> for example, was mediated by Ivan Stoilkovic, MP and leader of the Serbian Democratic Party in North Macedonia, who, on multiple occasions, has openly displayed an affinity towards Russia<sup>44</sup>. The government's decision to not procure the Sputnik V vaccine while no other vaccines were available was condemned by almost all opposition party leaders.<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, between 2016 and 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also expelled Russian diplomats on three occasions. The first expulsion in 2018 came as an act of solidarity with the United Kingdom over the Skripal case<sup>46</sup>. Two more in 2021, meanwhile, were accompanied with no official explanation apart from it being a matter of national security.<sup>47</sup> Some politicians showed neutrality<sup>48</sup> towards these decisions, though others criticized them openly<sup>49</sup>.

While Macedonian politicians display a cautious approach in commenting on Russia and its actions, most politicians from Albanian parties (except government officials<sup>50</sup>) espouse negative attitudes.<sup>51</sup>

☛ **Russia showed Christian love and intelligence and did not respond to the Macedonian decision, but did it in a very principled and cultural way [...] this is a 'deja vu' moment where Macedonia is trying, on one hand, to flatter the West and the EU and to prove itself as the most loyal ally and, on the other hand, to demonstrate power in front of the domestic public.**<sup>52</sup>

**Ivan Stoilkovic,**  
leader of the Democratic Party of Serbs, 2021



☛ **North Macedonia expelled three Russian diplomats on different occasions since 2018.**

## Concerning openness to Beijing

More than 80% of surveyed experts agreed that China's influence in North Macedonia is minor to non-existent. The Chinese Embassy, however, makes its sizable presence in the country apparent through regular meetings with significant political figures, garnering positive coverage in both traditional and social media.<sup>53</sup> Two of the biggest Macedonian political parties have expressed their appreciation towards China for promoting a constructive relationship and beneficial cooperation on the economy, healthcare, culture, investment, and infrastructure<sup>54</sup>.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>55</sup>, through multiple memoranda



of understanding with China, is being used as a soft power instrument, influencing crucial political decisions. The availability of below-market loans to finance new infrastructure also raises concerns about the emerging levels of debt dependency on Chinese providers of the country.<sup>56</sup> Cooperation with China was, nevertheless, more than welcomed by the previous VMRO-DPMNE government.

☛ **Successful realization of the projects so far is the best guarantee and motivation for continuing cooperation (with China). In this context, success stories should not only continue, they should be promoted in every possible way.**<sup>57</sup>

**Nikola Poposki,**  
former Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2017

Current Prime Minister Zaev has on many occasions expressed the readiness of his government to implement bilateral infrastructure projects with China which are of great interest to North Macedonia<sup>58</sup> and indicated appreciation for China's willingness to approve loans to the country for building critical infrastructure.<sup>59</sup>

Politicians from the smaller Albanian parties, meanwhile, seem to hold either neutral or predominantly negative<sup>60</sup> attitudes towards China but are not as vocal about it as they are towards Russian influence. Even though DUI, the biggest Albanian Party, has voiced concern about the rise of China in their latest manifesto<sup>61</sup> and reiterated its orientation towards the West, some politicians have given indications that they are open-minded towards Beijing, particularly with respect to donations and investments that concern the Albanian population.<sup>62</sup>

The generally positive sentiment towards China has increased during the pandemic against a backdrop that has seen China offer significant medical support to North Macedonia<sup>63</sup> to acclaim from politicians of all stripes. An overt pro-Beijing orientation, in fact, was displayed by Prime Minister Zaev during his visit to a vaccination center, together with the Minister of Health and the Chinese Ambassador<sup>64</sup>. The event witnessed the prime minister openly declare his preference for the Sinovac vaccine.



# Public administration

## Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

# 42

/100



Since independence, North Macedonia has sought to address numerous critical challenges including the integrity of public management. The government, in this vein, has pursued<sup>65</sup> public administration reforms, in accordance with EU recommendations, though they have engendered little impact. While governments come and go, the public administration continues to face rampant corruption<sup>66</sup> and politicization<sup>67</sup> (including numerous nepotism cases<sup>68</sup>) that dampen already

paltry citizen trust in public institutions<sup>69</sup>. The implementation of the judicial reform strategy<sup>70</sup>, however, has achieved some notable progress in recent years<sup>71</sup>. But North Macedonia has yet to establish mechanisms to ensure judicial independence and accountability. The country has also made progress towards more inclusive and accountable democracy overall<sup>72</sup>.



## Foreign influence requires more attention

North Macedonia's legal framework governing foreign influence can be categorized as insufficient, with party financing a particular point of vulnerability. While laws regulating this type of interference (e.g. bans on foreign financing)<sup>73</sup> exist, monitoring remains insufficient<sup>74</sup> and circumvention rife. Several cases have previously revealed financial manipulation by organized crime in politics from both domestic and foreign actors<sup>75</sup>. Moreover, it is apparent that not enough space was devoted to the topic of foreign influence in the country's

main strategic documents. The National Defense Strategy<sup>76</sup> is the only strategic document that clearly recognizes foreign interference, in the form of foreign intelligence services, as a grave threat facing the country. Other documents, meanwhile, cover foreign influence related to cyber espionage sponsored by other countries,<sup>77</sup> the financing of terrorism by foreign actors,<sup>78</sup> and extremism<sup>79</sup>. In contrast to its NATO allies, no relevant strategic document in the country, however, specifically mentions Russian or Chinese influence or proposes solutions for preventing such influence in the future.

The government, that said, has adopted an Action Plan for combating disinformation<sup>80</sup>, representing a positive step forward even if the initiative requires further information on its implementation and time horizon.

★ **The National Defense Strategy is the only strategic document clearly recognizing foreign interference.**



## Cyber security on the radar

Over the past few years, more attention has been given to cyber security, especially following the country's NATO accession and the adoption of the Cyber Security Strategy,<sup>81</sup> which extensively defines and addresses these threats. The Defense Strategy also recognizes cyber threats as a serious potential threat that can undermine the constitutional order,<sup>82</sup> underscoring North Macedonia's commitment to preventing such threats. National bodies responsible for preventing hybrid and cyber-attacks, in practice, are still not satisfactory, witness the hacking of the National Election Committee website on election day<sup>83</sup>.

★ **The electoral commission's website was hacked on the day of elections in 2020.**



“ The hacking of the National Election Committee website was intended to undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process. This incident was a debacle which had a much delayed reaction from relevant institutions, giving the hackers time to wipe away all evidence and leaving the country without a suspect for further investigation and prosecution which will allow similar events to happen in the future and showing that the institutions lack even minimum capacity in this sphere.

Expert from academia

## Strengthening electoral integrity

Election laws in North Macedonia fall short - specific regulations are lacking on the involvement of third parties in political campaigns, online spending limits, and the online space overall. The transparency of the State Election Committee has improved since 2019 with regards to election results and reporting but regulations governing the registration of candidates and election-related dispute<sup>84</sup> resolution mechanisms still need to be addressed<sup>85</sup>.

Despite Moscow accusing the West of putting “unprecedented pressure” on President Ivanov to give the post of prime minister to the opposition in 2016<sup>86</sup>, only four years later the same Moscow-based MFA labeled the accusations of Russian interference<sup>87</sup> in the 2020 snap general election as “absurd” and accused Western politicians of hypocrisy and a “cynical use of double standards”<sup>88</sup>.



“ **VMRO-DPMNE, being the largest opposition party, nominates the President of the National Election Commission<sup>89</sup> and the fact that this party was accused of cooperation and funding from Russian structures in the past raises serious doubts about the integrity and independence from foreign influence of this important body.**

Expert from public administration



## High-level corruption

Macedonia is home to chronic levels of corruption and graft that permeate every level of the state, ranking 111<sup>th</sup> on the Corruption Perception Index<sup>90</sup> in 2020. The 2017 Talir case<sup>91</sup> highlights the problem of high-level abuse of power - the top suspect, former Prime Minister Gruevski, fled to Hungary<sup>92</sup> as he was being investigated for money laundering and abuse of office. And the Titanik 2 saw the Special Prosecution Office launch an investigation the same year into two government officials accused of abusing their official position for illegal public procurement<sup>93</sup>. The SPO itself, ironically, became embroiled in a scandal in 2019<sup>94</sup>, shaking public trust in anti-corruption efforts. Media reports have also surfaced about police investigations concerning possible illegal party financing and the laundering of funds from Hungary<sup>95</sup>.



★ **Corruption remains a challenge for North Macedonia, ranked as 111<sup>th</sup> by the Corruption Perceptions Index.**

These cases reveal a notable lack of transparency in political financing and inadequate legislative frameworks governing party financing in North Macedonia. These shortcomings can contribute to the monetization of politics through the covert funding of politicians by organized crime or other nefarious interests. The independent Audit Office has reported on inconsistencies but oversight pertaining to sources of funding falls to the Tax Authority, which is notoriously weak and susceptible to influence<sup>96</sup>. During the last election, changes were made to the Electoral Code to allow political parties to transfer funds from their main permanent accounts to temporary electoral accounts, a development that was widely (mis)used by parties<sup>97</sup>.

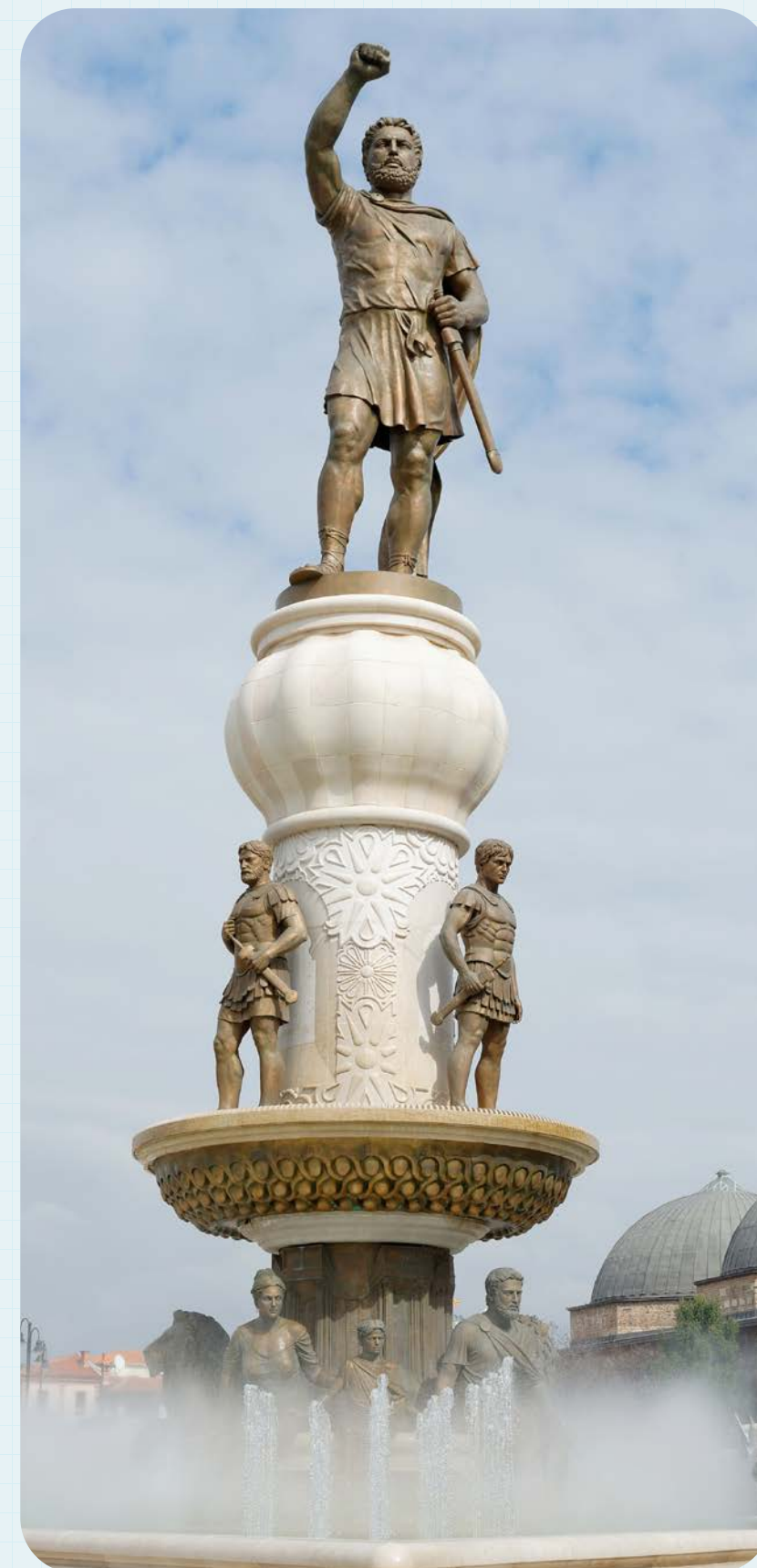
💡 **The fact that crucial corruption legislation is being adopted almost 30 years after the country's independence clearly shows that previous governments enjoyed the commodity of corruption and misuse of public resources for private interests. Now, the work of the National Anti-Corruption Body and a Vice Prime Minister for the fight against corruption is a clear sign of the government's will to regulate all aspects from this broad spectrum, which is a good step forward for the country in the fight against corruption.**

**Expert** from public administration

## Awareness and resilience-building

33 out of 37 surveyed experts agreed that while the national election monitoring body shows some level of awareness concerning cases of foreign interference, they do not hold the necessary knowledge or capacity to respond to and address such cases. This level of awareness, though, seems to be lower among the executive and legislative bodies since foreign influence is rarely or vaguely mentioned in the main strategic documents. While the need for state resilience building is emphasized in most of these documents, it is not mentioned in connection to foreign influence or interference nor are specific plans on addressing such influence put forward. And 21 of 37 surveyed experts underlined the fact that a whole-of-society approach is lacking. The civil sector, notwithstanding, remains the biggest driver of changes in this area.

★ **21 of 37 experts agree that the whole-of-society approach towards resilience-building lacks completely.**





# Information landscape

## Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

45  
/100



**V**iolations of media freedom have become the norm in North Macedonia despite the country's efforts and ambitions to join the EU. According to the most recent Report of the European Commission<sup>98</sup>, the country has made only limited progress in this area since 2019. Numerous media freedom transgressions were recorded during the pandemic and the elections. All interviewed experts consider the state of media freedom and independence as "concerning" in North Macedonia and recognize the need for intensified

self-regulation to support the advancement of professional standards and journalism. Disinformation and conspiracy theories continue to bombard the online space<sup>99</sup> and government efforts to combat it remain limited, leaving this area vulnerable to foreign influence and as a potential safe haven for pro-Kremlin narratives and propaganda.

## Improving media freedom

According to the World Press Freedom Index<sup>100</sup>, even though North Macedonia still finds itself in the "problematic" category, its overall level of media freedom has steadily improved since 2016 when the country ranked last in the region<sup>101</sup>. In 2021, the country ranked 90<sup>th</sup> in the world. Improvements include several recent important steps: the creation of the Register of Professional Online Media<sup>102</sup> and the signing of a charter on journalist working conditions and a draft Fair Working Contract for journalists and media workers in digital media<sup>103</sup> - two major documents for the protection of journalists in the country. A notable step forward by the SDSM-led Government on media freedom reform concerned the decision to cut state media advertising<sup>104</sup>. The previous VMRO-DPMNE-led government, rather than employing this budget for public communication, used it as a tool for propaganda and editorializing. The media lease was widely abused,<sup>105</sup> contributing to the general ban on media campaigns by the current government. Furthermore, cases of mass surveillance and the wiretapping of journalists' phones took place under the previous government<sup>106</sup>.

The SDSM-led government, moreover, has demonstrated a commitment to transforming the public media broadcaster MRT from merely being a party bulletin to a professional service for all citizens that could

underline a strong identity pillar for the country<sup>107</sup>. Regrettably, the tendency of senior government officials to threaten and insult journalists remains<sup>108</sup>. The culture of impunity is well entrenched<sup>109</sup> and still an obstacle for journalist safety in North Macedonia. The numerous cases of attacks on journalists<sup>110</sup> mobilized protests led by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia and the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers. These groups requested changes to the Criminal Code to end impunity and protect media workers from all types of attacks<sup>111</sup>.

★ **North Macedonia enjoys the highest media freedom among the Western Balkan countries surveyed.**





# Quality of information space

The quality of the information space in North Macedonia is far from ideal due to deep polarization along political lines and private media outlets often tied to political or business interests that influence their content<sup>112</sup>. Whereas there are multiple channels for information and numerous information providers<sup>113</sup>, the numbers alone do not guarantee genuine media and information pluralism.

And though there is a favorable legal framework<sup>114</sup> for media freedom and a quality information space, implementation lags behind and often depends on the will of political centers of power<sup>115</sup>. While media outlets must register with the regulating body and disclose information on their ownership, for example, the statutory duties for openness of ownership can be easily bypassed, especially for outlets affiliated to political parties<sup>116</sup>.

★ North Macedonia scores 64/100 in the access to media diversity online indicator.

“ The situation of the quality of the information space is deplorable due to a lack of media professionalism - amateurism and lack of education makes it susceptible to foreign influence. The previous VMRO-led government methodically worked towards the destruction of professional journalism by placing obedient amateurs that will share their narratives and propaganda. This led to a non-resilient informational landscape of the country which is vulnerable towards foreign influence.

Expert from public administration



The lack of regulation of social media platforms has contributed to an abundance of misinformation and conspiracy theories that further harm the quality of the overall information space given that 58% of Macedonians are social media consumers<sup>117</sup> and consequently exposed to innumerable disinformation narratives<sup>118</sup>. The online portals remain the biggest concern in spreading disinformation narratives because, unlike traditional media, they have no imprint and they are often registered offshore<sup>119</sup> - this means that their true ownership cannot be determined for possible court resolution<sup>120</sup>.

★ 37% of adult respondents in North Macedonia believe that COVID-19 was deliberately created by the United States.

The most recent cases of massive disinformation flow were related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the (un)intentional manipulation of public opinion leading to inflated toxic nationalism<sup>121</sup> in an already fragile society. The data from fact-checking operations reported that about two-thirds of the articles debunked in 2020 were COVID-19 related.<sup>122</sup>



# Serving pro-Kremlin interests

While 59% of surveyed experts agreed that there are certain journalists, editors, and programs that regularly promote pro-Russian interests, a lower number of respondents (44%) thought that pro-Beijing narratives appear occasionally and/or accidentally due to journalistic mistakes/unprofessionalism. Also, whereas the majority of surveyed experts agreed that Chinese influence is minor to non-existent in both traditional and online media, Moscow's influence was identified as "significant".

There are four registered foreign-owned broadcasters<sup>123</sup>, one of them (local radio station) owned by the Russian-owned International Slavic University. The European Parliament has raised concerns about hate and destructive speech in the country's foreign-owned media, particularly a group of outlets controlled by Hungarian investors close to Prime Minister Orbán's administration<sup>124</sup>. On the other hand, little evidence of Russian interference, such as covert media sponsorship, has surfaced<sup>125</sup>. All interviewed experts pointed to TV Alfa as being financed from these sources<sup>126</sup>, raising questions concerning whether the television station is part of a much broader Moscow operation to expand its influence and spread propaganda in North Macedonia.

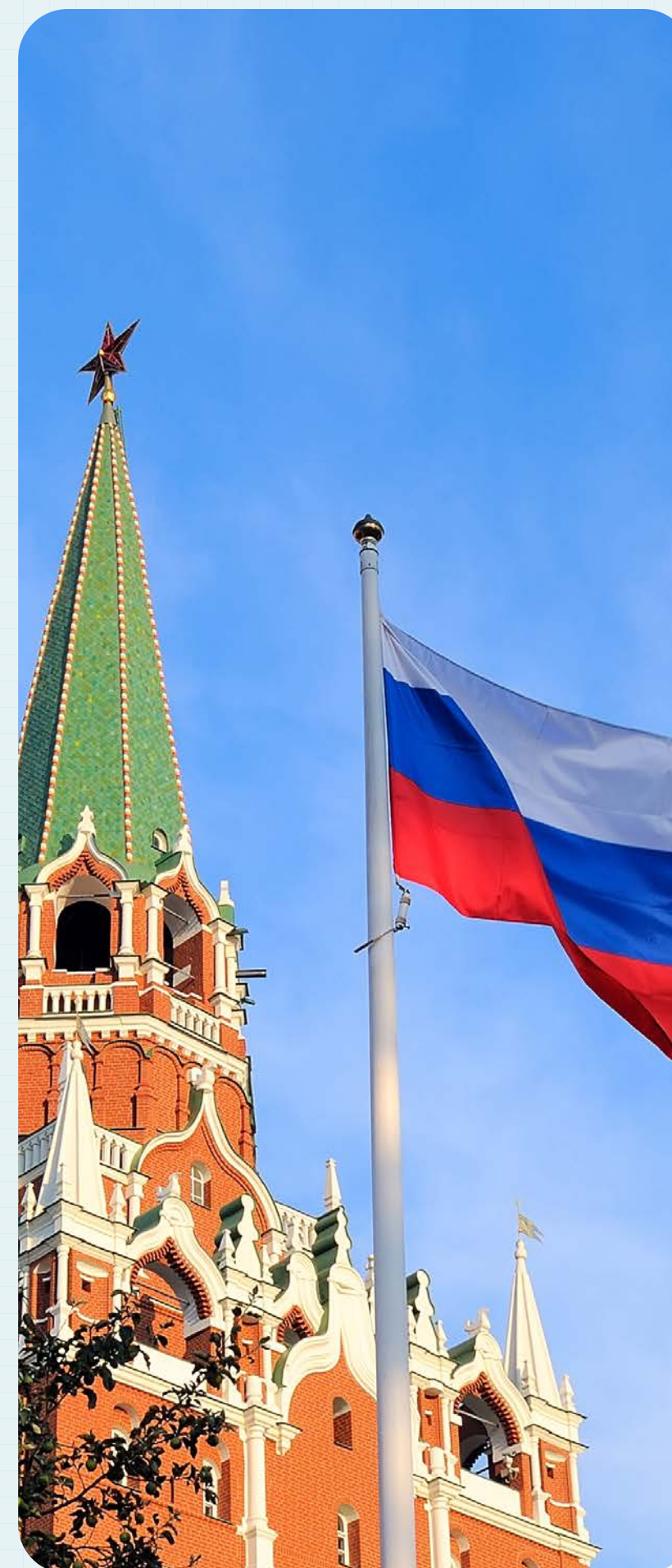


“ While state-owned media has been careful in providing space for pro-Russian narratives over the past few years, these narratives permeate in public media mostly through informative narratives and in the area of culture and it is hard to define if those narratives are organized or coincidental. Sometimes they are present only due to lack of elementary journalistic education and journalistic mistakes and amateurism. During the previous regime (VMRO), not only was the pro-Russian narrative very present in the media, it was also imposed on the general public.

Expert from the media sector

The information space remains vulnerable to foreign actors, in particular, Kremlin influence with 12 of 27 expert survey respondents agreeing that pro-Russian actors occasionally manage to shape discourse/opinions on social media and 7 of 27 agreeing that the impact of sources spreading disinformation on online media affects a significant part of the population. The online presence of the Russian Embassy in the country, through seemingly entertaining or anecdotal content, is alarming given that some of its tweets have been re-shared thousands of times and appeared in published media<sup>127</sup>, resulting in the Embassy garnering additional popularity and followers for further purposes.

“ 18 of 30 experts agree that pro-Kremlin actors or narratives receive regular attention in the Macedonian public broadcaster.





# Civic & academic space

## Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

40  
/100



Even though the V-Dem index on political polarization<sup>128</sup> indicates a slight upward trend compared to 2018, Macedonian society remains polarized, mostly because of lengthy political crises from 2015-2017<sup>129</sup>. Political party affiliation, alongside ethnic and religious divides, remain the dominant cleavages in society and the primary predictor of social conflict.

The prior government's censorship attempts, attacks on the political opposition, and failure to provide meaningful access to government information hindered the practice of freedom of expression<sup>130</sup>. A caustic approach that included insulting rhetoric and violence was utilized against civil society as well.

## Bloody Thursday

The greatest strike to the civic space in North Macedonia over the past decade took place during VMRO-DPMNE-led protests in 2017 organized, primarily, in opposition to the election of Albanian Parliament Speaker Talat Xhaferi. The developments culminated in the storming of the parliament building<sup>131</sup> and the flaring of ethnic tensions in the country. The clashes also resulted in significant injuries to politicians, journalists, and police officials.<sup>132</sup> The incident, later called "Bloody Thursday", was indicative of a rapidly growing social and political crisis in an already deeply polarized country. Anti-migrant social movements, including the "Awakening", gained traction the same year. Progressive civil society organizations, for their part, urged authorities to provide adequate protection to migrants and investigative journalists.<sup>133</sup>

Anti-government and nationalistic protests were also held before the ratification of the Prespa Agreement (to change the country's name)<sup>134</sup>. The protests were decentralized between 84 organizations<sup>135</sup> (political parties, NGOs, civil society initiatives) which were later united under the slogan "Macedonia Blocks" signing a Strategic Cooperation Charter<sup>136</sup> against constitutional changes.

Regarding civic space actors that are not in direct or public relationship with Russia, there were situations like the movement "Boycotting" for which suspicions emerged concerning possible relations with Moscow's foreign policy interests aimed at, for example, preventing North Macedonia's accession to NATO. A large number of people involved in the organization of this movement are in some way connected to Russia. The protests featured numerous banners purporting "there is an alternative" and the alternative they offered was Russia.

Expert from academia





# Attacks against civil society

North Macedonia has experienced a slight improvement in the Civil Society Sustainability Index<sup>137</sup> since 2016, partially due to a change in government. Following the 2016 elections, the political crisis continued to negatively affect civil society until a new government was formed – this administration has adopted a more open approach and includes CSOs in decision-making processes.

A step forward was further taken in 2017, with the Council for Cooperation and Development of the Civil Society Sector establishing an advisory body to the government on issues related to cooperation, dialogue, and development of the civil society sector<sup>138</sup>. This move has contributed to the active inclusion of civil society in policy-drafting, consultations, the sharing of expertise, and the implementation of related monitoring.<sup>139</sup> This shift was further supported through the adoption of a strategy on cooperation and development of civil society.<sup>140</sup>

That said, in 2016, the Public Revenue Office announced it would conduct financial investigations of the Open Society Foundation and 20 additional CSOs<sup>141</sup>, claiming the move was not politically motivated. In 2017, the VMRO-DPMNE party and its affiliated organizations launched a crackdown against CSOs focused on human rights and governance-related work, particularly those that receive foreign funding<sup>142</sup>

“While most of the foreign CSOs operating in North Macedonia are funded by the West and aim to promote democratic principles and values in our civil society, a few associations are funded by Russia to subtly promote its interests in the country. China’s influence on the other hand is concentrated towards state resources. The greatest point of vulnerability of the Macedonian civil sector towards foreign influence concerns funding and the lack of domestic capacities, leading to CSO underfunding and putting them in a position to seek out more foreign grants, sometimes at the high price of their independence.”

Expert from civil society

“Although most sustainable from the Western Balkan countries covered by the Index (scoring 54/100), the civil society requires empowerment.”

as part of a move to support the “desorosization” of civil society.<sup>143</sup>

Cases of state interference in the work of CSOs in the form of unannounced inspections, excessive audits, threats, and harassment were noted as well<sup>144</sup>.

Civil society has struggled to gain the public trust<sup>145</sup> after being subjected to negative campaigns for an extended period of time. This is exacerbated by the failure of citizens to recognize the potential role of civil society even as CSOs have demonstrated that they are contributing to beneficial societal change.

# Russian friendship associations

The Russian embassy has overseen the creation of roughly 30 Macedonia-Russian “friendship associations” with more than 5000 members who officially support Russia’s engagement in the country<sup>146</sup>. Russia’s soft-power strategy has seen Moscow expand its cultural influence in North Macedonia through these associations - the Russian Cultural Center in Skopje is emblematic

of the strategy. The interviewed experts agreed that the Kremlin’s strategy is to promote the Russian economy, folklore, literature, and traditions in North Macedonia, gradually and subtly turning this soft support into political admiration for Moscow. The President of the Union of Russian Associations in North Macedonia, however, rejects this characterization<sup>147</sup>. The work of Rosotrudnichestvo<sup>148</sup> Skopje and its relations with the Macedonian-Russian organizations should not be overlooked given that one of its central activities relates to the security of Russia’s foreign and domestic policy<sup>149</sup>.

“Russia uses business, cultural, religious, tradition, and language ties with North Macedonia in order to form associations and covertly spread its influence via soft power methods. There is no Kremlin funded CSO with the main purpose of promoting democracy, human rights, or the rule of law. The civil sector’s response towards such influence is elitist and analytical in its nature, providing policy papers and research in which they only detect foreign influence and share it with a small group of people. Their output is lacking and fails to raise awareness among the public. The only way to prevent foreign influence in the civil society sector is greater transparency.”

Expert from civil society





## Lack of Chinese presence

China, for its part, has refrained from showing any interest, as of yet, in the Macedonian civil society sector and seems to prefer its traditional approach in communicating with government officials rather than through NGOs or private businesses. This strategy, nevertheless, could shift in the future. The Confucius Institute is the only known Chinese NGO in the country and was established in 2013 at Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje<sup>150</sup> and aimed at improving education cooperation between the PRC and North Macedonia. The Institute is mostly focused on promoting the Chinese language and culture in the country and is not very active on social media<sup>151</sup>.

★ 24 of 28 experts describe Beijing's influence on North Macedonian civil society as non-existent or limited.



## Potential biases in academia

While the former government sought to limit academic freedom through legislative overregulation and the exertion of pressure on the academic community,<sup>152</sup> the situation has been improving<sup>153</sup> and academic freedom in North Macedonia is generally upheld<sup>154</sup>. However, corruption in academia is widespread<sup>155</sup> and large-scale brain drain has harmed the country's research organizations. Many professors have become engaged in politics and elected to office only to later return to academia following the end of their mandates.<sup>156</sup> This dynamic raises questions concerning potential bias.

Regarding foreign influence in the academic sphere, the International Slavic Institute and its two campuses in two cities in North Macedonia are a case in point. The Bitola campus has seen several Macedonian-Russian friendship associations registered. This university was established in cooperation with Tambov State University with which they partner through exchanges in the scientific, teaching, and student spheres, the joint organization of conferences, and training programs.<sup>157</sup> The university justifies this position by arguing that it aspires to promote good relationships between the Balkans and Russia<sup>158</sup>.

★ While scoring as resilient (17/100), one of the most pressing challenges in the academic space is a large-scale brain drain.







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**85** <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/freedom-world/2021>

**86** <https://tass.com/politics/933889>

**87** Russia saw Mickoski as the only leader of a serious political party who, on the one hand, constantly reiterates that his party favors North Macedonia's membership in NATO and the EU but, at the same time, backs the annulment or amendment of the Prespa Agreement that made the membership possible. <https://respublica.edu.mk/mk/blog/2020-02-10-09-14-47>

**88** <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/02/14/sd-meps-ask-the-com-mission-about-hungarian-interference-in-north-macedonian-elections/>

**89** The State Election Commission is composed of seven members with a four year mandate. Opposition political parties nominate a president and two members of the SEC while the ruling parties nominate a vice president and three members of the SEC. All are elected by the Assembly with a two-thirds majority vote of the total number of MPs.

**90** <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/mkd>

**91** <https://www.transparency.org/en/projects/cases-project/data/illegal-financing-of-a-political-party-talir-case>

**92** <https://www.dw.com/en/macedonian-ex-pm-escapes-jail-term-flees-to-hungary/a-46298504>

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**95** <https://www.ostro.si/en/stories/oiling-or-bans-propaganda-machine>

**96** Illicit Financial Flows in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, p. 13, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IFFs-Balkans-English-WEB-Nov2020-1.pdf>

**97** Ibid.

**98** [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/country\\_20\\_1795](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/country_20_1795)

**99** Infodemics, a snap election, and a (luke-warm) Western welcome: North Macedonia's identity at stake on Twitter Study II – Content of Disinformation, p. 13, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/38-infodemics-a-snap-election-and-a-lukewarm-western-welcome-north-macedonia-s-identity-at-stake-on-twitter-study-ii-content-of-disinformation>

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**101** <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/21/reporters-without-borders-north-macedonia-surpasses-serbia-on-media-freedom-index/>

**102** <https://semmlk.com/soopshteni-ja/699-www-promedia-mk>

**103** <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/01/31/macedonia-online-media-vi-di-vaka-endorsed-the-european-charter-on-journalists-working-conditions/>

**104** <https://vlada.mk/node/13272>

**105** Lost Among the Priorities, p. 8, <http://www.eu.inf.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/LostAmongPriorities.pdf>

**106** <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/22/north-macedonia-journalists-tell-wiretapping-trial-about-surveillance/>

**107** <https://vlada.mk/node/18048>

**108** <https://rsf.org/en/north-macedonia>

**109** <https://rsf.org/en/north-macedonia>

**110** <https://znm.org.mk/povreda-na-novinari/> <https://ifex.org/north-macedonia-government-official-sends-threats-and-sexual-comments-to-journalists/> <https://ifex.org/macedonia-former-ruling-party-propagandist-calls-for-rape-of-woman-journalist/>

**111** <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%98-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B-D%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B7-%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8/a-55718875>

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**115** <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-freedom5>

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**117** <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-north-macedonia>

**118** GLOBSEC, Pro-Kremlin Networks on Facebook in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, 2021, non-public report

**119** <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Wiki-for-mediafreedom/Concentration-of-media-ownership-in-the-Republic-of-Macedonia>

**120** <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/14/how-hungarian-olive-oil-kept-macedonian-media-afloat/>

**121** <https://ifex.org/covid-19-north-macedonian-border-closures-exploited-to-spread-disinformation/>

**122** Vibrant Information Barometer 2021: North Macedonia, p.4

**123** АНАЛИЗА НА МЕДИУМСКАТА СОПСТВЕНОСТ ВО 2021 ГОДИНА, p. 3

**124** <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/14/how-hungarian-olive-oil-kept-macedonian-media-afloat/>

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**146** <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/28940267.html>

**147** <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/28939853.html>

**148** The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, commonly known as Rossotrudnichestvo, is an autonomous Russian federal government agency under the jurisdiction of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**149** <https://mkd.rs.gov.ru/mk/about>

**150** <http://nubsk.edu.mk/en/services/users/> The institute only uses Facebook confucius-institute

**151** <https://www.facebook.com/institutkonfucijmk/> and boasts a very limited following (2500) and does not post regularly.

**152** <https://www.isshs.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/TECHNOLOGY-OF-STATE-CAPTURE-Overregulation-in-Macedonian-Media-and-Academia.pdf>

**153** <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>

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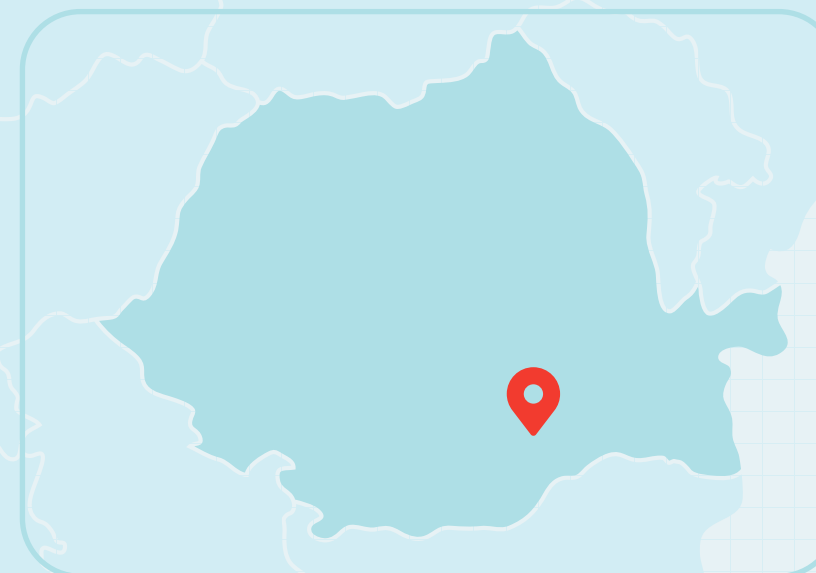
# Focus on Romania



**T**he long-standing and uncontested Euro-Atlantic orientation of prominent political figures, embraced (albeit formally) even by the radical AUR party, underpins Romania's resilience to malign foreign influence.

The country's pro-western commitment is reflected in policies seeking to foster cooperation (rather than competition) in the EU and NATO and enhance security in the entire Black Sea Region. The adoption of legislation paving the way for additional scrutiny over the involvement of foreign actors in critical infrastructure was motivated by the same security-related considerations undergirding the country's moves to avert foreign malign influence. Romania's extensive economic integration with the EU and identity-cultural legacies further mitigate its vulnerability to foreign interference.

The direct operations of the Kremlin and Beijing remain relatively limited and struggle to find a hospitable environment in the Romanian information space and civil society. Yet internal vulnerabilities, including political instability, widespread corruption, a lack of transparency in relevant decision-making processes, and limited enforcement of laws, create inroads for indirect influence to seep in through domestic agents. Rising societal polarization, nationalism, populism, and social conservatism challenging Western liberal values and democracy all open a window of opportunity for external influence.



↓ Vulnerability score

29  
/100

## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes



Political landscape



Public administration



Information landscape



Civic and academic space

# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

42  
/100

**A**fter over thirty years since the fall of communism and the country becoming an EU member, the Romanian population is still characterized by deep social and economic inequalities. The differences in access to basic social services, education and healthcare between the rural and urban population, and even between different regions have created a strong feeling of under-representation and disenfranchisement in a large part of the society, leading to polarization. Against this general

background, conservatism and traditionalism have flourished, creating an audience easily manipulated by populist politicians and other opportunistic parties. These unaddressed vulnerabilities are creating opportunities for malign actors interested in promoting their interests.

## The Kremlin exploiting wedge issues

The long history of acrimonious relations between Romania and Russia<sup>3</sup> has seen the population largely reject Kremlin propaganda. Romanians have been drawn, however, to certain ideas that cohere to Russian interests. Russia has sought to amplify and exploit a core set of fault lines within Romanian society: low confidence in state institutions<sup>4</sup>, authoritarian sympathies<sup>5</sup>, the prioritization of security over self-expression<sup>6</sup>, nationalism, and ethnocentrism<sup>7</sup>.

Explicitly pro-Kremlin narratives that present Russia as an alternative to the West are nearly non-existent (this blackout extends even to Russia-owned outlets like sputnik.md)<sup>8</sup>. Rather than pulling Romania into its 'fold', Moscow has merely sought to alienate the country from its Western allies, thereby sapping at the root of EU and NATO solidarity and unity. The Kremlin's strategy in Romania, in other words, is to exacerbate existing divisions to the point that the capacity of the state and society to maintain a functional democracy and Western alliances is exhausted<sup>9</sup>.



## Strong support for the EU & NATO

Even those who describe themselves as pro-EU and anti-Russian can fall prey to Kremlin-backed disinformation and information manipulation campaigns. Certain segments of the population believe various narratives that are often amplified by the Kremlin itself or by domestic actors supportive of Moscow (or by those with converging interests). While the support for EU and NATO membership remains overarching and strong, the impact of information manipulation campaigns is reflected in public opinion as well, with 38% believing

that NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases, 29% considering NATO to be an aggressive organization and a tool for the US to control other countries, and 37% agreeing that Western countries often unjustly accuse Russia of unlawful or fraudulent behavior<sup>10</sup>. The Kremlin, therefore, finds indirect support for its agenda through this Eurosceptic and anti-American sentiment and the purported shortcomings and hypocrisy of Romania's Western allies. Moscow has sought to magnify and exploit these perceptions to the greatest extent possible.

The Kremlin-aligned worldview is also facilitated by other deep-seated convictions, mostly nationalistic and ultraconservative in nature, that find safe harbor among certain segments of the public and provide an opening for opinion manipulation.



## Kremlin's agenda aligned with nationalist elements

These beliefs broadly fall into two categories. The first concerns the ethnocentric idea that Romania is a victim of great power games – this narrative is prominent among a wide swath of mainstream society but also the fringe far-right (Romania's "great history" but "unjust destiny"). The second, meanwhile, alleges an "external conspiracy against Romania" ("Western disrespect towards the East", "foreigners hate us/ envy us", "the nefarious elites conspire with foreign powers out of self-interest"). The latter storyline is more prevalent on the fringe and frequently involves varying degrees of xenophobia, homophobia, and chauvinism<sup>11</sup>. While it is difficult to ascertain whether formal ties to Moscow exist, the behavior of some radical influencers<sup>12</sup> indicates they are aware of overlaps between their own agendas and that of the Kremlin and use it to their advantage.

## Russia perceived as an aggressor

The direct antipathy between Romania and Russia has only cemented itself since Romania's accession to NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007 (largely branded as a bulwark against potential Russian aggression<sup>13</sup>) and its strategic partnership with the US<sup>14</sup> that has come to include the hosting of military bases and components of a missile defense shield. Russia's annexation of Crimea and military action in Ukraine and Georgia has

underlined Romanian perceptions of Russia as a regional aggressor. The image of Russia as an aggressor is reflected in public opinion – 58% of adult population considered Russia to be a threat in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

These views have been further fueled by Romania's and Russia's clashing strategic interests in Moldova. Romania claims special relations with the Republic of Moldova, which continues to be seen as Romanian territory unjustly "snatched" by the USSR after WWII<sup>16</sup>. Russia's interests in Moldova, on the other hand, are exercised through Moldova's large Russian-speaking minority and the internationally unrecognized independent region of Transnistria in the east of Moldova<sup>17</sup>.



## Indifference to China

Simultaneously, building on constructive relations during communism, Beijing has for a long time sought to persuade political leaders in Bucharest to adopt a more China-friendly approach<sup>21</sup>. Despite the lack of results so far, the general indifference of the population and the presence of some positive attitudes towards China (30% of respondents think the Chinese regime could be a role model for Romania<sup>22</sup>) could provide future inroads for Chinese influence in the country, against the background of intensifying efforts by Beijing itself to that end.



## Disappointment with democracy

Widespread dissatisfaction with how democracy works in the country, meanwhile, contributed to the rise of an anti-establishment party in the 2020 parliamentary elections.<sup>18</sup> This disgruntlement, accompanied with political chaos and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>19</sup> is steering the public towards more general openness to a strong autocratic leader taking charge (preferences for this form of government increased by 19 percentage points to 58% over the past year)<sup>20</sup> and potentially more sympathy toward the associated system of government, well-represented by Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping.

★ **27% of adult respondents in Romania were satisfied with how democracy works in their country in 2020.**



# Political landscape

## Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

# 18

/100



Despite gloomy predictions in the 1990s related to a stalled anti-communist revolution and a high degree of political continuity with the former regime, Romanian democracy has endured. Both the population and political elites share a sanguine outlook on the EU and NATO, harbor suspicions concerning Russia and (moderate) suspicion of China. Continued political turbulence and the presence of the far-right in parliament, nonetheless, stand out as pressing problems<sup>23, 24</sup>.

Romania remains an imperfect democracy<sup>25</sup> that has, for several years, experienced a high degree of political instability, exemplified in the fact that ten prime ministers have taken office over the past ten years. While democratic institutions and processes appear to be resilient at present<sup>26</sup>, this record of instability poses a potential vulnerability.

Even if Romanians hold rather conservative views<sup>27</sup>, ultra-conservative movements and parties have systematically failed

to gain traction in the polls until 2020. This is because mainstream parties have mostly been able to cater – in a moderate way – to the expectations of the conservative electorate.

Far-right or populist parties enter the Parliament every few cycles but they are kept out of the government, partly because the Hungarian minority party (UDMR – RDMSZ) is a much more reliable partner, willing to govern with any party to safeguard the representation of their constituency and the position of local ethnic Hungarian elites. Their participation in government also does not generate any major backlash from the Romanian majority<sup>28</sup>.

## The EU & NATO in mostly positive light

The Romanian political class is pro-European and favorable to NATO. Even the radical Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) declares the same orientation<sup>28</sup> although they promote starkly different values<sup>29</sup> and anti-EU disinformation narratives. The AUR party, for its part, has accused the EU<sup>30</sup> of “unequal treatment” of Eastern Europe and imposing perverted values<sup>31</sup>.

The largest parties in the country – the National Liberal Party and the Social Democrats – and UDMR were founders of the so-called Snagov consensus<sup>32</sup> which articulated Romania’s EU and NATO membership as the country’s overarching aim. The parties have consistently refrained from jeopardizing this position. The Social Democrats are occasionally speaking of the need for self-determination and resistance to “foreign [Western] intrusion”, based on the narratives of preserving Romania’s “traditional values” or “sovereignty”.<sup>32</sup>

The relatively new civic party USR PLUS (part of Renew Europe) is staunchly pro-European<sup>33</sup> and implicitly pro-NATO<sup>34</sup>. They have on occasion affirmed their progressive support for minority rights<sup>35</sup> too.

The National Liberal Party (PNL), which has formed the coalition in 2020 with USR PLUS and UDMR, nominated the Prime Minister, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, and gave the country’s President in 2019 is starting to turn to positions that are more

nationalistic and hostile to sexual minority rights.<sup>33</sup> Their pro-Euroatlantic rhetoric, nonetheless, stays consistent.

🗨️ **Romania does not share the views that the Alliance is in crisis and stressed that the process of NATO adaptation must continue.**<sup>36</sup>

**Bogdan Aurescu**,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs,  
2019





According to Transylvania-based analysts, the ethnic Hungarian party (UDMR) is becoming closer and closer to Viktor Orbán's regime<sup>37</sup> despite the fact that, in 2017, party leader Kelemen Hunor criticized the move to close the Central European University as undemocratic and antithetical to EU values.<sup>38</sup> The Hungarian government is expending significant resources to support Hungarian language media and NGOs in Transylvania<sup>39</sup> (albeit within the perceived parameters of the broad pro-Western consensus).

☛ **Promoting this so-called "gender identity" aberration and the aggressive activism of LGBT propagandists are among the EU's external "priorities", as the European Commission informs us... There is no other authentic family than the one based on marriage between a man and a woman, whose connection creates life. Everything else is extremism and perversion of the human being and its role as given by God.**<sup>40</sup>

**Claudiu Târziu,**  
Co-President, Alliance for the Union  
of Romanians, 2021

## Resilience to Russian interference

A majority of surveyed experts<sup>41</sup> believe that neither Russian nor Chinese interference pose an imminent threat and 19 of 22 experts believe that pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing interests have not been promoted successfully by either parliamentary or non-parliamentary actors.

Several factors contribute to the lack of success of foreign interference within the political system. I) Strident anti-Russian sentiment in Romania<sup>42</sup> constitutes a quasi-impenetrable barrier to significant (visible) interference - the political class tends to respond to these preferences of the electorate. II) Many interviewed experts believe that the only rational agenda for Russia to pursue is to create discord and weaken Romania. However, Romanian politics is already quite discordant on its own, leaving Russia in a rather



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enviable position if it wishes to take advantage of internal vulnerabilities. III) The far-right is anti-Russian<sup>43</sup> and to a lesser extent anti-Chinese<sup>44</sup> and there is no far-left party present in the political sphere.

That said, the far-right's attitudes on many policy issues, particularly women and LGBT+ rights, are identical to those held by Russian

conservatives and the Kremlin.<sup>45</sup> There are, as such, occasional bridges between the two movements<sup>46</sup>. And it is indeed impossible to rule out indirect cooperation. But apart from this value alignment, an anti-Russian platform remains paramount to the Romanian far-right, with pro-Russian voices competitors rather than allies of AUR.<sup>47</sup>

## Minimal Chinese presence

The political discourse or positions on China are rather spasmodic given Beijing's minimal presence in Romania, being blocked off by an establishment which has consistently assessed Chinese interests as clashing with Bucharest's pro-Western agenda. No party had China mentioned in their party manifesto. Some specific politicians have expressed favorable opinions of economic cooperation with China though<sup>48</sup>. Most references to China have been tailored to economic cooperation and partnerships and failed to translate to cooperation at the institutional level. Former PM Victor Ponta's seeming willingness to break the strategic consensus<sup>49</sup> to take advantage of the promise of Chinese investment and cheap construction projects marked an exception.

The promise, however, never materialized against appearances that his Chinese counterparts seemed more interested in the Romanian state guaranteeing profits. With the US intensifying its pressure on EU allies on China relations, Romania staged a semi-boycott<sup>50</sup> at the last 17+1 summit, signed on to the US-led Huawei ban<sup>51</sup>, and enacted legislation<sup>52</sup> that implicitly blocks Chinese participation in public tenders.



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★ **Romanian political entities' lack of awareness on China can be a vulnerability for the future.**

# Public administration

## Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

28  
/100



The public administration is vulnerable to corruption, nepotism and patronage from political and business interests. If these interests were to be aligned with foreign interference, they would find ways to sway the state apparatus, at least to some extent. However, for now at least, the pro-Western consensus among institutions and elites is still a strong buffer against foreign malign influence. Despite Romania scoring well in V-Dem's checks and balances index<sup>53</sup>, there have been attempts

by previous governments to control the judiciary<sup>54</sup> and to adjudicate self-serving interpretations of the Constitution. Such constitutional instability may create the conditions for one power in the state to exert a controlling influence on all others and to serve as a privileged avenue.<sup>55</sup>



## Corruption as a challenge

Corruption and nepotism are a source of widespread distrust in public institutions<sup>56</sup> and of perceptions that civil servants, including high level representatives, are a liability and a potential channel for malign influence.<sup>57</sup> Romania ranked, alongside Hungary and Bulgaria, 69<sup>th</sup> in the Corruption Perceptions Index, which puts them among the most corrupt EU member countries.<sup>58</sup> Despite aspirations and the launch of reforms, the National Anticorruption Directorate has proven to be no magic bullet<sup>59</sup>, with corruption remaining an issue within Romanian society at large.<sup>60</sup> Many civil servants feel personally threatened by EU values and regulations which

would expose their shortcomings in performance standards, while enjoying higher wages than in the private sector.

Luckily, most of the state apparatus, especially in foreign affairs, security and defense, is loyal to the country's Western orientation, and strong cooperation with NATO allies, especially the US, is an important buffer against backsliding<sup>61</sup>. While there is some controversy around the opacity of decision-making and the potentially excessive role of the secret services in internal affairs<sup>62</sup>, most legislation must be transparently posted for public scrutiny ahead of its adoption, limiting opportunities for discretionary power.

★ Romania scores 69th in the Corruption Perceptions Index.



## Elements of resilience

The national defense strategy of Romania is updated each time the President is sworn into office, within six months of taking oath, as per constitutional requirements.<sup>63</sup> This regular update of national security policy is a good practice other countries in the region could emulate, enabling the government to routinely evaluate new security challenges facing the country. The 2020 version<sup>64</sup> provides a comprehensive understanding of the country's security environment, recognizing the need to build capabilities to counter malign influence. While the Supreme National Defense Council is responsible for coordinating defense and security

strategies at the highest level and serve as a cooperation platform,<sup>65</sup> structures of operational inter-departmental coordination are yet to be developed.<sup>66</sup> This is currently hindered by unclear and overlapping mandates among different agencies, which was acknowledged by a majority of surveyed experts. According to their statements, there is no effective whole-of-government approach and situational awareness of foreign interference is also selective: while the Kremlin's influence is better known, according to most experts surveyed, than that of the Beijing, since Chinese influence is being much more limited, it is also much less monitored.

Internally, the presence of significant conservative and nationalistic elements right within the public administration, especially security institutions and

the corps of retired officers, is not acknowledged as a vulnerability. Hybrid threats and influence operations conducted by malign foreign actors are, however, presented in official documents as one of the most important security threats. They also featured as one of the priorities of the Romania, Finland and Croatia Presidency Trio of the Council of the EU in 2019<sup>67</sup>. In February that year, a high-level conference on hybrid threats, resilience and strategic communication was organized in Bucharest<sup>68</sup>.

★ **Romanian strategic documents are regularly updated.**



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## Response to malign influence

Romania maintains a rigid, outdated<sup>69</sup>, reactive and state-centric approach to countering disinformation that relies on institutions of force and is led by the Ministry of Interior. While the National Security Strategy identifies "the dissemination of disinformation sponsored by malign foreign actors such as Russia" as a threat,<sup>70</sup> the strategic communication strategy elaborated following an inter-agency review of national responses<sup>71</sup> has been shelved for now. Funding and support for broader resilience measures integrating the broader public, including civil society organizations and local authorities, to create a proper whole-of-society approach, are still not largely implemented.

Such deficiencies are visible, for example, in the absence of adequate measures to combat Hungarian interference activities directed at the Hungarian minority based in Romania. The Budapest government<sup>72</sup> is allocating significant resources to the Hungarian Protestant Church, Hungarian media, and NGOs in Romania<sup>73</sup>, potentially resulting in undue influence on local authorities.



## Election integrity

Elections in Romania are assessed as being free and fair<sup>74</sup>, with high voting transparency and without external interference. Political parties receive state funding for election campaigns, but strict financing laws govern campaign spending, especially barring funding from abroad<sup>75</sup>.

Consequently, parties have shifted some of their focus onto intense pre-campaign efforts, i.e. more than one month prior to the electoral campaign. During this pre-campaign period, the spending of many interest groups to promote their agenda<sup>76</sup> lacks transparency, which creates a loophole for both domestic and foreign actors. Most of the surveyed experts also mentioned that the national election oversight body does not have a mandate to analyze foreign election interference.

★★ **Foreign sponsorship of political parties, individual candidates or campaigns is prohibited by law. (...) there is a cap on how much money a political party or an individual candidate can receive as sponsorship and on how much [they] can spend on a campaign.**

**Sorin Cucerai**,  
sociologist and political  
campaigner



# Information landscape

## Chapter 4

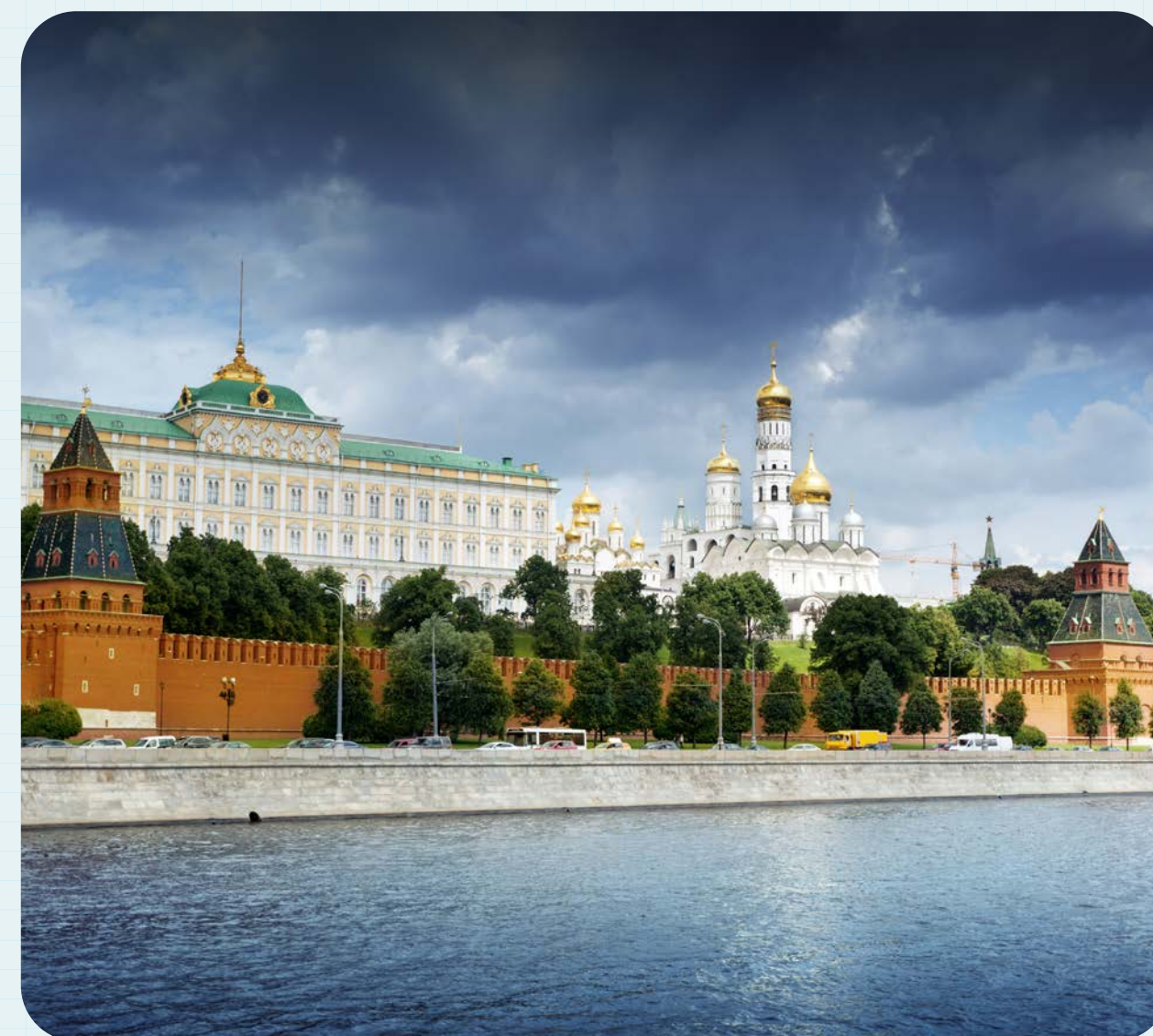
↓ Vulnerability score

30  
/100



The disinformation problem in Romania is characterized by complexity - actors with partially overlapping agendas act through diverse means of communication and use both traditional and new media. Malign influence, moreover, derives from both domestic and foreign sources. Their strategies vary too: sometimes different entities coordinate their efforts to disseminate disinformation (such as partisan news outlets that have common ideological alignments<sup>77</sup> especially in the far-right sphere)

or merely direct their activities towards amplifying already existing narratives (the preferred approach of pro-Russian outlets<sup>78</sup>). Although most foreign state-sponsored disinformation present in Romania can be traced back to Russia, China seems to be emerging as a new source of foreign influence in the country.



## Russian indirect influence

Though its direct influence in Romania is not on par with its involvement in other countries in the region, Russia is still a relevant actor in disinformation dissemination in the country<sup>79</sup> (see Facebook's takedown of a propaganda network as an indication of the Kremlin's increasing presence).<sup>80</sup> China, on the other hand, is a new entry and as yet only a marginal influencer.

Moscow's disinformation diffusion approach seeks to exploit the vast network of local media outlets independently peddling narratives that overlap with the Kremlin's agenda<sup>81</sup> (anti-West, anti-liberal, ultraconservative). Moscow's strategy of choice in Romania, therefore, is largely an indirect one: adapting narratives promoted by outlets under its direct control (such as sputnik.md<sup>82</sup>) to disinformation narratives<sup>83</sup> already spreading in the country. Sputnik.md also extensively quotes Romania's most populist politicians in a positive light and provides a platform to illiberal voices (such as former<sup>84</sup> and current politicians<sup>85</sup>).

★ 16 of 18 experts surveyed believe that Russia has no or limited influence on the mainstream media in the country.



# Media freedom affected by corruption

According to the World Press Freedom Index, Romania ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in the world,<sup>86</sup> registering a slight deterioration of freedom of the press in the country in the last 5 years<sup>87</sup>. The scarcity of truly independent journalism is due to media ownership by corrupt businessmen<sup>88</sup>, that seek to directly influence editorial policy<sup>89</sup>. Nearly all managers of private television outlets in Romania have been convicted or prosecuted for corruption.

That being said, should a malign actor decide to exert its influence over the main information channels in Romania, the corrupt business model (prioritization of owners' interests and little to no transparency regarding ownership, a permissive regime of labelling programs as "promotion" or "political advertisement") and the external influence over newsrooms could facilitate the process. As the manager of a major government stakeholder in combating disinformation stressed in an interview, "(...) *There's an immense need to develop procedural means of interpellation and clarification of the links between Russian and Romanian media entities*".

Against all these counter currents, Romanian media still remain one of the most important points of resilience against foreign influence in the country<sup>90</sup>. A fast-developing corpus of independent media outlets is catering to a



growing audience, many of whom are part of the 60%<sup>91</sup> of the population expressing little to no confidence in the mainstream media.<sup>92</sup>

State interventions regulating the media space are initiated in compliance with the law, though often proving ineffective. During the COVID-19 state of emergency, for example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the National Communications Management Authority took a harsh stand against websites spreading blatant disinformation that hampered the government's efforts to combat the pandemic. The government, in fact, temporarily shut down some of these websites. Some of the outlets, however, were moved to different servers and swiftly relaunched, while others continued their disinformation campaigns on social media by slightly changing their names<sup>93</sup>.



## Dan Voiculescu

Sentenced in 2014 to 10 years in prison for a fraudulent privatisation. (released conditionally in 2017)



## Sorin Ovidiu Vântu

Sentenced for a cumulative sentence of over 10 years in prison, for traffic of influence, blackmail and financial fraud.



## Ioan Bendei

Sentenced in 2019 to 4 years in prison for bribery.



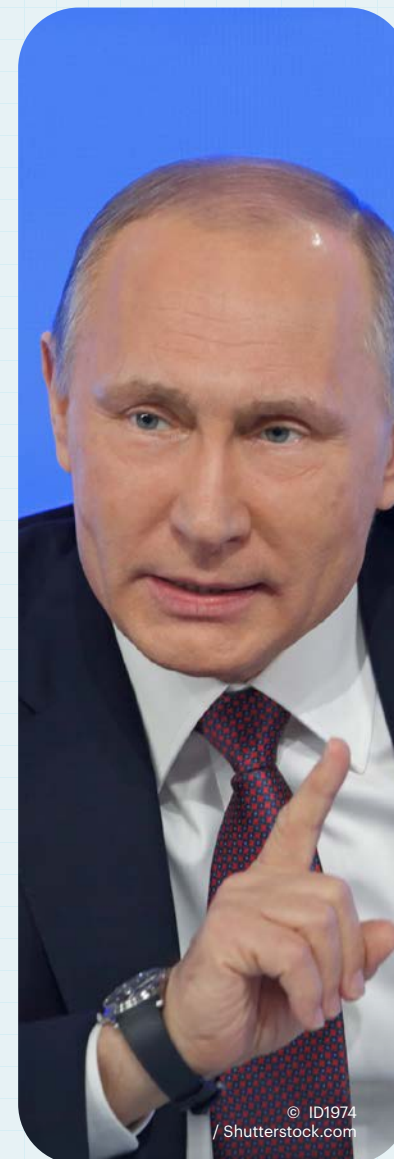
## Adrian Sârbu

Prosecuted for money laundering and tax evasion charges.

Source: GlobalFocus Center

# Pro-Kremlin interests in the media

While direct Russian influence over either Romanian mainstream or fringe media is difficult to ascertain, pro-Kremlin narratives are afforded significant space in all domestic public and commercial media, a conclusion affirmed by the survey conducted with the Romanian expert community<sup>94</sup>. The central promoters of pro-Kremlin narratives in Romania rather often serve as "useful idiots".



**94** Russia is an extremely well-trained actor, with extensive experience in using this type of unconventional attack; to the propaganda and subversion tactics practiced by Russia during the Cold War, and the methods of 'kompromat' used in the internal political struggles after the collapse of the USSR, were added cyber-attacks and the use of virtual space.

**Stanislav Secieru,**  
Senior Analyst, EUISS

In recent years, disinformation has gained increased traction as a considerable segment of Romanian society has transitioned to using social media.<sup>95</sup> Romanians are more active on social media than an average European<sup>96</sup>, with 62% of Romanians maintaining at least one social media account. Considering the country's polarized population<sup>97</sup>, its sizeable audience on social networks, and heightened uncertainty from the pandemic, the threat of disinformation is bound to grow and become more disruptive.

# China's footprint

Although most foreign state-sponsored disinformation present in Romania can be traced back to Russia, China seems to be emerging as a new source of foreign influence in the country. A study conducted by GlobalFocus Center, in coordination with think-tanks in more than 17 European countries, revealed a significant (though sometimes difficult to attribute) cross-regional push to change the public narrative on COVID-19 in the early months of the pandemic<sup>98</sup>. This effort sought to shift the prevailing narrative from one of "China as the source of the pandemic" to "China as a reliable partner and supporter", especially compared to the alleged inaction of the EU and US early on.

Apart from narratives disseminated by fringe media outlets, such messaging could be found on the social media pages of the Chinese Embassy in Romania<sup>99</sup>.

# Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

29  
/100



The civic space in Romania is primarily defined by a high degree of freedom of assembly and expression<sup>100</sup> and the absence of significant efforts by state actors to control or restrict said liberties. It scores highly<sup>101</sup> on media pluralism, the ease of starting a blog or news website and open and unrestricted access to the internet.

## Illiberal tendencies

This environment, however, cannot be equally capitalized on by all, with the chronically poor population in small urban and rural areas<sup>102</sup> feeling marginalized from the civic space and underrepresented politically. Such groups often react to this climate through excessive traditionalism, nationalism and support for the political re-centralization of power<sup>103</sup>. Recent years, consequently, have seen the emergence of ultraconservative and nationalistic associative activities, where none used to exist - supported by the Orthodox Church and neo-evangelist groups in the US<sup>104</sup>. Their activities led to the constitutional referendum in 2018 to outlaw same-sex marriage, organized by the Coalition for Family. Although unsuccessful, it has energized the radical base<sup>105, 106</sup> and served as a precursor to the radical party AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians), which also has a nationalistic predecessor - Action 2012 movement for Romania's unification with the Republic of Moldova<sup>107</sup>. This pushback against liberalism and modernization is the main avenue for anti-Western influence in Romania, according to former presidential adviser Iulian Fota<sup>108</sup>.



## Civil society as a buffer

The overall impact of civil society on political processes remains limited primarily due to pertaining social polarization<sup>109</sup>, scarce availability of funding, marginalization of independent voices by decision-makers and low levels of political activism. In recent years though, civic action led by an increasingly liberal, urban, pro-Western and financially independent middle-class harboring ambitions to reclaim political agency has served as the main buffer against democratic backsliding.

Romania's civil society fares best in areas where the country played the greatest catch-up to EU standards pre- and post-EU and NATO accession: rule of law, child

protection, public administration reform, the integration of ethnic minorities, etc. The availability of funding, support from Western partners, and the saliency of the problems, nonetheless, enabled the development of vibrant NGOs in the different spheres<sup>110</sup>. The same EU entry requirements have contributed to the creation of a legal framework prioritizing social dialogue, government transparency and accountability, and the inclusion of NGOs in consultations during the decision-making process. The lifting of the EU monitoring check and funding reductions, however, have seen the voice and influence of civil society markedly diminish<sup>111</sup>. The three-year term of the PSD government witnessed activists branded as "Soros agents" or "foreign agents" and attempts were made to draft "foreign agents-type" legislation restraining their activity<sup>112</sup>.





## Institutions with links to Russia and China

The rise of independent think-tanks in foreign policy and security, meanwhile, has been mostly neutralized by the promotion of so-called experts and NGOs loyal to the administration – these entities serve as echo chambers for the government to help it preserve a monopoly over the narrative space<sup>113</sup>. Such organizations and individuals drown out independent voices and serve as the (willing or involuntary) mouthpieces for the Kremlin and Beijing interests. These include the Titulescu Foundation, where former PM Adrian Nastase and former MEP Adrian Severin, both previously jailed for corruption,

are the leading voices, or the recently established New Strategy Center, or Strategikon, all with a pro-Western front, but rooted in groups of interests in the intelligence services and institutions of force, which abound in toxic nationalistic and autocratic worldviews<sup>114</sup>.

Direct Russian or Chinese interference through GONGOs or the funding of civil society remains relatively low according to surveyed experts, and limited to the Confucius Institutes, the Russian Cultural Center, some suspected funding for religious NGOs and environment organizations, or indirect ideological influence through Viktor Orbán's funding of soft power tools such as media<sup>115</sup> and football teams in Transylvania<sup>116</sup>.

However, the domestic promotion of narratives and ideologies corresponding to the Kremlin's

and Beijing's interests has taken on unexpected energy with the AUR's entry into parliament in 2020 and COVID-19 restrictions, which have provided an impetus for frequent street protests<sup>117</sup>.

★ 15 of 19 experts surveyed believe that Russia has no or limited influence on the country's civil society.

## Activism against corruption

Liberal middle-class activism, however, brought Romania back from the brink between 2017 and 2019 as the Social-Democrat government engaged in a sustained campaign to reverse anticorruption reforms. The movement would morph into the largest protests since the 1989 anti-communist revolution. But it was not started by formal civil society institutions but rather the spontaneous mobilization of people on social media valuing rule of law and anticorruption principles<sup>118</sup> as measures of genuine reform. These citizens now make up the electoral base of the new civic parties (the USR-PLUS alliance). The parties are currently on a downward polling trend<sup>119</sup> and remain vulnerable to anti-Western manipulation coming in the form of "alternative" ideas packaged as democratic pluralism.

## Academia prone to political influence

The academic sector is afflicted by institutions such as the Academy for Security Sciences or the National Defense College proven by courts to be facilitating the distribution of titles to legitimize shady figures<sup>120</sup>. Academia also harbors high-profile ultraconservative and nationalistic elements. The head of the Romanian Academy, Prof. Ioan-Aurel Pop, and the institution itself, have released official statements advancing views questioning some scientific evidence,<sup>121</sup> opposing sex education and digitalization<sup>122</sup>. Its International Relations Institute is run by Prof. Dan Dungaciu, a promoter of unionist narratives on Moldova, which fuel Moscow's allegations of Romanian "imperialism"<sup>123</sup>. The University of Craiova hosted

the influential Russian diplomat Alexey Gromyko with his anti-NATO, anti-EU messaging, while universities in Bucharest, Cluj, Pitesti and Targoviste have invited outspoken Russian Ambassador Valery Kuzmin to lecture at various events. Aleksandr Dugin appeared in Romania twice, launching a book in the presence of Romanian academics and politicians<sup>124</sup>.

Though the country's liberal legal framework grants autonomy to academic institutions<sup>125</sup>, most universities have recorded shoddy levels of scientific performance and remain prone to political influence<sup>126</sup>. Additionally, the intellectual movement in Romania post-1989 primarily has its origins in the anti-communist ideology and has predominantly been liberal-conservative in orientation even as far-right tendencies take hold too frequently (the Iași local branch is the most notorious example<sup>127</sup>).







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**72** <https://atlatszo.ro/en/english/two-a-penny-5-million-euro-per-year-for-the-hungarian-language-media-trust-in-transylvania/>; <https://atlatszo.ro/en/english/marriage-of-convenience-sweetened-with-millions-how-fidesz-persuaded-the-largest-hungarian-party-in-transylvania/>; <https://atlatszo.ro/en/english/the-hungarian-community-in-transylvania-flooded-with-financial-support-from-hungary-here-are-the-biggest-winners/>

**73** <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/30/living-like-in-hungary-orban-bankrolling-romania-ethnic-parallelism/>

**74** [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/h7a147898?country=ROU&indicator=28751&viz=line\\_chart&years=2006,2020](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/h7a147898?country=ROU&indicator=28751&viz=line_chart&years=2006,2020)

**75** <https://expertforum.ro/finantarea-partidelor-2020/>

**76** <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/252/55>; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/romania/nations-transit/2021>

**77** The Great Unification and Disinformation, p. 11<https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Revisionism-Report.pdf>

**78** <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/coronavirus-%C3%AEn-rom%C3%A2nia-de-ce-a-fort-o-gre%C8%99eal%C4%83-%C3%AEnchiderea-site-urilor-%C8%99i-ce-ponderea-aveau-rusia-%C8%99i-china-%C3%AEn-con%C8%9Binutul-lor/30592498.html>

**79** Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence, p. 68, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>

**80** <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/03/facebook-shuts-russian-propaganda-net-work-based-in-romania/>

**81** The Great Unification and Disinformation, p. 29

**82** <https://ro.sputnik.md/>

**83** <https://www.global-focus.eu/2018/03/propaganda-made-measure-vulnerabilities-facilitate-russian-influence/#more-940>

**84** Former PM Adrian Nastase, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and MEP Adrian Severin.

**85** The Eurosceptic MEPs Cristian Teheș and Maria Grapini.

**86** <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#>

**87** From the 46th position in 2017: <https://rsf.org/en/romania>

**88** <https://cmds.ceu.edu/article/2019-05-03/whos-funding-romanian-journalism>

**89** Ibid.

**90** Through its contribution to democratic resilience, see Democratic Resilience Index, p. 8, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Democratic-Resilience-Index.pdf>

**91** GLOBSEC Trends 2021, p. 72

**92** Democratic Resilience Index, p. 13





**93** <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/coronavirus-%C3%AEn-rom%C3%A2nia-de-ce-a-fort-o-gre%C8%99ea%C4%83-%C3%AEnchiderea-site-urilor-%C8%99i-ce-ponderea-aveau-rusia-%C8%99i-china-%C3%AEn-con%C8%9Binutul-lor/30592498.html>

**94** More than two-thirds of those interviewed consider Romanian media to be disseminating pro-Kremlin narratives. Less than a third think Russia holds influence over Romanian media.

**95** Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, p. 99

**96** <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/produces-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20190629-1>

**97** <https://monitorsocial.ro/data/scadem-usor-saracia-dar-crestem-mult-polarizarea-sociala/>

**98** Report on COVID-19-related false information, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Monitoring-COVID-19-related-disinformation-April-July-2020.pdf>, p. 1

**99** <https://www.facebook.com/Ambasada-ChineiiinRomania/posts/391850705635679>; <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaChinei-inRomania/posts/391349045685845>; <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaChineiiinRomania/posts/385531839600899>

**100** V-Dem Civil Liberties Index for Romania has constantly been around 0.9, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>, the World Press Freedom Index ranks it 44th out of 180 countries

**101** Democratic Resilience Index, p. 26, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Democratic-Resilience-Index.pdf>

**102** <https://www.eapn.eu/poverty-watch-romania-poverty-watches-overview-2020/>

**103** Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence, p. 61, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>

**104** <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/53bkmz/cine-sunt-oamenii-din-spatele-coalitiei-pentru-familie>

**105** <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-romania-referendum-idCAKCN-1MH0XI-QCATP>

**106** and led to increased hate crime against the LGBTQ+ community in Romania

**107** <https://www.dw.com/ro/ce-caut%C4%83-aur-la-chi%C8%99in%C4%83u-%C8%99i-pentru-cine-joac%C4%83-o-carte-unionist%C4%83-spotmediaro/a-57591763>

**108** “In the preservation of the European path, the continuation of Romania’s modernization in line with the Western model there is not just a national, but also a regional stake. Influential voices are asking for sanctions against Hungary and Poland, leading up even to exclusion. Under the circumstances, any anti-European domestic backsliding in Romania can create a critical mass in favor of the idea of exclusion, consolidating the belief of the ‘old EU’ that enlargement was a mistake. If Romania keeps on the right path, it saves not only itself, but it also helps save Poland and Hungary. And [GlobalFocus note: given historical tensions in our bilateral relations with Hungary] keeping Hungary in the EU is a major national interest for Romania”.

**109** Each of the two major groups that have emerged along socio-economic lines sees the other as the main obstacle to imposing its agenda throughout the whole of society: <https://monitorsocial.ro/data/scadem-usor-saracia-dar-crestem-mult-polarizarea-sociala/>

**110** <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Centers-and-Institutes/Center-on-Philanthropy-and-Civil-Society/Report-on-Civil-Society-in-Eastern-Europe>

**111** A score of 3.7 in the Civil Society Sustainability Index places Romania in the average resilience category

**112** <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/a37mga/de-ce-e-periculoasa-noua-lege-anti-ong-uri-a-psd>

**113** Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence, p. 137

**114** <https://newsweek.ro/educatie/cu-gurul-academiei-romane-adrian-nastase-face-propaganda-in-favoarea-chinei-si-rusiei>

**115** <https://atlatszo.ro/en/english/two-a-penny-5-million-euro-per-year-for-the-hungarian-language-media-trust-in-transylvania/>

**116** <https://atlatszo.ro/en/english/the-hungarian-community-in-transylvania-flooded-with-financial-support-from-hungary-here-are-the-biggest-winners/>

**117** <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/care-este-miza-protestelor-aur-impotriva-restrictiilor-cristian-pirvulescu-a-explicat-sloganul-libertate-1477641>

**118** A score of 44 in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index puts Romania 69th in the world (below Belarus) in terms of resilience.

**119** <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/sondaj-inscop-aur-a-deposit-usr-plus-in-preferintele-romanilor-partidul-aflat-pe-primul-loc-20043932>

**120** Fabrica de doctorate sau Cum se surpă fundamentele unei nații, p. 73, <https://humanitas.ro/assets/media/fabrica-de-doctorate.pdf>

**121** E.g. A statement on the alleged negative impact of 5G technology on people: Tehnologia 5G –subiect de dezbatere națională, p. 1, <https://acad.ro/mediaAR/doc2020/c0902-Tehnologia5G-subiectDezbaterreNationala.pdf>

**122** [https://adevarul.ro/tech/stiinta/un-fizician-demonteaza-conspiratiile-promovate-academiaromana-pericolele-radiatiei-5g-nu-depasesc-cele-precum-alimentati-nesanatoasa-1\\_5f47d9bf5163ec427161eaa2/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/tech/stiinta/un-fizician-demonteaza-conspiratiile-promovate-academiaromana-pericolele-radiatiei-5g-nu-depasesc-cele-precum-alimentati-nesanatoasa-1_5f47d9bf5163ec427161eaa2/index.html)

**123** <https://www.g4media.ro/pariu-pe-un-calmort-intruchipat-de-o-lebada-neagra-cum-a-fost-sustinut-aur-de-dan-dungaciu-analistul-cu-post-la-academie-care-a-monopolizat-discursul-pe-republica-moldova.html>

**124** <https://www.g4media.ro/universitatile-din-romania-tinta-pentru-rusia-tot-mai-multe-conferinte-evenimente-cu-ambasadorul-kuzmin-si-alti-oficiali-rusi.html>

**125** Academic freedom has consistently remained above 0.89 over the past three decades in the V-Dem Academic Freedom index.

**126** <https://www.g4media.ro/rectoriada-iii-cine-sunt-rectorii-care-vizeaza-al-treilea-mandat-politicienii-care-conduc-universitati-si-cazul-aparte-al-politehnicii-unde-alegerile-au-loc-cu-6-luni-inainte-de-expirarea-mandatului.html>

**127** <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/local/iasi/cuib-de-legionari-in-sinul-academei-romane-filiala-iasi-ni25iv>

# Focus on Serbia



**S**erbia'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

55  
/100

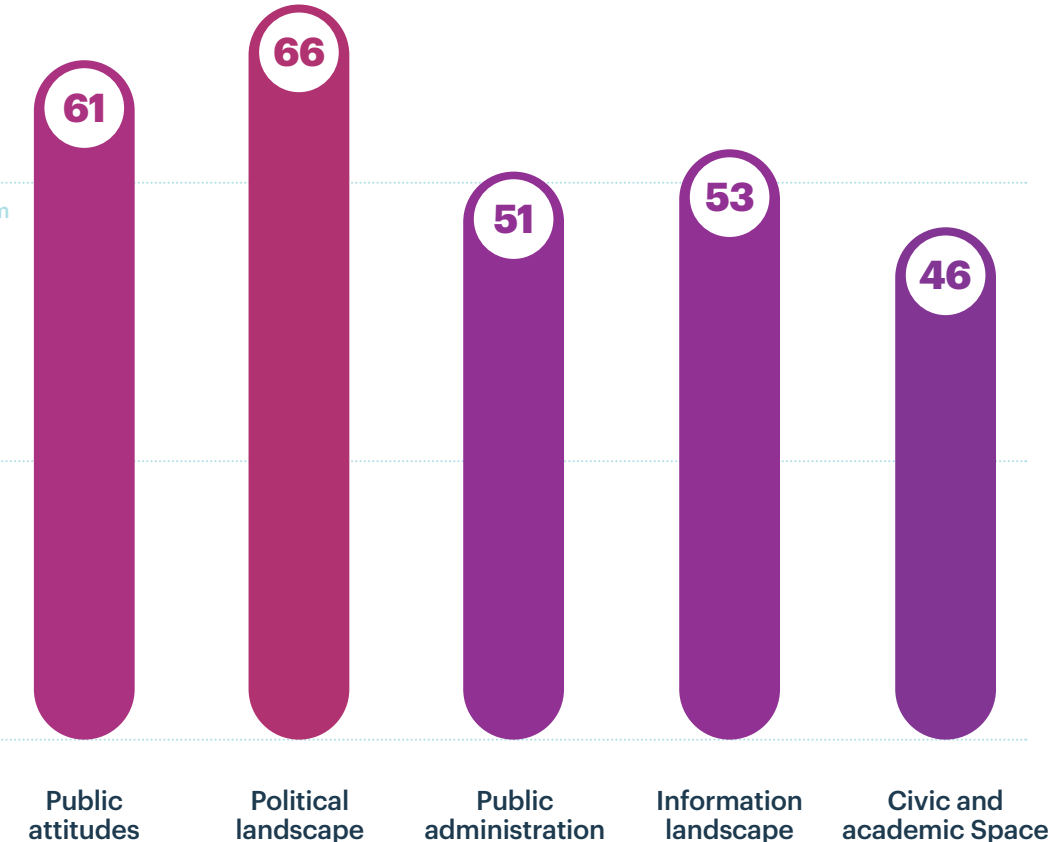
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None





# Public attitudes

## Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

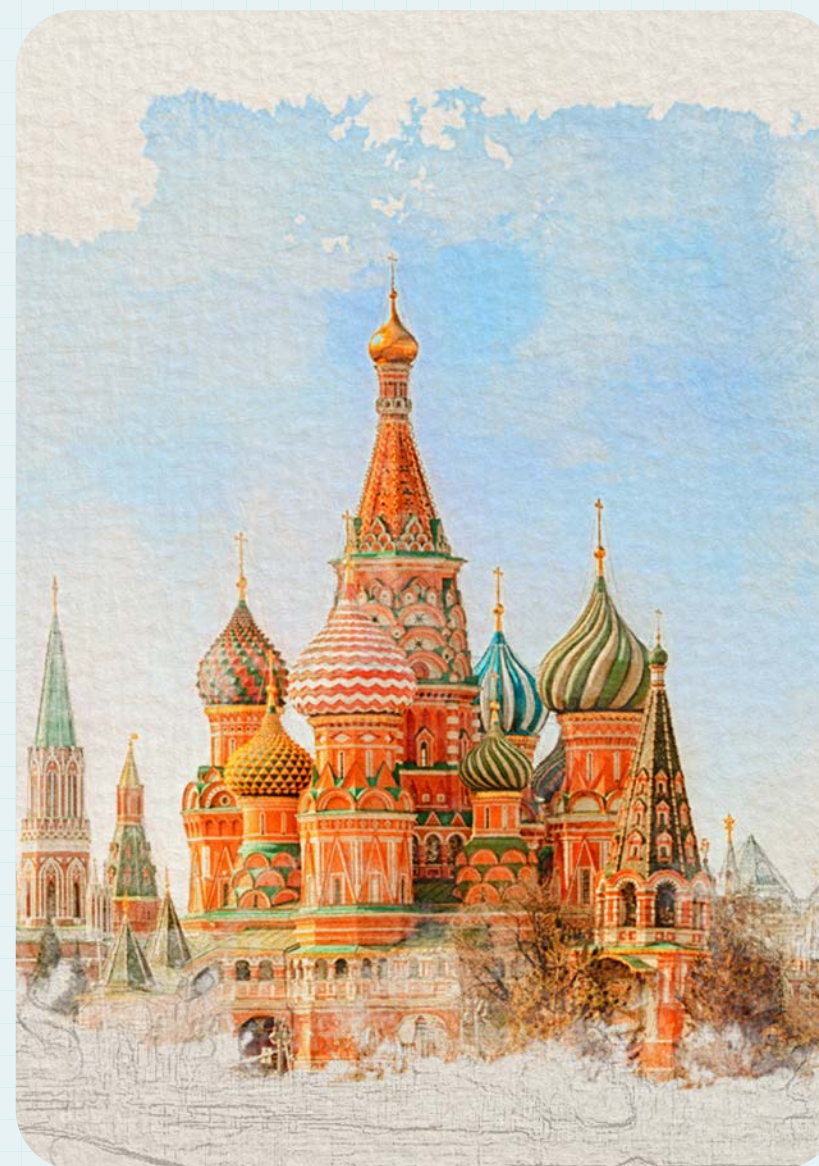
61  
/100



**S**erbia'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.



## 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. Research<sup>3</sup> 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 uprisings<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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%)<sup>6</sup>. This opinion holds across all socio-demographic groups, likely a legacy of communist Yugoslavia,



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.<sup>7</sup> 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 officials<sup>8</sup>. 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.<sup>9</sup>



## 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.<sup>10</sup>

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).<sup>11</sup> According to opinion polls,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>



✪ **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.<sup>17</sup> 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 Party<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup>

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 Kosovo<sup>20</sup> 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".<sup>21</sup>

“Serbia will maintain its position of military neutrality and the “Partnership for Peace” is the optimal form of cooperation with NATO.”<sup>22</sup>

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.”<sup>23</sup>

Aleksandar Vulin,  
Minister of Defence, 2020



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“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.”<sup>26</sup>

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



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## 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup>



rallies to welcome Putin.<sup>27</sup> 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)<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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 supplies<sup>32</sup>. 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).<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup>

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 countries, Serbia supported the Belarus declaration filed at the UN Human Rights Council backing Chinese policy and acts in the Xinjiang province.<sup>35</sup>

★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.<sup>36</sup> 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."<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> Checks and balances are lacking and the services of the administration are geared towards serving the party in power.<sup>39</sup>

The power dynamics at play, including administrative control, encapsulates the notion of state capture recognized by scholars.<sup>40</sup> 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 Strategy<sup>41</sup> and the National Defense Strategy<sup>42</sup>, 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.<sup>43</sup>

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 Serbia<sup>44</sup> 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 91<sup>st</sup> (of 180 countries), a decline of 14 spots compared to 2017.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> This negligence includes cases connected to organized crime exemplified by the recent so-called Belivuk scandal.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> The state typically decides to arrest government or party officials only in response to internal power struggles and as a demonstration of force.<sup>49</sup> Similar action is initiated against



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



## 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,<sup>51</sup> 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”.<sup>52</sup> 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.



## 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.

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.<sup>55</sup>

ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report



# 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

## Limited media freedom

According to the World Press Freedom Index, Serbia ranks lowest in the Western Balkans region and 90<sup>th</sup> altogether.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> Media companies that are close to the government control most of the information space through nationally broadcasted television networks and daily newspapers including tabloids.<sup>60</sup> 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,<sup>61</sup> with some journalists and owners of independent media subjected to physical violence.<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> This pertains particularly to the functioning of the State Broadcasting Service (RTS), the most influential news media organization in Serbia according to polls.<sup>64</sup>

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

– the highest in the region.



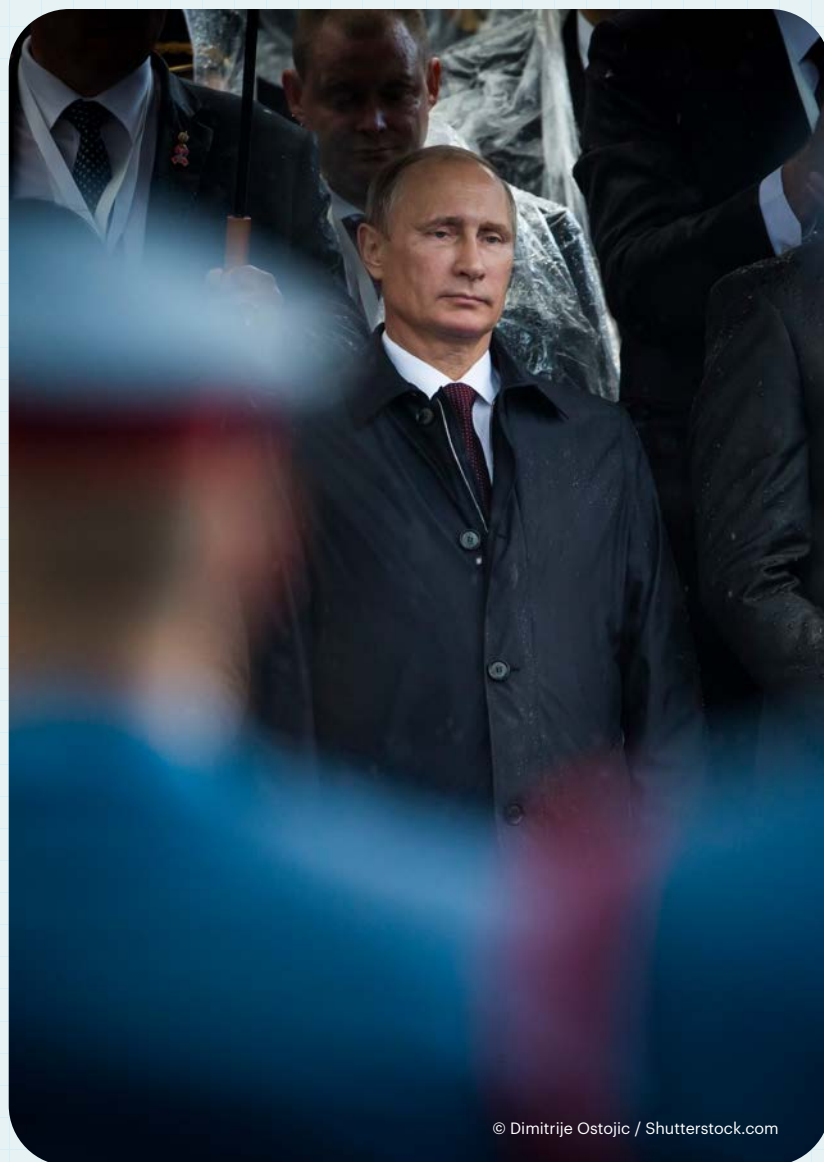


## Pro-Kremlin messaging

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.<sup>65</sup>

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)<sup>66</sup> as illustrated in the recent network mapping of Serbian and Montenegrin Facebook conducted in summer 2020.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> The nationally broadcasted news programs of



✪ **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.<sup>69</sup> 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”<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

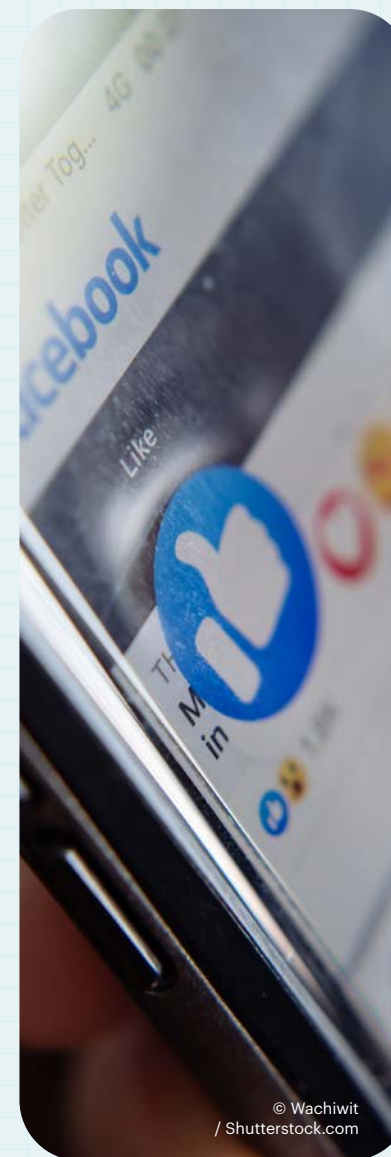
Two media outlets, finally, are characterized by ardently pro-Kremlin attitudes but do not belong in the “tabloid” grouping. These publications seek to present ever slightly more balanced coverage without the sensationalism and “emotional” tone that defines the tabloids.<sup>73</sup>

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.<sup>74</sup>

## 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 demonstrates<sup>75</sup>, 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.”<sup>76</sup>





# Civic & academic space

## Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

46  
/100



According to the V-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.<sup>77</sup>

Due to the opposition boycott of the 2020 parliamentary elections<sup>78</sup>, 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 2018-2019<sup>79</sup> 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”<sup>80</sup> and the July 2020 protests in Belgrade<sup>81</sup>, 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,<sup>82</sup> countering civic actions,<sup>83</sup> and/or creating a favorable impression on foreign leaders visiting Serbia.<sup>84</sup> Some media outlets reported that the government had allegedly employed criminal groups,<sup>85</sup> often connected with football hooligans,<sup>86</sup> 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,<sup>87</sup> including investments from China.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup>

Numerous pro-democratic and environmental NGOs are being targeted by different threatening campaigns and labelled as a "threat to state security"<sup>91</sup> or as agents of foreign intelligence services.<sup>92</sup> 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.<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup> More than a year after the investigations were launched, no information about the findings have been published.<sup>95</sup> Many international

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

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,<sup>97</sup> 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.<sup>98</sup> Another subset of domestically funded NGOs advocate for strategic alternatives and an eastern orientation for the country (e.g., the Center for Strategic Alternatives<sup>99</sup>) but are not directly connected to Moscow or Beijing.

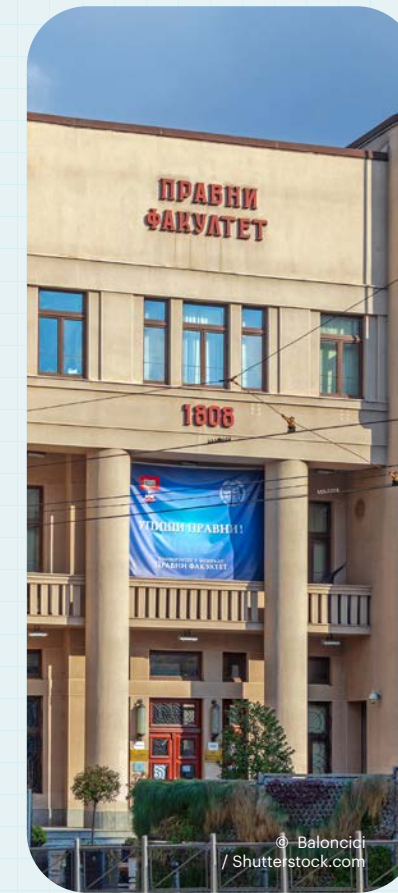
99 Russian attempts to establish its own CSOs in Serbia failed to produce tangible results. The public discourse is already suffocated by pro-Russian information. There is, consequently, no need to invest in further promotion. It seems like Sputnik and a number of portals that are indirectly connected 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.<sup>100</sup> 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),<sup>101</sup> or a scrutiny of the doctoral diploma of the current Minister of Interior<sup>102</sup> and the master's degree of the former President.<sup>103</sup>

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 center<sup>104</sup> and numerous faculty members participate in



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

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

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.<sup>107</sup> There are also a number of initiatives promoting cooperation between Serbian and Chinese universities and other institutions.<sup>108</sup> 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.<sup>109</sup>



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**67** GLOBSEC, Pro-Kremlin Networks on Facebook in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, 2021, non-public report

**68** While some owners of these outlets, like Željko Mitrović and Dragan Vučićević, have clear links with the ruling elite, these associations are widely speculated for others. Their unequivocal support for the ruling elite and the direct support they receive from state aid indeed suggests a close relationship.



**69** <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>

**70** Ibid.

**71** <https://bit.ly/319WuMR>, <https://informer.rs/vesti/srbija/354962/foto-katalonija-spanija-kosovo-srbija-informerovi-bilbordi-podrske-centru-beograda>

**72** <https://www.dw.com/sr/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87eve-konsultacije-sa-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87em/a-54321178>

**73** The first is the weekly, Pečat, owned by Milorad Vučelić, a former director of Radio-Television of Serbia during Milošević's rule. From its establishment a decade ago, this weekly became a leading Eurosceptic and pro-Russian magazine. The other is Novosti Corporation, which operates through two linked outlets – the daily, Večernje Novosti, and the Novosti portal. Novosti (both outlets) are traditionally more conservative and right-wing and, as such, are inclined to nurture a discourse which is not, at best, skeptical towards Kremlin. This media finds itself in the ownership of the Serbian government and since 2017 Vučelić has served as its acting director and main editor.

**74** The daily is now again controlled by the state but East Media Group, its previous owner and a shareholder, was founded in Russia and controlled by Miroslav Bogićević, a businessman who was close to former ruling elite. See: <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/rs/vlasnik/companies/detail/company/company/show/east-media-group/>

**75** Pro-Kremlin Networks on Facebook in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, 2021, non-public report

**76** [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=03&dd=16&nav\\_category=11&nav\\_id=1667074](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=03&dd=16&nav_category=11&nav_id=1667074)

**77** <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>

**78** <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/25/why-evryone-lost-out-in-serbias-elections/>

**79** <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46772500>

**80** <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/5444/>

**81** <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53329591>

**82** [https://mondo.rs/Info/Drustvo/a784487/Ispred-Skupstine-skup-podrske-Beogradu-na-vodji.html?fbclid=IwAR1iemNrxgDqn1gFRkEu-OMaIZ\\_rpWvKOfYKi41XLIWTqJvx4dlAHQoez3o](https://mondo.rs/Info/Drustvo/a784487/Ispred-Skupstine-skup-podrske-Beogradu-na-vodji.html?fbclid=IwAR1iemNrxgDqn1gFRkEu-OMaIZ_rpWvKOfYKi41XLIWTqJvx4dlAHQoez3o)

**83** <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vlast-porucuje-bice-vode-kad-padne-kisa/>

**84** <https://www.danas.rs/politika/putin-u-poseti-srbiji-transparent-jedan-od-300-miliona-nacelu-kolone-koja-ide-ka-hramu-uzivo/>

**85** <http://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/news/article/nuns-osuda-navijackih-huligana-i-podrska-novinarnima-n1>

**86** <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/analiticari-na-proteste-ubaceni-huligani-trazi-se-odgovornost-policije/5494718.html>

**87** <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/aktivisti-odbranimoreke-stare-planine-spremni-na-zatvor-zbog--%C4%8Di%C5%A1%C4%87enja-reke/4916376.html>

**88** <https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/zrenjanin-veliki-protest-ispred-linglonga-prot-estanti-traze-postovanje-zakona-i-ocuvanje-zivotne-sredine/>

**89** <https://csosi.org/?region=EUROPE>

**90** <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/kako-su-nastali-strani-placenici-i-domaci-izdajnici/>

**91** <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a425693-spoljni-faktor-naiveca-pretnja-po-bezbednost-zemlje/>

**92** <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/napad-na-nvo-crta/>

**93** <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31158417.html>

**94** <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/uprava-kontrola-finansije/5523871.html>

**95** <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/slucaj-spisak-nvo-mediji-pranje-novca/31329824.html>

**96** Ibid.

**97** <https://nkd.rs/2019/08/22/gongo-nevladine-organizacije/>

**98** Ibid.

**99** <https://www.strateskealternative.rs/>

**100** <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/istrazujemo-nakon-presude-profesorima-iz-kragujevac-bez-odgovora-je-ostalo-pet/497xjbd>

**101** <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a545897-univerzitet-sinisa-mali-plagijator/>

**102** <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a547264-dokumentarni-film-o-diplomi-nebojse-stefanovica-i-megatrendu-mega-diplomac/>

**103** <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1206477>

**104** <https://ruskidom.rs/sr/2021/04/29/otvoren-ruski-balkanski-centar-u-beogradu/>





**105** <https://cordmagazine.com/sr/diplomatija/odrzana-rusko-srpska-konferencija-%D0%BA%BDa-valdaj-i-ruskog-doma-u-beogradu/>; <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/atlagic-sramno-optuzio-sinisu-kovacevica-zeli-jos-mrtvih/>

**106** <https://www.danas.rs/politika/grupa-srpskih-intelektualaca-pozvala-putina-da-vucicu-oduzme-ruski-orden/>

**107** <https://konfucije.fil.bg.ac.rs/wp/o-nama/>

**108** <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kina-i-u-srbiji-sara%C4%91uje-sa-univerzitetima/31241214.html>

**109** [http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/384774/Srbija-najaktivnija-clanica-projekta-Noviputsvile?\\_cf\\_chl\\_managed\\_tk=pmd\\_g1vsRQlldWsSPNGDkAx53TdDC3j04\\_n6oLtjRO-843Ho-1632166890-0-gqNtZGzNAvujcnBszQsl](http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/384774/Srbija-najaktivnija-clanica-projekta-Noviputsvile?_cf_chl_managed_tk=pmd_g1vsRQlldWsSPNGDkAx53TdDC3j04_n6oLtjRO-843Ho-1632166890-0-gqNtZGzNAvujcnBszQsl)



# Focus on Slovakia



## 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 Vladimír 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

# 32

/100

## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes



Political landscape



Public administration



Information landscape



Civic and academic space



# 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 threat<sup>3</sup> and 35% regard their country's values to be in line with those of Russia.<sup>4</sup> This openness has been shaped by complex historical, political, and cultural relations. Support for democracy remains high too<sup>5</sup> but disillusionment, lack of trust, and dissatisfaction with the system<sup>6</sup> 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 operations<sup>7</sup>, Russia's symbolic appeal and its romantic misconceptions date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ľudovít 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 1848<sup>8</sup>. His book shifted some Slovaks away from the idea of Slovak nationalism towards a conception of pan-Slavism<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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-20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> These beliefs continue to be prevalent – 41% of Slovaks express nostalgia for communism and believe that their lives were better before 1989.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> These inclinations have since been further bolstered through the creation of several political parties espousing positive attitudes towards Russia including the Slovak National Party.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 country<sup>16</sup>. Numerous historical events and anniversaries connected to the defeat of fascism<sup>17</sup> and the end of World War II are used to reinstate Russia's importance and link to the Slovak nation and its independence<sup>18</sup>. This process is aided by a lack of narratives about Slovak military heroes and victories<sup>19</sup> 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.

a puppet of US imperialism and expansion also find broad popular resonance.<sup>26</sup> 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.



## 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.<sup>20</sup> Slovakia, in fact, is one of the CEE countries most susceptible to conspiracy theories and disinformation.<sup>21</sup> Such beliefs are supported by dissatisfaction with democracy and distrust in public institutions leading to preference for strong autocratic leader rather than liberal democracy.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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”.<sup>25</sup>

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

## 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<sup>27</sup>. 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.<sup>28</sup> 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,<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup>

**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.<sup>35</sup>

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!”<sup>33</sup>

**Boris Kollár**,  
leader of Sme Rodina, 2017

## Complex relationship with NATO

Despite the prevalent belief in NATO-related conspiracy theories in Slovakia<sup>36</sup>, 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 NATO<sup>37</sup>, 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.”<sup>38</sup>

**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 Presidency<sup>39</sup>, Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>40</sup>, and Ministry of Defense.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

★ 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 2017<sup>43</sup>, 2019<sup>44</sup>, and 2020<sup>45</sup>.



## 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 surveyed<sup>46</sup> 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 Moscow<sup>47</sup>.

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 diplomats<sup>48</sup>. Years later, the media uncovered that the expulsion was blocked by Andrej Danko, who maintains strong ties to Russian political representatives.<sup>49</sup> In November 2018, however, the country

did expel one diplomat based on espionage.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

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,<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

## 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 party<sup>55</sup> and the Slovak National Party.<sup>56</sup>

Symbolic actions have been rare but exceptions include statements from President Čaputová and former Slovak President Kiska<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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

↓ Vulnerability score

29  
/100



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**T**he 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.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup>

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 administration<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup>

Intelligence services have indicated the malign activities of foreign intelligence agencies,<sup>64</sup> hybrid threats, and disinformation as security threats since 2016.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> In 2018, moreover, the Framework of the Slovak Republic on Countering Hybrid Threats<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> Although several public institutions<sup>69</sup> have established designated units focusing on hybrid threats, a lack of long-term political leadership and strong “resortism”<sup>70</sup> still contribute to

low situational awareness and interdepartmental cooperation.<sup>71</sup> 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 General<sup>72</sup> and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Justice,<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, the backlash against several prosecutions<sup>75</sup> reveal deep-rooted state-capture.<sup>76</sup> Despite the absence of legislation on lobbying,<sup>77</sup> a registration of “public sector partners” has been in place since 2017, requiring registration from entities entitled to receive state funding.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup>

## 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.<sup>80</sup> While hybrid threats and propaganda at the strategic level were already recognized in the 2016 White Paper on Defence<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup>



“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”<sup>89</sup> 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.

“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

Annual reports of intelligence services naming malign actors and their activities, nevertheless, have become more transparent and detailed.<sup>83</sup> The vulnerability of Slovakia has ultimately decreased through the eventual adoption of the new security<sup>84</sup> and defence strategies,<sup>85</sup> 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 Chinese<sup>86</sup> agencies utilizing Chinese ICT companies were identified by the Slovak Information Service.<sup>87</sup> Its former director, in a television interview, further emphasized the need to clearly specify the definition of critical infrastructure and enhance its protection.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>90</sup>

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 Mechanism<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup>

★ 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,<sup>93</sup> 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 influence<sup>94</sup> including electoral interference. As a majority of surveyed experts pointed out, the State Committee for Elections and Control of Political Party Financing<sup>95</sup> (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.<sup>96</sup>

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 extremists<sup>97</sup>

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

“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.<sup>99</sup> 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 35<sup>th</sup>. Like most countries in the region, however, this marks a slide backward from 12th place in 2016.<sup>100</sup>

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.<sup>101</sup> Also, despite its status as one of the most trusted news sources,<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup>

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.<sup>104</sup>

Though the media is largely free of state and financial groups' influence and comprises a range of widely read and independent high-quality outlets,<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup>

## 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,<sup>107</sup> 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*,<sup>108</sup> currently lists more than 200 Czech and Slovak outlets<sup>109</sup> as problematic. The amount of Facebook<sup>110</sup> pages and groups contributing to spreading such content in the Slovak online information landscape, moreover, numbers in the hundreds.<sup>111</sup> The reach of the most popular posts from these outlets, furthermore, is comparable to the reach of viral posts from mass media outlets.<sup>112</sup>

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,<sup>113</sup> NATO as an obsolete and/or aggressive tool of the US,<sup>114</sup> and the notion of the “West” as decadent.<sup>115</sup> 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,<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup>

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.<sup>118</sup> This indirect influence is generally difficult to map notwithstanding occasional revelations (e.g. a

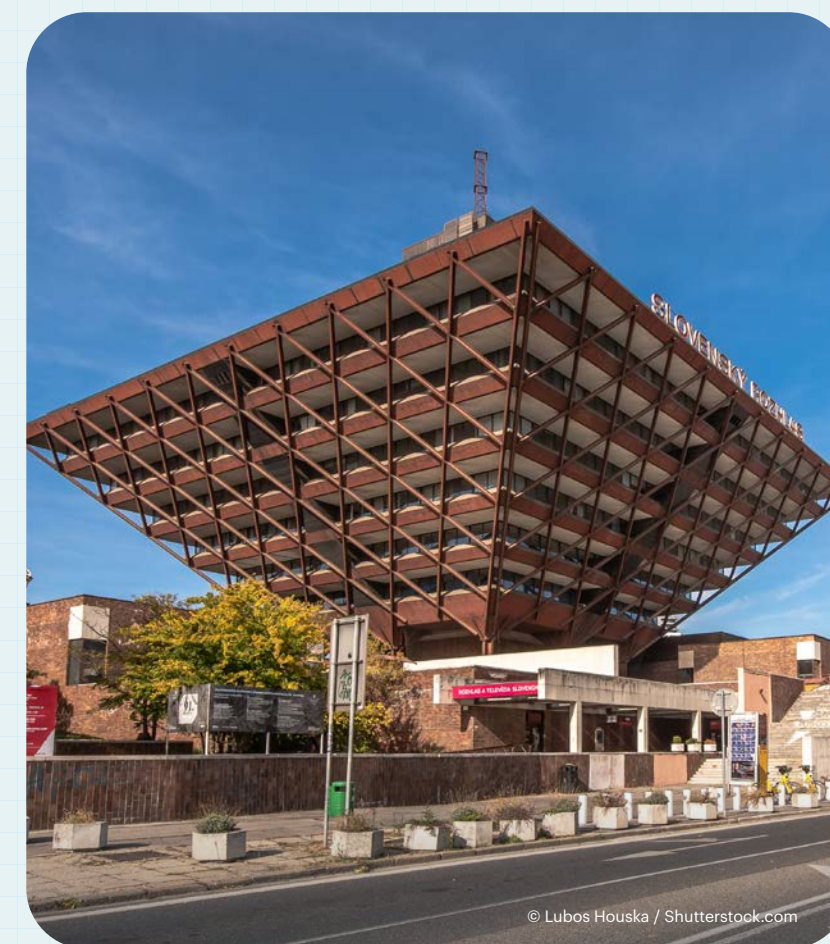
Russian journalist with ties to Rossiya Segodnya [Russia Today] on the payroll of Hlavné správy and publishing pro-Russian articles under a pseudonym<sup>119</sup> or the editor-in-chief of Zem a Vek [Earth and Age], a popular disinformation outlet, visiting the Russian Embassy<sup>120</sup>).



## 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,<sup>121</sup> 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. Ľuboš 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.<sup>122</sup>



★ **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

## Chapter 5

↓ 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.<sup>123</sup>

Mass protests that followed the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak<sup>124</sup> 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,<sup>125</sup> the violent participation of football hooligans,<sup>126</sup> and the harassment of experts.<sup>127</sup>

The hate-driven rhetoric of anti-systemic far-right parties, such as Kotleba-ĽSNS<sup>128</sup> and its spin-off Republika,<sup>129</sup> 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 leanings<sup>130</sup> and their current success is to a significant extent facilitated by a steady stream of disinformation<sup>131</sup> and character assassination campaigns directed at political opponents on Facebook.<sup>132</sup>

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.<sup>133</sup> 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 rule<sup>134</sup> 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,<sup>135</sup> initiatives, and their representatives. These groups have come to face strategic lawsuits against public participation (so-called SLAPPs),<sup>136</sup> public attacks,<sup>137</sup> smear-campaigns,<sup>138</sup> and threats.<sup>139</sup>

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



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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.<sup>140</sup> 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-LSNS<sup>141</sup> and the Sme Rodina<sup>142</sup> parties.

Civil society in Slovakia, it should be noted, is not universally pro-democratic<sup>143</sup> and some elements of it maintain links to the Kremlin. There are numerous organizations, some even with political ambitions, such as the neofascist SHO<sup>144</sup>, which has cooperation agreements with several Russian organizations.<sup>145</sup> The paramilitary organization Slovenski branci (Slovak conscripts), in fact, openly promotes pro-Kremlin interests and maintains a track record of successfully recruiting youth to its ranks.<sup>146</sup> 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 free<sup>147</sup> although the country's higher education institutions do not figure into the top 100 world university rankings.<sup>148</sup> 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.<sup>149</sup> 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,<sup>150</sup> the former Minister of Social Affairs and the Family,<sup>151</sup> the Minister of Education,<sup>152</sup> the Minister of Finance<sup>153</sup> and the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament.<sup>154</sup>

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.<sup>155</sup> His Facebook channel often disseminates polarizing content, disinformation, and pro-Kremlin propaganda.<sup>156</sup>

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).<sup>157</sup> 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.<sup>158</sup>

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.<sup>159</sup>





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**92** <https://www.mosr.sk/49526-en/rezort-obrany-predstavil-expertom-na-globsecu-akcny-plan-koordinacie-boja-proti-hybridnym-hrozbam/>

**93** <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2005-85#cast4>

**94** <https://vs.mosr.sk/sprava-o-cinnosti-vs-2015/>

**95** <https://www.minv.sk/?statnakomisia>

**96** <https://volby.transparency.sk/parlament2020/hodnotenie/>



**97** <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gam-bit-part/>

**98** <https://dennikn.sk/788590/kotlebovci-zbieraju-podpisy-za-referendum-o-eu-a-nato-uz-tak-mer-rok-vraj-ich-maju-desattisice/>

**99** E.g. Sputnik CZ targeting Slovaks and Czechs was established in 2014 and [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/russias\\_information\\_war\\_in\\_central\\_europe.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/russias_information_war_in_central_europe.pdf)

**100** <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

**101** <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22105666/screening-journalists-monitoring-koc-ner-kriak-police-toth.html>

**102** Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, p. 99, [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf)

**103** <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-politics-media-idUSKCN1IW25M>

**104** RTVS denies the link. The reporting about the vaccine was widely watched and is perceived as a key content piece contributing to distrust towards vaccination in the country. The reporting was labelled as misleading and the author was found to be related to the victim, whose death proved to be unrelated to the vaccine. <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/2484244/>

**105** E.g. SME or Dennik N

**106** Attack on the media from Igor Matovič: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/matovic-stazu-je-utoky-voci-nemu-pise-kobercovom-nalete>; from Robert Fico: [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/23/slovakias-pm-calls-journalists-dirty-anti-slovak-prostitutes?CMP=tw\\_tgu](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/23/slovakias-pm-calls-journalists-dirty-anti-slovak-prostitutes?CMP=tw_tgu), Marian Kotleba: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/563898/komentar-petra-bardy-ho-utok-na-media-a-zastrasovanie/>

**107** <https://dennikn.sk/1630470/mediab-rifing-preco-su-hlavne-spravy-idealny-partner-pre-fica-a-kocnera-grafy-a-fakty/>

**108** <https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>

**109** However, the project has been forced to remove some websites from its list of problematic sources due to SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation): <https://e.dennikn.sk/2501626/dezinfoweb-hlavny-dennik-muse-li-skrtnut-zo-zoznamu-konspiratori-sk-taktika-carnogurskeho-mladsieho-na-sude-uspela/>

**110** Facebook is the most popular social media platform used by more than 50% of the population. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf)

**111** One of the databases seeking to list a range of problematic (alongside the non-problematic) sources is blbec.online. In addition, the Czech and Slovak Facebook landscapes are to a great

extent closely entangled on account of linguistic affinity [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Visualising\\_influence.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Visualising_influence.pdf)

**112** One of the findings of a non-public monitoring GLOBSEC report conducted within 5 months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**113** <https://zemavek.sk/europska-unia-zakazala-pestovanie-niektorych-druhov-rastlin/>

**114** <https://zemavek.sk/vo-svedsku-nechcu-byt-pajacmi-nato-a-odmietaju-hadky-s-ruskom/>

**115** <https://kulturblog.sk/kultura/kedy-si-zmenit-pohlavie-lgbt-bar-londyn/>

**116** Slovak Parliamentary Election 2020, p. 14

**117** <https://www.omediach.com/blog/17079-kandiduje-za-harabina-a-obdivuje-putina-ta3-z-nej-urobila-nezavislu-expertku-video>

**118** <https://infosecurity.sk/dezinfo/sef-sis-rus-ki-diplomati-financuju-alternativne-media/>

**119** <https://dennikn.sk/1288348/propagandu-pre-hlavne-spravy-pise-rus-ktory-sa-chodi-radit-do-agentury-kremla-odomknute/>

**120** <https://dennikn.sk/blog/378330/ako-je-to-s-udajnou-nezavislostou-tibora-ros-tasa/>

**121** Visualising Influence, p. 22, [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Visualising\\_influence.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Visualising_influence.pdf)

**122** CrowdTangle data

**123** <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/slovakia-works-through-its-authoritarian-past/>; data on Slovakia's political polarization can be accessed on V-Dem website: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>

**124** <https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/03/jan-kuciak-murder-the-crime-and-trial-that-sparked-a-renaissance-of-civil-society>

**125** <https://www.startitup.sk/demonstranti-zablokovali-vchod-do-parlamentu-zasahuje-aj-policia/>

**126** <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/sledujeme-protesty-na-slovensku/508408-clanok.html>

**127** [https://www.tvnoviny.sk/koronavi-rus/2033568\\_z-facebooku-do-ulic-agresivni-aktivaxeri-kricali-pred-domami-odbornikov-policia-zatial-hovori-o-priestupku](https://www.tvnoviny.sk/koronavi-rus/2033568_z-facebooku-do-ulic-agresivni-aktivaxeri-kricali-pred-domami-odbornikov-policia-zatial-hovori-o-priestupku)

**128** Participation of the Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia in protests: <https://www.noviny.sk/slovensko/628281-demonstracie-v-bratislave-kotleba-v-prejave-kritizuje-vladu-a-prezidentku-caputovu>

**129** Participation of the Republic Party in protests: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/regiony/clanok/599398-protestne-zhromazdenia-v-kosici-ach-sa-zatial-zaobisli-bez-vaznejsich-incidentov/>

**130** Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training: The violent radicalisation and Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups, p. 14, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_SK\\_20170428.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_SK_20170428.pdf), <https://www.noviny.sk/politika/453962-blaha-rusko-je-krasne-rusko-je-mudre-rusko-je-vyspele-podla-klusa-si-blah-pomylil-svetove-strany>, <https://dennikn.sk/2274243/maju-radi-rusko-nemaju-radi-vakciny-prokremelska-scena-riesi-dilemu-co-so-sputnikom/>

**131** <https://www.startitup.sk/blaha-na-face-booku-znova-klame-az-sa-prasi-prekrutenymi-informaciami-manipuluje-ludi/>

**132** <https://www.tyzden.sk/reportaze/55278/boli-sme-na-mitingu-lsns-klamu-strasia-a-urazaju/>

**133** <https://csosi.org/>

**134** <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22309594/civil-society-seen-as-the-best-cure-to-safeguard-democracy.html>; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13510340312331293907> ; <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/194-closer-look-the-slovak-ngo-community>

**135** The narrative about NGOs acting on behalf of foreign interests, usually as an 'extended hand of the US', has been widely disseminated, for example, during the 2020 Slovak Parliamentary Elections: <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Slovak-parliamentary-election-2020.pdf>

**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/mimovladky-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](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=38846457749226353886345808085965](https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/fico-mali-sme-pravdu-sorosove-peniaze/543820-clanok.html?fb_comment_id=38846457749226353886345808085965)

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

**142** <https://www.platformahas.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](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-skrývajú-vysoko-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-utajil-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-zlahcil-som-si-to-nebolo-to-pekne-reagoval-sef-parlamentu>

**155** [https://www.sav.sk/?lang=sk&doc=user-org-user&user\\_no=6654](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/>

**158** <https://dennikn.sk/2361789/spite-dobre-mali-by-ste-byt-vo-velkom-strese-sef-cinskeho-institutu-pise-slovenskemu-expertovi/>

**159** China in Central and Eastern Europe, p. 5, [https://cepa.org/cepa\\_files/2018-03-China\\_in\\_Central\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Europe.pdf](https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2018-03-China_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe.pdf)







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