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



North **Macedonia**

Romania

Serbia

Slovakia

Bulgaria

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NOVEMBER 2021

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

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➔ What is this report about?

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

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

Why are we doing this?

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

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

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

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



Our theoretical approach

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

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

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

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



The countries we cover

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

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

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



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

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

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

Our methodological approach

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

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

Consultants on measurement methods:

Kyle Marquard

Assistant Professor, HSE University

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

Dan Pemstein

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

Alexander Stoyanov

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

➡ 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

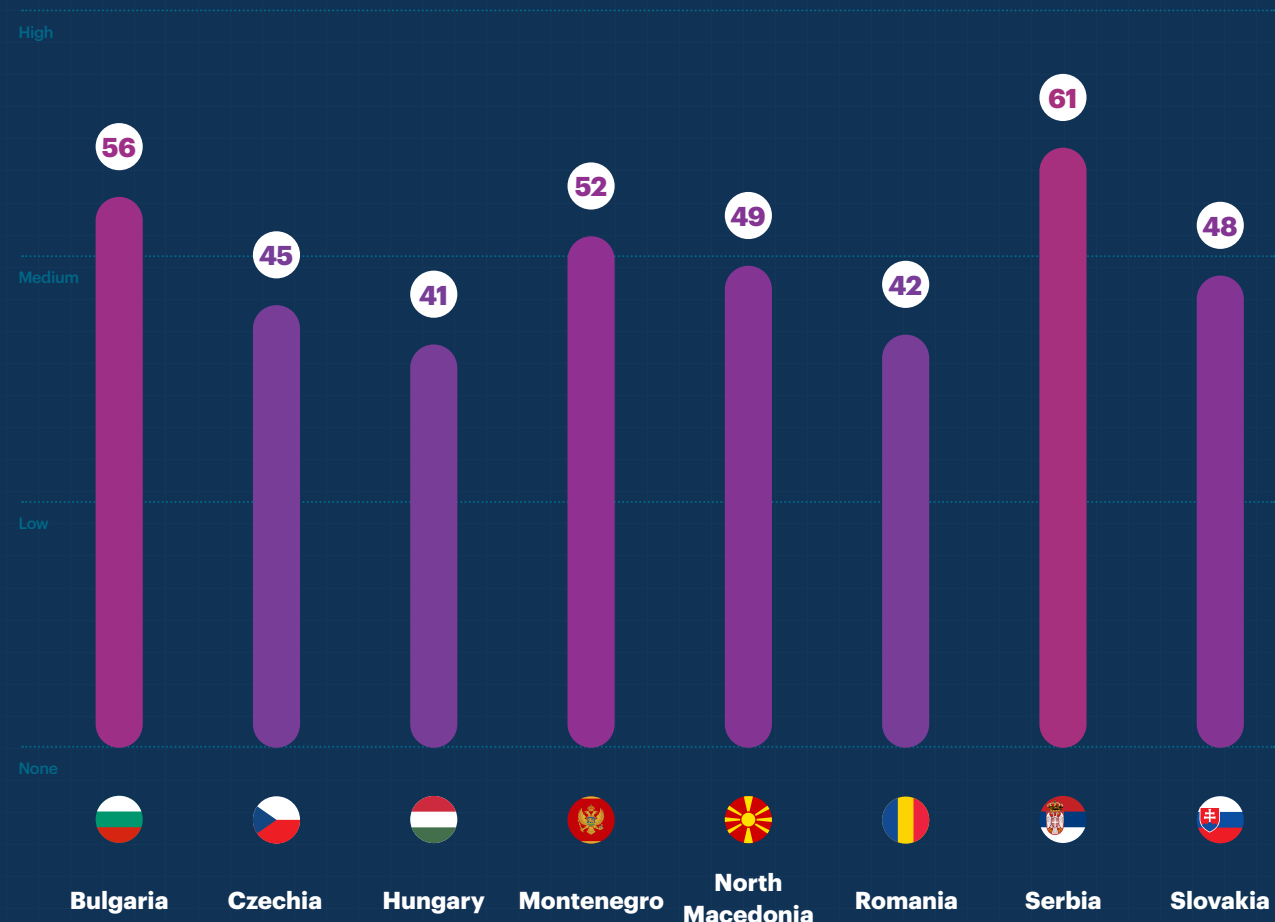


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina famously begins, *"Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"*.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

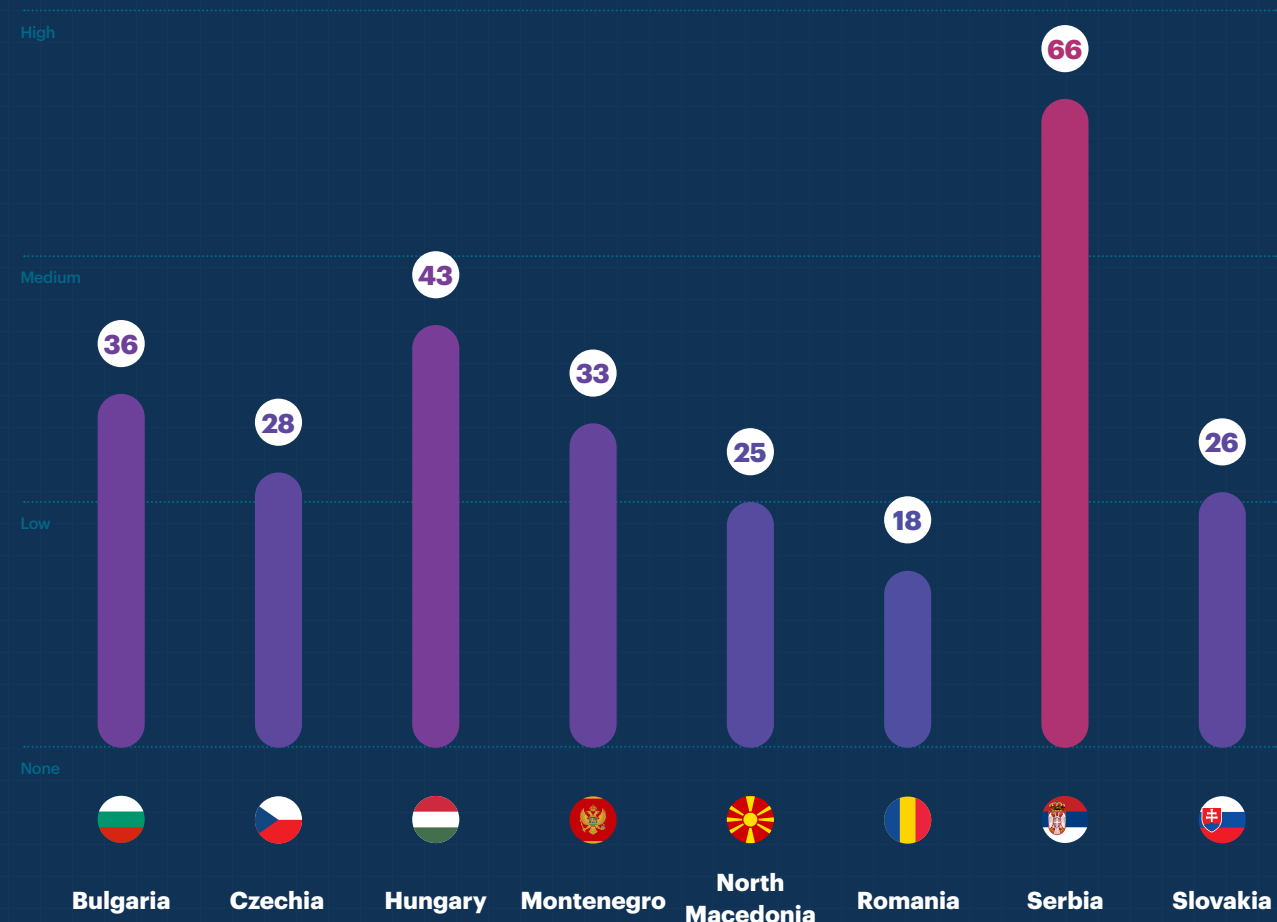
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

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

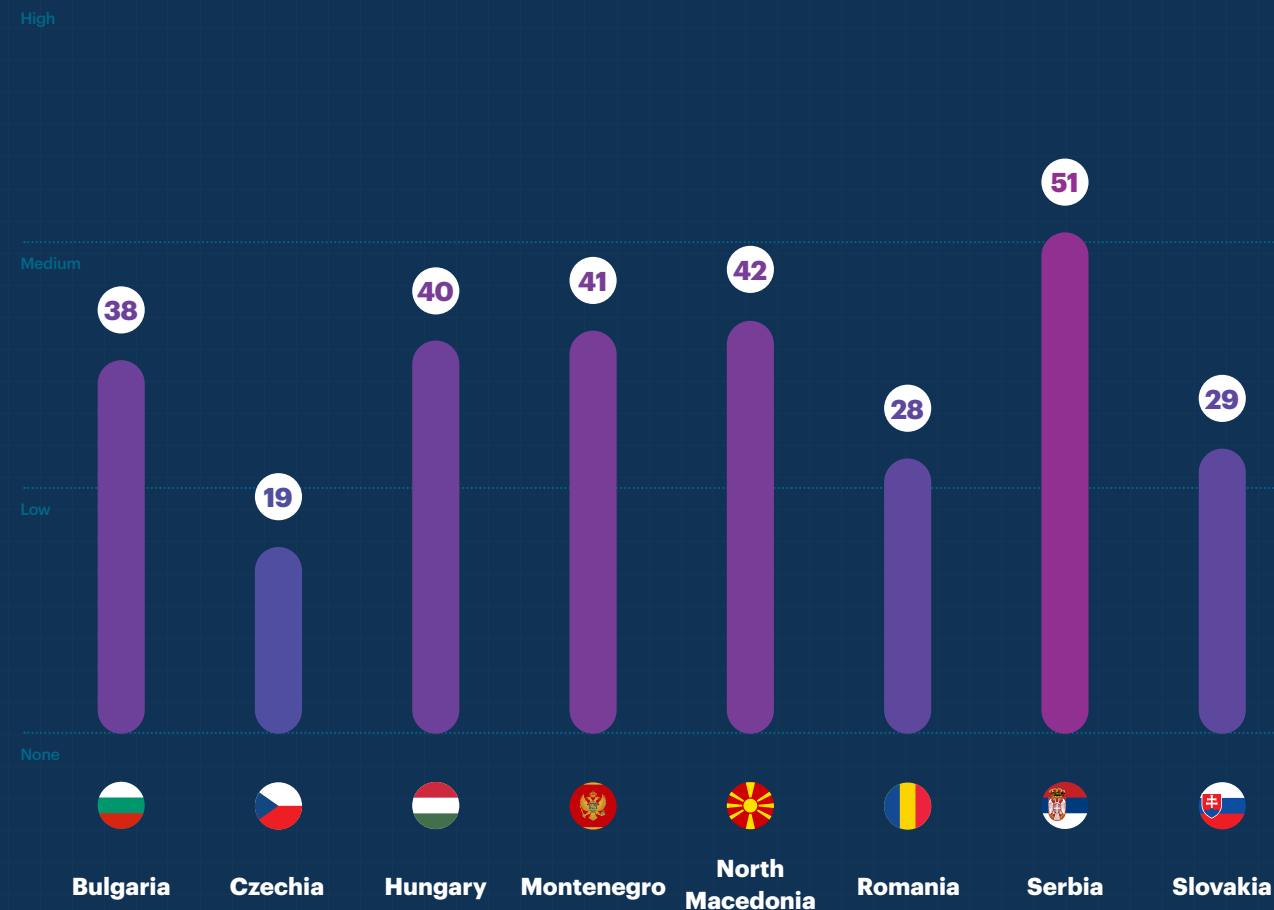
facilitated by the witting or unwitting promotion of their interests, is counterbalanced by strong commitments to Euro-Atlanticism. Over the monitoring period from 2016 to June 2021, political representatives in six of eight countries studied generally pursued policies supportive of the EU. NATO, for 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.

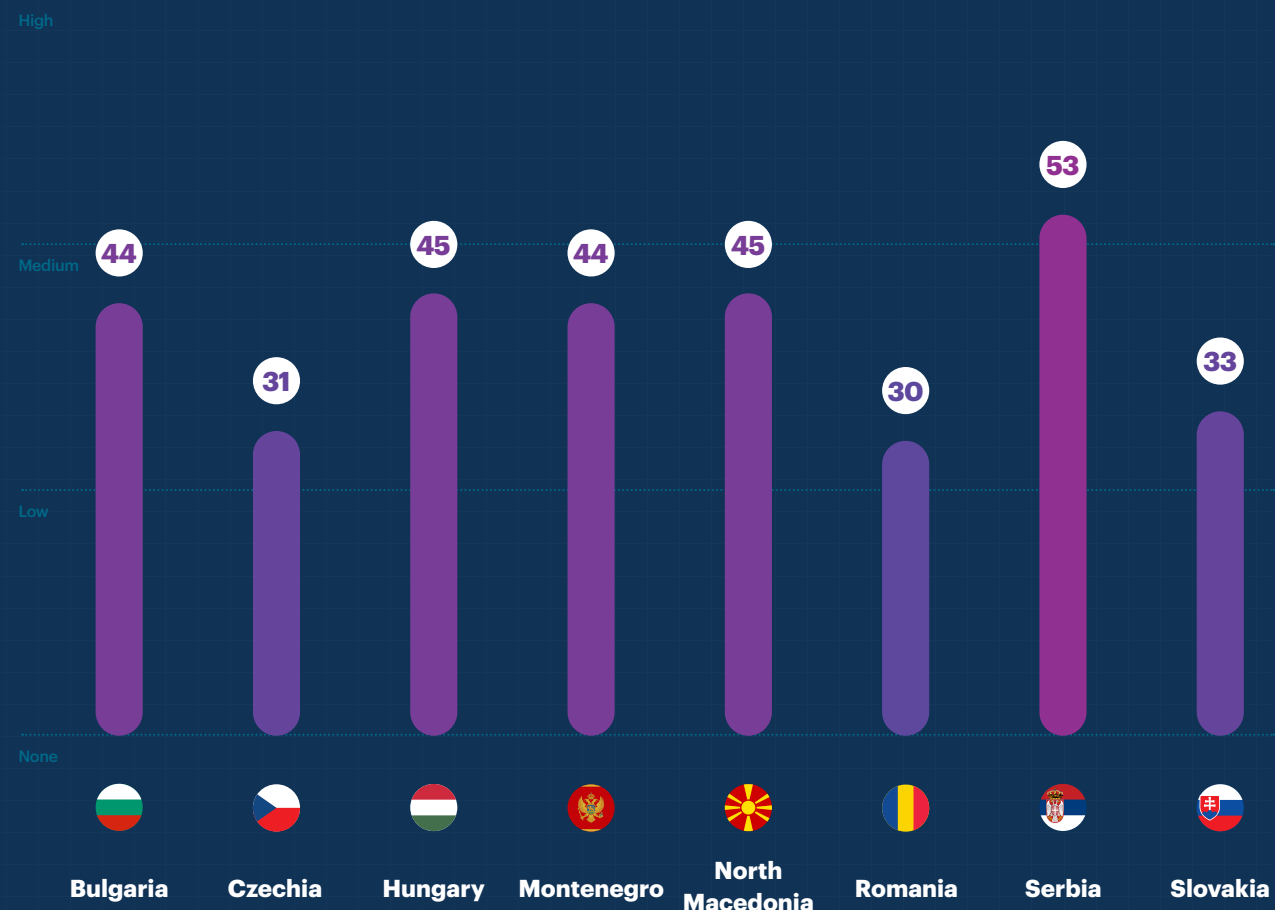
Public servants having an insufficient situational awareness is, consequently, a common and prevailing problem. But recognition of this gap, the first necessary step if change is to occur, has progressed in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and even Montenegro, following an attempted coup. These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

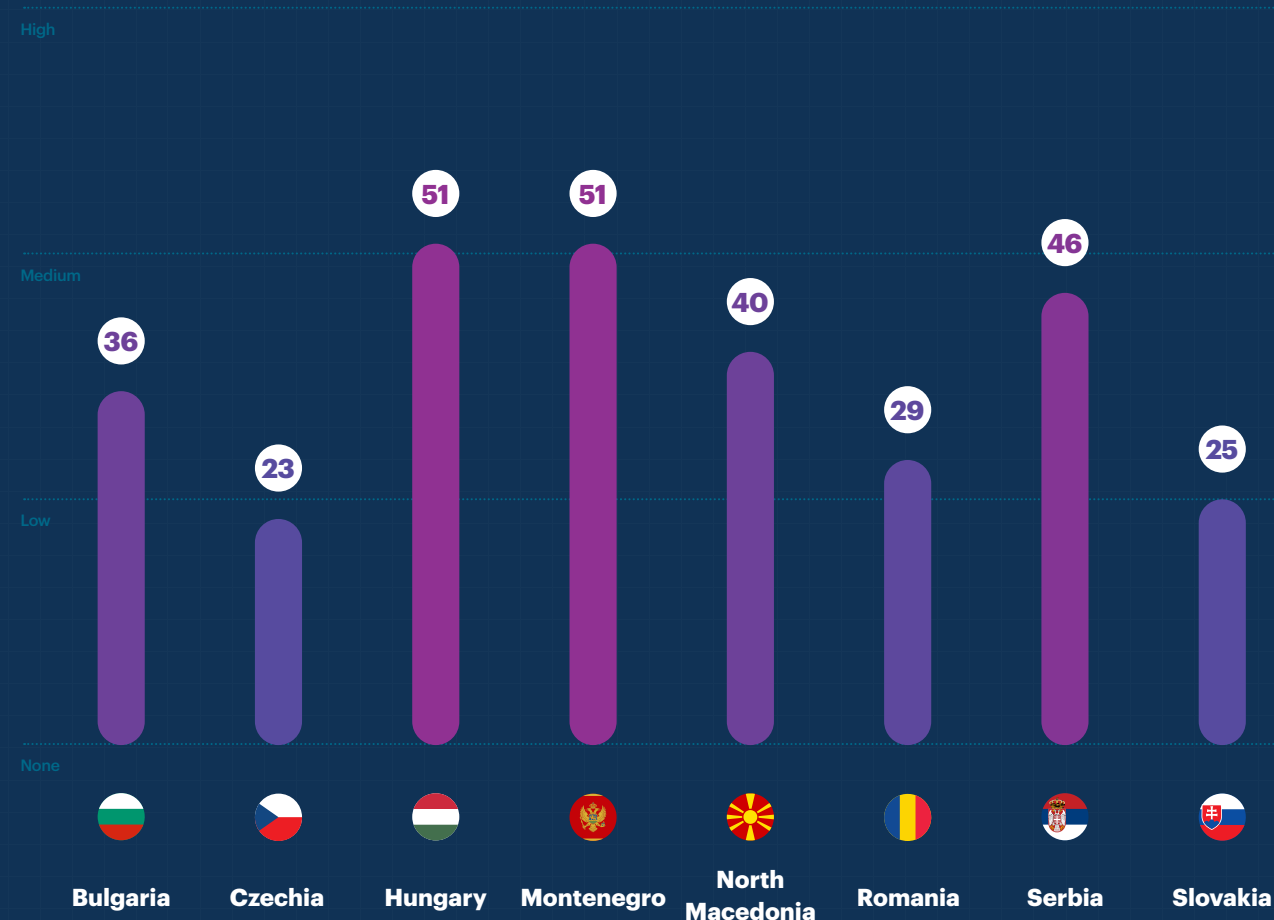
The presence of pro-Kremlin actors and content in the media space is one of the most serious challenges contributing to vulnerability across Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans.

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 North Macedonia



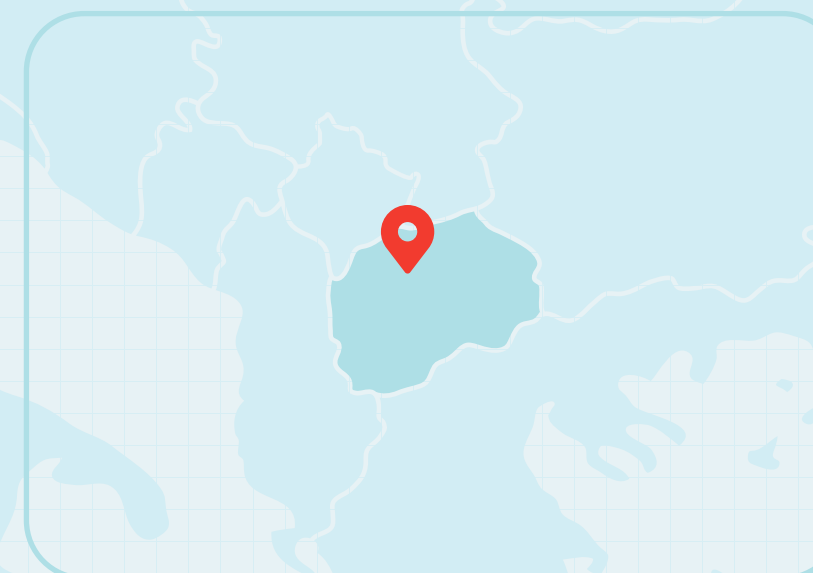
North Macedonia can be classified as the most resilient of the Western Balkan countries examined by the Index. Its society, however, finds itself polarized into antagonistic political camps and remains vulnerable.

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.



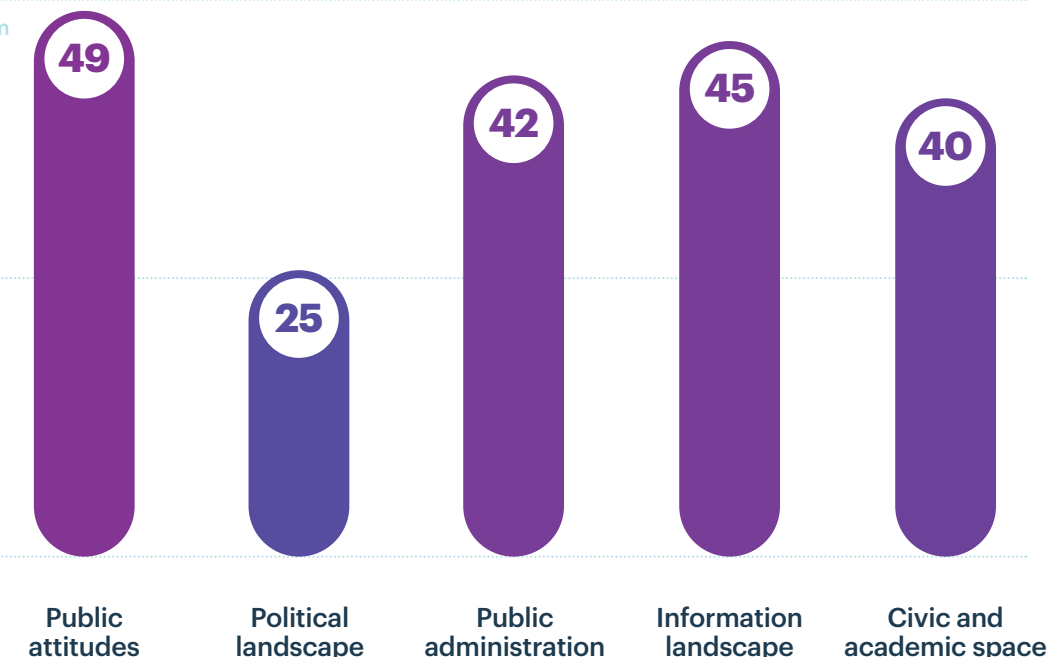
Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

49

/100



EU and NATO membership garner the greatest support in the Western Balkans region in North Macedonia (more than 70% are in favor)³. 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 world⁴.

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 neighbors⁵, strident political polarization⁶, and ethnic and religious rifts⁷ 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.⁸

Perception of partners

Macedonians perceive the West as a key strategic partner (including the EU at 31% of respondents and Germany at 42%)⁹ 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 Beijing¹⁰. This dynamic, nevertheless, has notably shifted during the pandemic, with Beijing becoming North Macedonia's largest donor and supplier of vaccines¹¹. 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) ties¹². 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,¹³ 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 membership¹⁴ 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 NATO¹⁵. Russia, in this vein, has continued to effectively utilize various instruments of political influence, including its economic and investment power¹⁶, 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)¹⁷. 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.¹⁸ Through an official ministerial communication, it sought to evoke strident emotions and exploit an already polarizing issue to turn people against the West.¹⁹



★ **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 2020²⁰, 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 volatility²¹. Fears that EU integration will entail a loss of identity particularly stem from the Prespa Agreement and Bulgarian veto.²²

A majority of Macedonians, furthermore, are dissatisfied with democracy and the political system in their country²³. 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 underdelivering²⁴, 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-DPMNE²⁵ and SDSM²⁶) 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 Agreement²⁷, 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 Greece²⁸, which prevented North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, was finally resolved with the Prespa Agreement²⁹. 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.³⁰

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 talks³¹. This move angered even political leaders backing EU membership³² - 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 veto³³ concerning issues regarding Macedonian identity and history, spurring an anti-EU protest³⁴.

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 processes³⁵. 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.”³⁸

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.”³⁶

Dimitar Apasiev,
leader of Levica, 2019

Nearly all Macedonian political parties clearly state a pro-EU orientation in their manifestos.³⁷ 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.

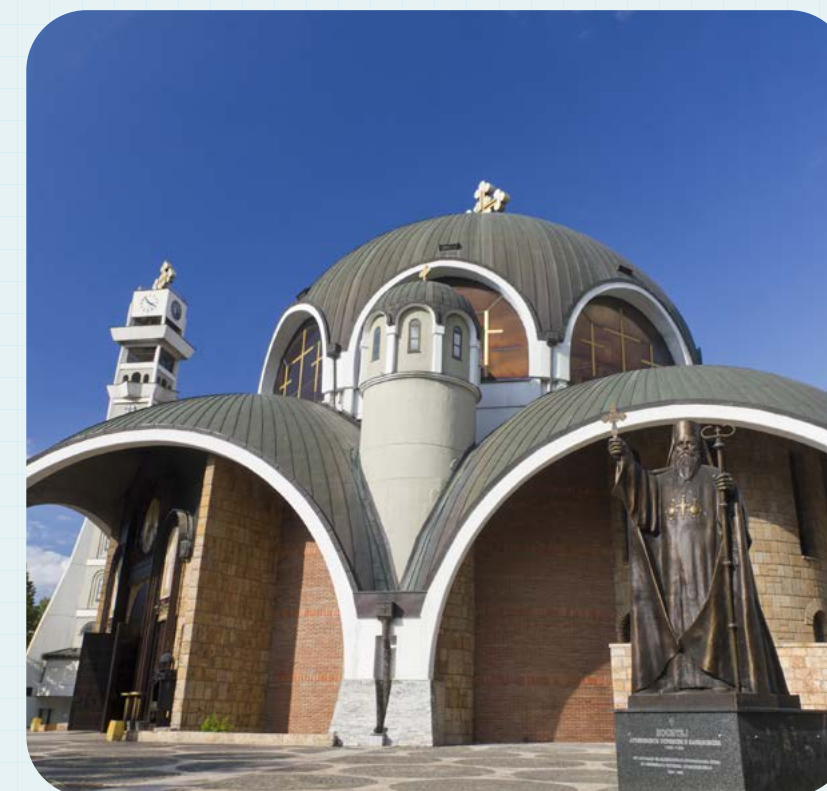
A majority of politicians have publicly pronounced their backing of North Macedonia’s NATO membership. Criticism of the Alliance or the country’s membership in it, meanwhile, is generally perceived as staking out a position against the national interest and could jeopardize electoral support. Critics,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

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 region⁴⁰. 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 pattern⁴¹. 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.⁴²

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



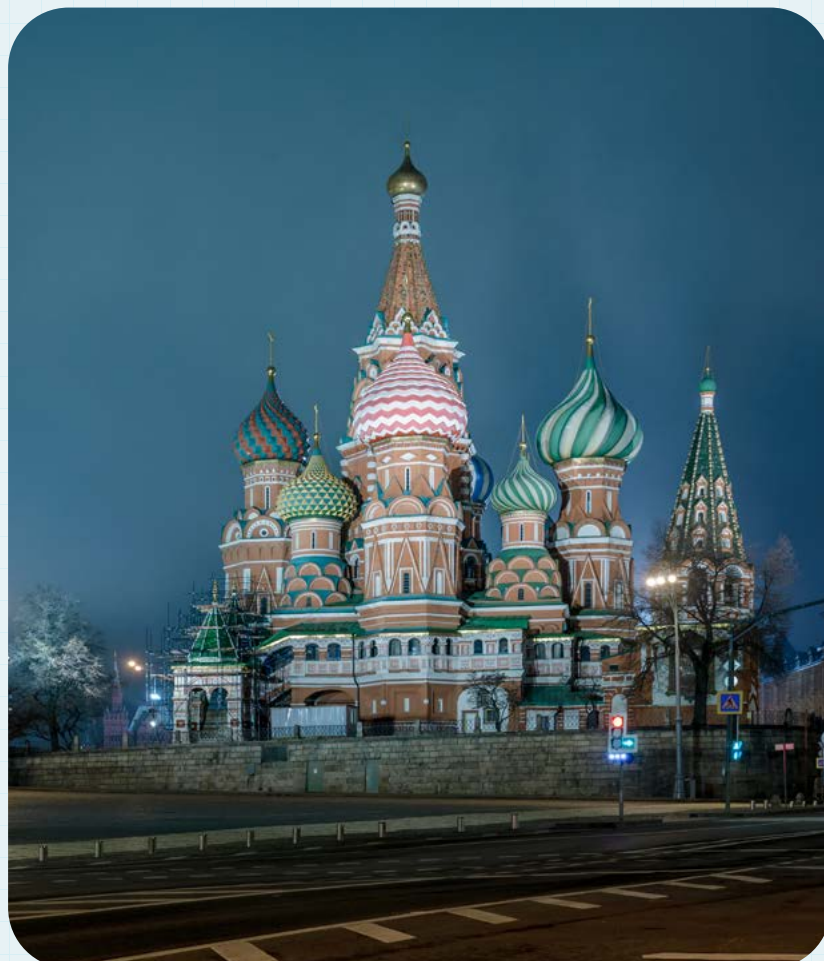
The Russian presence has been unmistakable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The Serbian donation of Sputnik V vaccines to North Macedonia,⁴³ for example, was mediated by Ivan Stoilkovic, MP and leader of the Serbian Democratic Party in North Macedonia, who, on multiple occasions, has openly displayed an affinity towards Russia⁴⁴. 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.⁴⁵

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 case⁴⁶. Two more in 2021, meanwhile, were accompanied with no official explanation apart from it being a matter of national security.⁴⁷ Some politicians showed neutrality⁴⁸ towards these decisions, though others criticized them openly⁴⁹.

While Macedonian politicians display a cautious approach in commenting on Russia and its actions, most politicians from Albanian parties (except government officials⁵⁰) espouse negative attitudes.⁵¹

☛ **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.**⁵²

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.⁵³ 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 infrastructure⁵⁴.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁵⁵, 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.⁵⁶ 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.**⁵⁷

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 Macedonia⁵⁸ and indicated appreciation for China's willingness to approve loans to the country for building critical infrastructure.⁵⁹

Politicians from the smaller Albanian parties, meanwhile, seem to hold either neutral or predominantly negative⁶⁰ 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 manifesto⁶¹ 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.⁶²

The generally positive sentiment towards China has increased during the pandemic against a backdrop that has seen China offer significant medical support to North Macedonia⁶³ 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 Ambassador⁶⁴. 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 pursued⁶⁵ 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 corruption⁶⁶ and politicization⁶⁷ (including numerous nepotism cases⁶⁸) that dampen already

paltry citizen trust in public institutions⁶⁹. The implementation of the judicial reform strategy⁷⁰, however, has achieved some notable progress in recent years⁷¹. 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 overall⁷².



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)⁷³ exist, monitoring remains insufficient⁷⁴ and circumvention rife. Several cases have previously revealed financial manipulation by organized crime in politics from both domestic and foreign actors⁷⁵. 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 Strategy⁷⁶ 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,⁷⁷ the financing of terrorism by foreign actors,⁷⁸ and extremism⁷⁹. 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 disinformation⁸⁰, 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,⁸¹ 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,⁸² 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 day⁸³.

★ **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 dispute⁸⁴ resolution mechanisms still need to be addressed⁸⁵.

Despite Moscow accusing the West of putting "unprecedented pressure" on President Ivanov to give the post of prime minister to the opposition in 2016⁸⁶, only four years later the same Moscow-based MFA labeled the accusations of Russian interference⁸⁷ in the 2020 snap general election as "absurd" and accused Western politicians of hypocrisy and a "cynical use of double standards"⁸⁸.

☛ **VMRO-DPMNE, being the largest opposition party, nominates the President of the National Election Commission⁸⁹ 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 111th on the Corruption Perception Index⁹⁰ in 2020. The 2017 Talir case⁹¹ highlights the problem of high-level abuse of power - the top suspect, former Prime Minister Gruevski, fled to Hungary⁹² 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 procurement⁹³. The SPO itself, ironically, became embroiled in a scandal in 2019⁹⁴, 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 Hungary⁹⁵.



★ **Corruption remains a challenge for North Macedonia, ranked as 111th 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 influence⁹⁶. 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 parties⁹⁷.

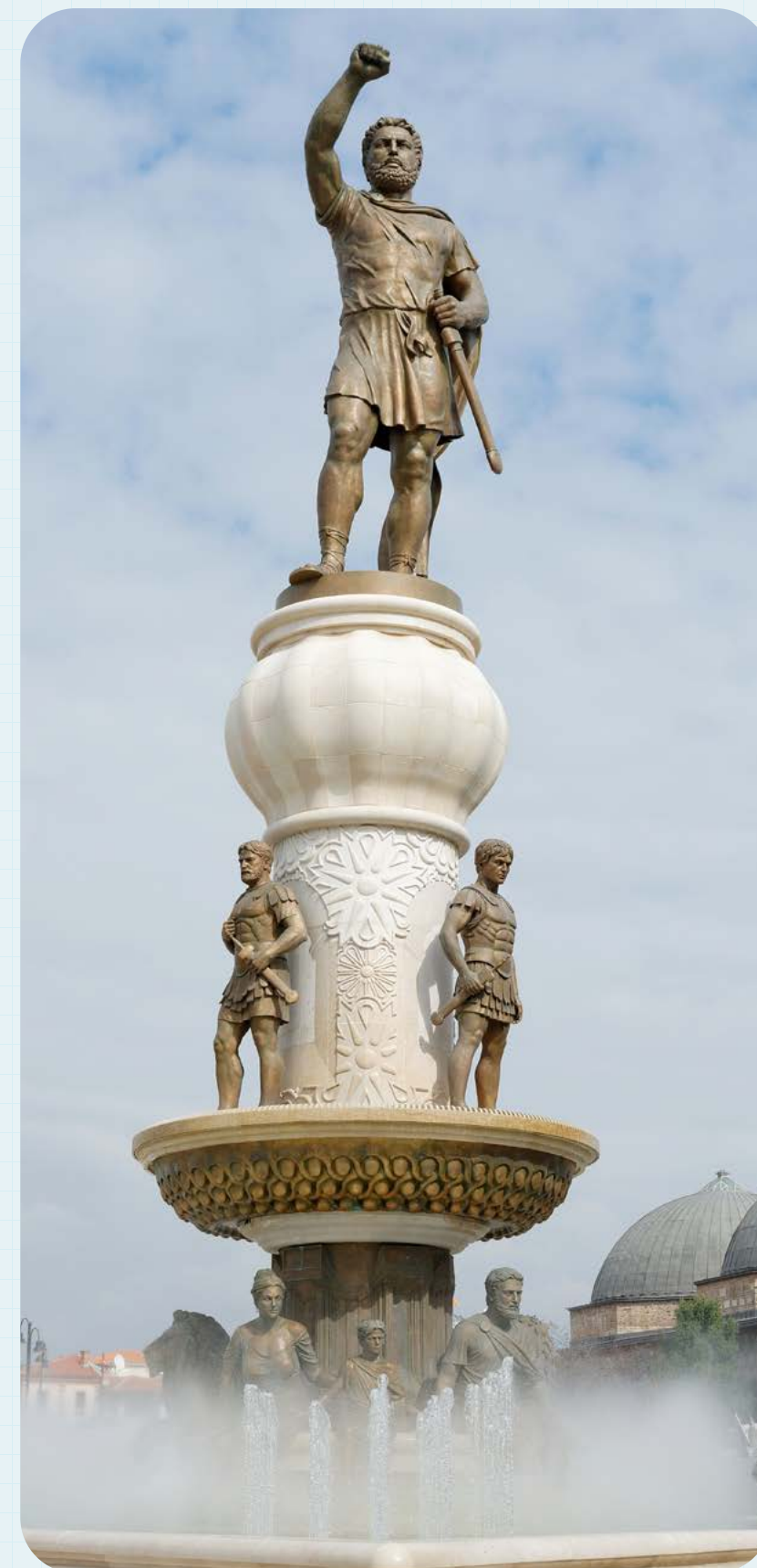
💡 **The fact that crucial corruption legislation is being adopted almost 30 years after the country's independence clearly shows that previous governments enjoyed the commodity of corruption and misuse of public resources for private interests. Now, the work of the National Anti-Corruption Body and a 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



Violations 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 Commission⁹⁸, 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 space⁹⁹ 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 Index¹⁰⁰, 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 region¹⁰¹. In 2021, the country ranked 90th in the world. Improvements include several recent important steps: the creation of the Register of Professional Online Media¹⁰² and the signing of a charter on journalist working conditions and a draft Fair Working Contract for journalists and media workers in digital media¹⁰³ - 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 advertising¹⁰⁴. 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,¹⁰⁵ 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 government¹⁰⁶.

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 country¹⁰⁷. Regrettably, the tendency of senior government officials to threaten and insult journalists remains¹⁰⁸. The culture of impunity is well entrenched¹⁰⁹ and still an obstacle for journalist safety in North Macedonia. The numerous cases of attacks on journalists¹¹⁰ 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 attacks¹¹¹.

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



Quality of information space

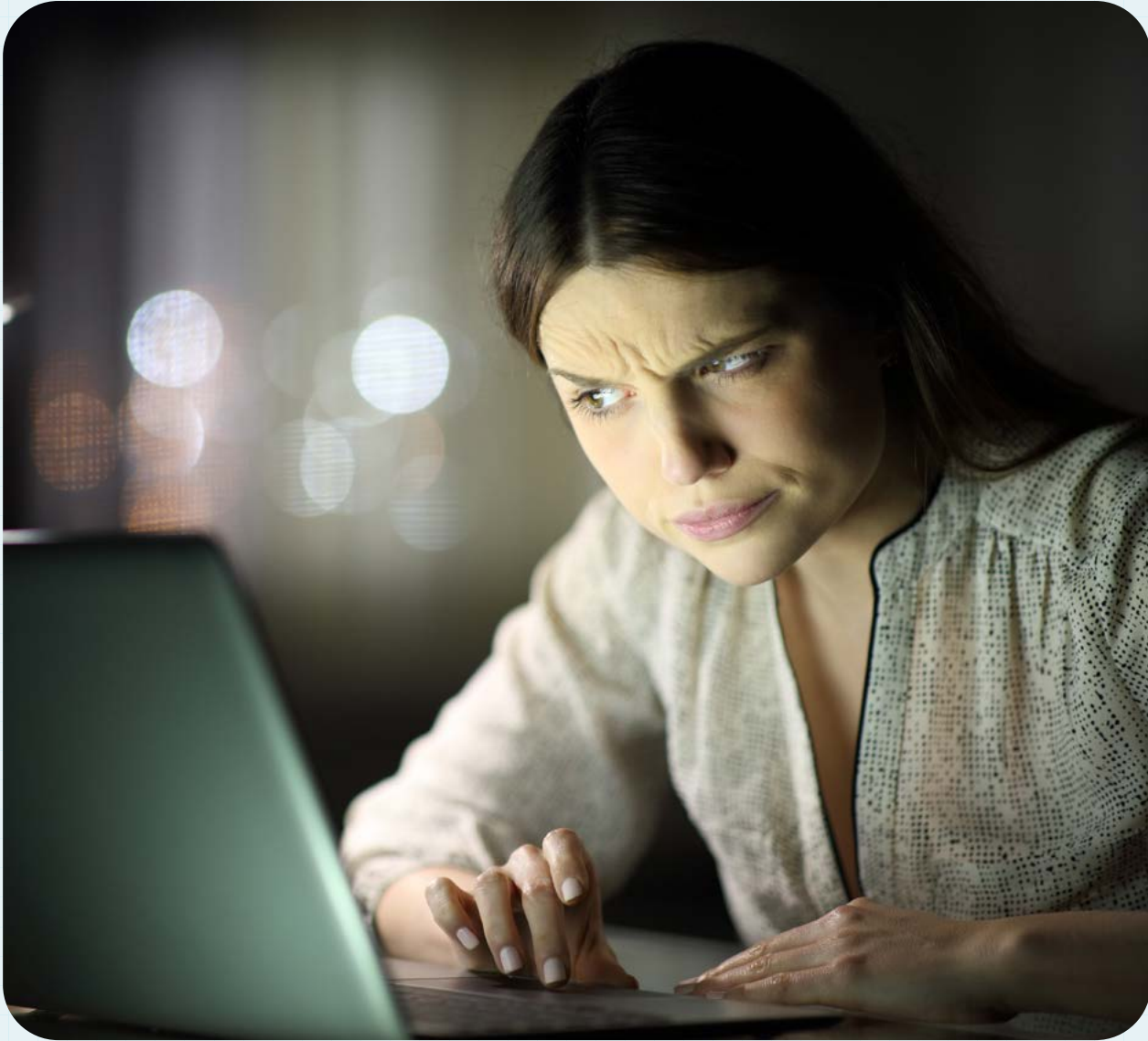
The quality of the information space in North Macedonia is far from ideal due to deep polarization along political lines and private media outlets often tied to political or business interests that influence their content¹¹². Whereas there are multiple channels for information and numerous information providers¹¹³, the numbers alone do not guarantee genuine media and information pluralism.

And though there is a favorable legal framework¹¹⁴ for media freedom and a quality information space, implementation lags behind and often depends on the will of political centers of power¹¹⁵. 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 parties¹¹⁶.

★ **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 consumers¹¹⁷ and consequently exposed to innumerable disinformation narratives¹¹⁸. The online portals remain the biggest concern in spreading disinformation narratives because, unlike traditional media, they have no imprint and they are often registered offshore¹¹⁹ - this means that their true ownership cannot be determined for possible court resolution¹²⁰.

★ **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 nationalism¹²¹ 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.¹²²

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 broadcasters¹²³, 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 administration¹²⁴. On the other hand, little evidence of Russian interference, such as covert media sponsorship, has surfaced¹²⁵. All interviewed experts pointed to TV Alfa as being financed from these sources¹²⁶, 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.

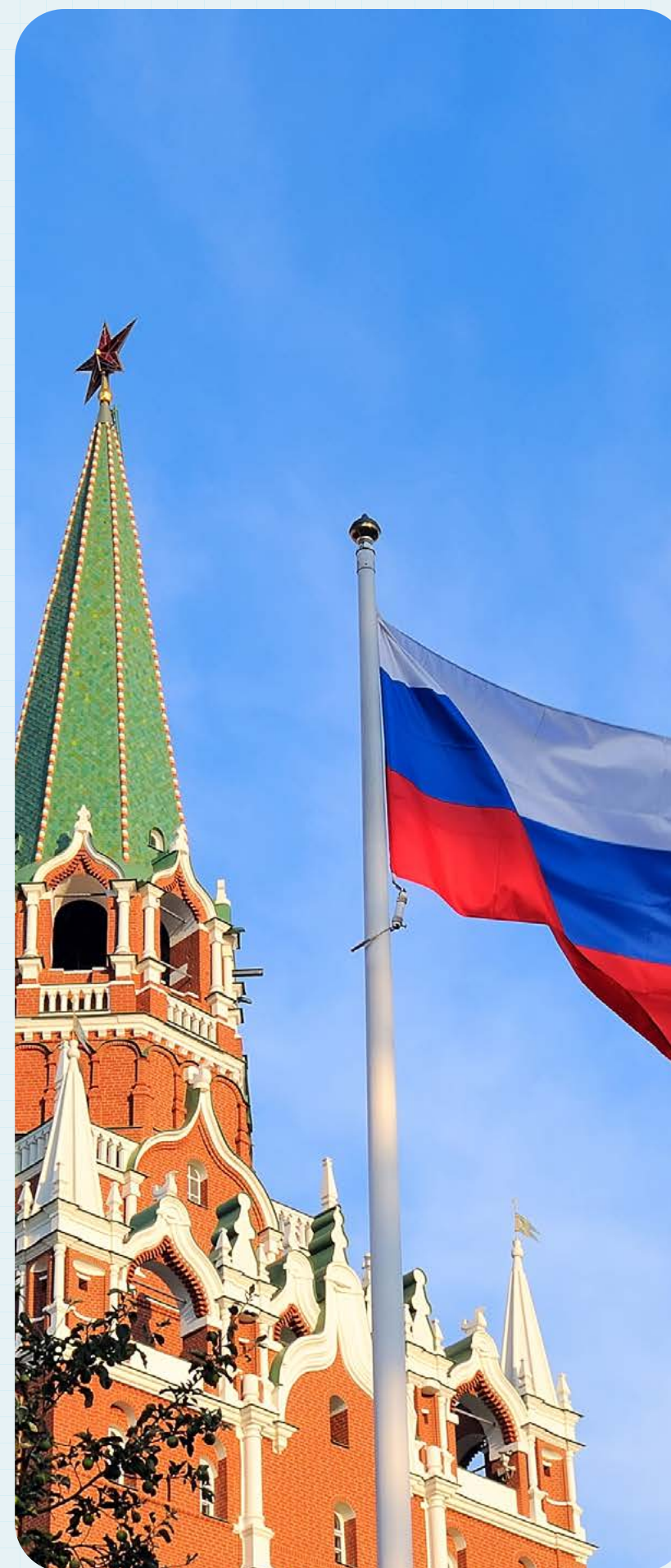


“ While state-owned media has been careful in providing space for pro-Russian narratives over the past few years, these narratives permeate in public media mostly through informative narratives and in the area of culture and it is hard to define if those narratives are organized or coincidental. Sometimes 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 media¹²⁷, 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 polarization¹²⁸ indicates a slight upward trend compared to 2018, Macedonian society remains polarized, mostly because of lengthy political crises from 2015-2017¹²⁹. 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 expression¹³⁰. 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 building¹³¹ and the flaring of ethnic tensions in the country. The clashes also resulted in significant injuries to politicians, journalists, and police officials.¹³² 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.¹³³

Anti-government and nationalistic protests were also held before the ratification of the Prespa Agreement (to change the country's name)¹³⁴. The protests were decentralized between 84 organizations¹³⁵ (political parties, NGOs, civil society initiatives) which were later united under the slogan "Macedonia Blocks" signing a Strategic Cooperation Charter¹³⁶ 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 index¹³⁷ 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 sector¹³⁸. 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.¹³⁹ This shift was further supported through the adoption of a strategy on cooperation and development of civil society.¹⁴⁰

That said, in 2016, the Public Revenue Office announced it would conduct financial investigations of the Open Society Foundation and 20 additional CSOs¹⁴¹, 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 funding¹⁴²

“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.¹⁴³

Cases of state interference in the work of CSOs in the form of unannounced inspections, excessive audits, threats, and harassment were noted as well¹⁴⁴.

Civil society has struggled to gain the public trust¹⁴⁵ 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 country¹⁴⁶. 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 characterization¹⁴⁷. The work of Rosotrudnichestvo¹⁴⁸ 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 policy¹⁴⁹.



“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 Skopje¹⁵⁰ 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 media¹⁵¹.

★ 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,¹⁵² the situation has been improving¹⁵³ and academic freedom in North Macedonia is generally upheld¹⁵⁴. However, corruption in academia is widespread¹⁵⁵ 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.¹⁵⁶ 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.¹⁵⁷ The university justifies this position by arguing that it aspires to promote good relationships between the Balkans and Russia¹⁵⁸.

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

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