

**GLOBSEC**

# Vulnerability Index 2021

  **Bulgaria**

Czechia

Hungary

Montenegro

North

Macedonia

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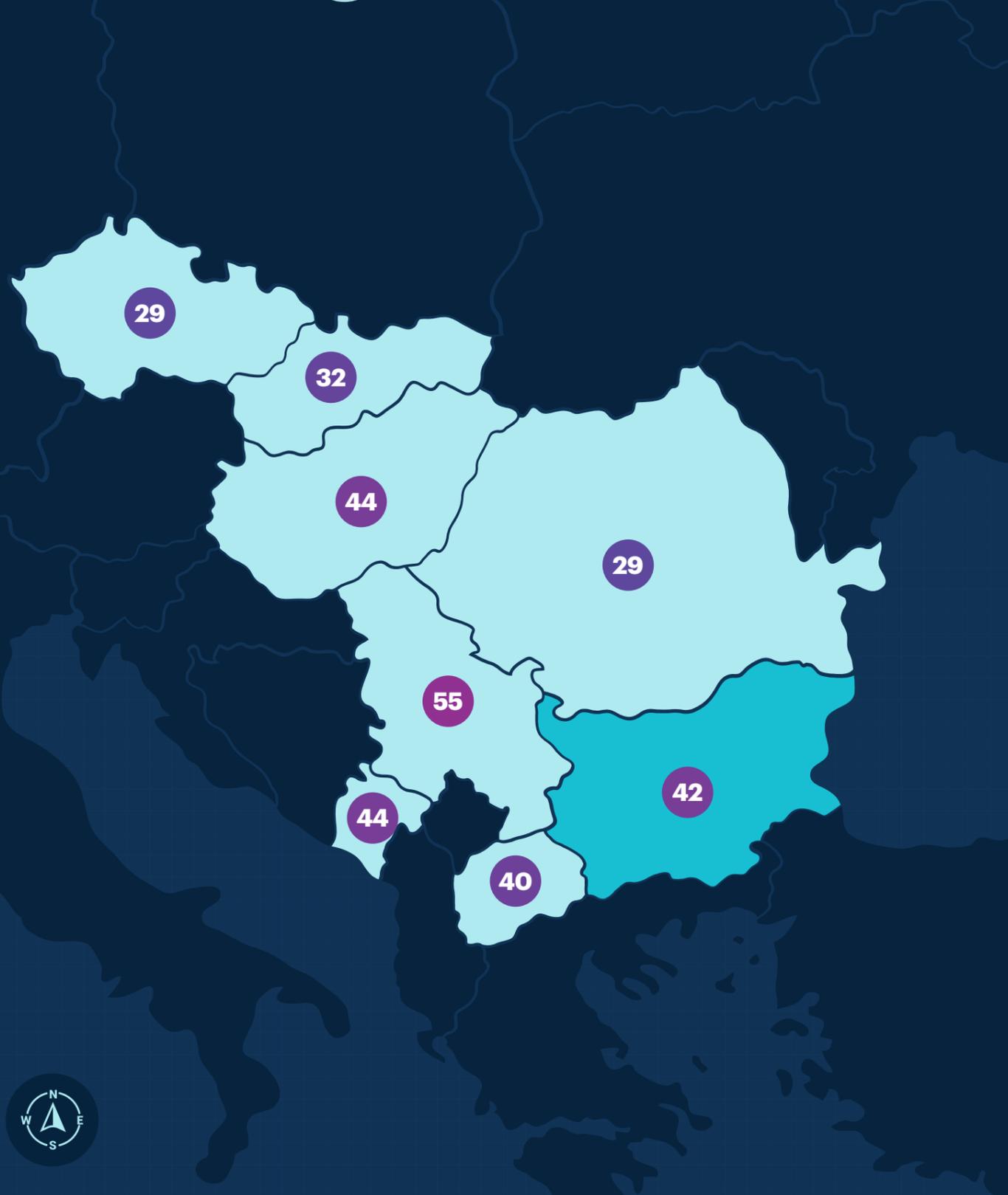
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# → Vulnerability score region overview



# → Editors & authors

**Dominika Hajdu**  
Policy Director

**Katarína Klingová**  
Senior Research Fellow

**Miroslava Sawiris**  
Senior Research Fellow

Centre for Democracy and Resilience



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.

# → Authors of Focus on Bulgaria

**Boryana Velcheva**  
Analyst, Economic Program

**Ruslan Stefanov**  
Program Director

**Martin Vladimirov**  
Director, Energy and Climate Program

Center for the Study of Democracy



[www.csd.bg](http://www.csd.bg)



# ➔ 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:

### Kyle Marquard

Assistant Professor, HSE University

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

### Alexander Stoyanov

Director, Vitosha Research

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

### Dan Pemstein

Associate Professor, North Dakota State University

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

# ➔ The vulnerability calculation was based on seven key data sources

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

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

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

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

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

➔ **Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index**

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

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

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

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

# → Vulnerability dimensions

## 1 Public attitudes

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

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

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



## 2 Political landscape

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

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

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

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

## 3 Public administration

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

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

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





# 4 Information landscape

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

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

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



# 5 Civic & academic space

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

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



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

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

[Learn more](#)





# → Strategic insight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

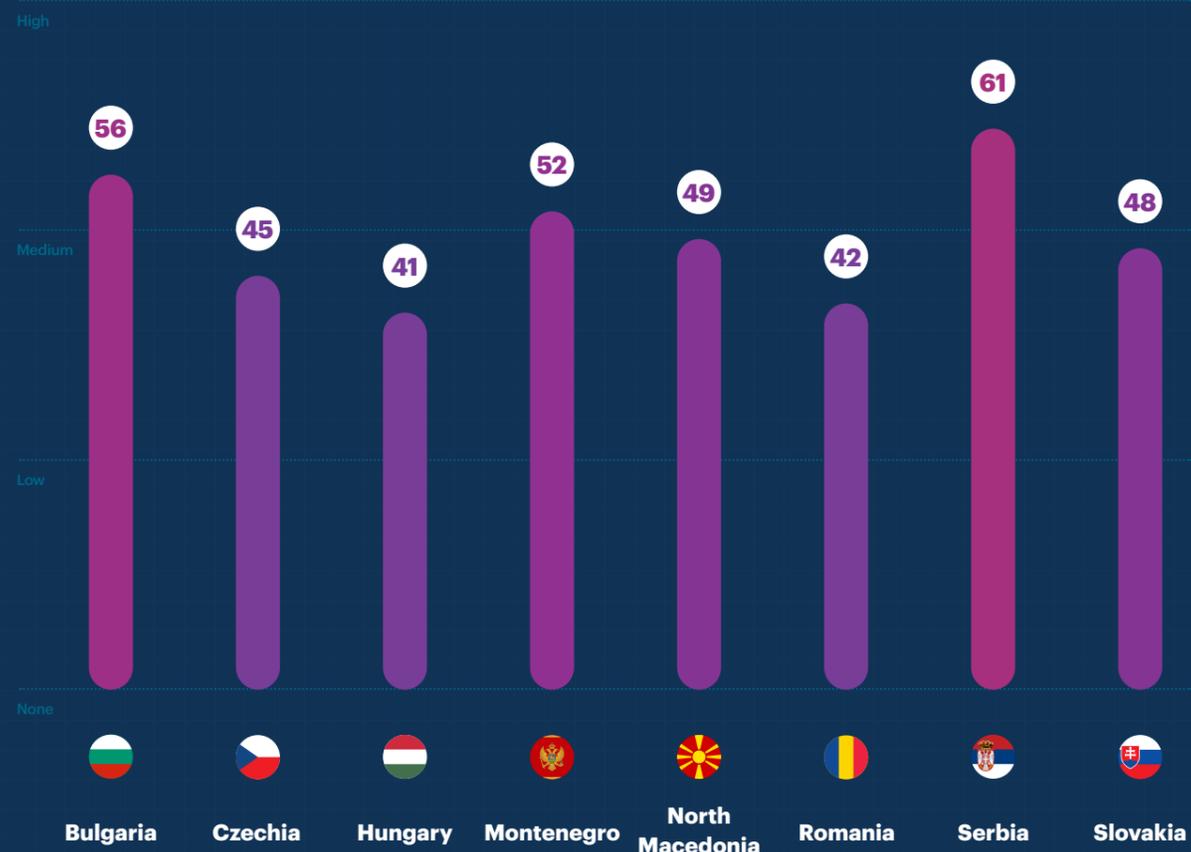
Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, Miroslava Sawiris and Jakub Wiśniewski



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



# → Public attitudes



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

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

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

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

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

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

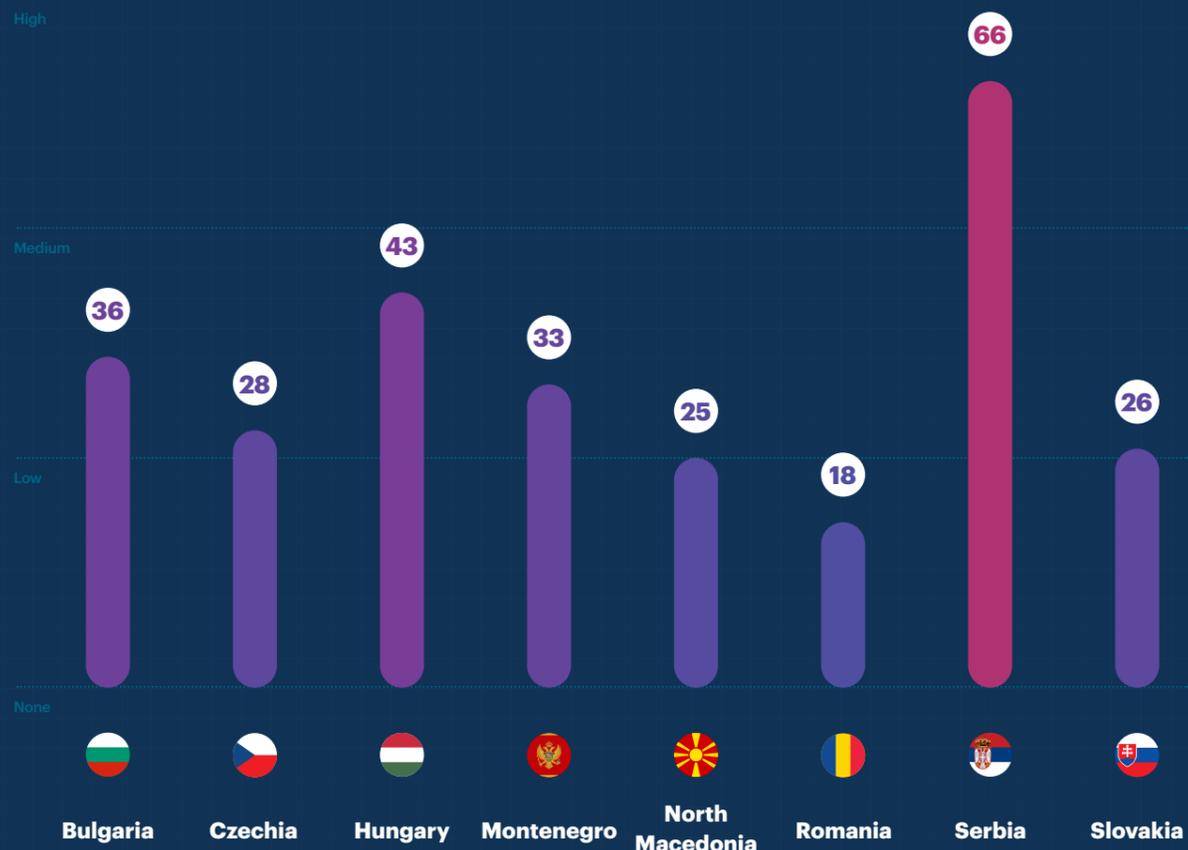
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

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

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



# → Political landscape



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

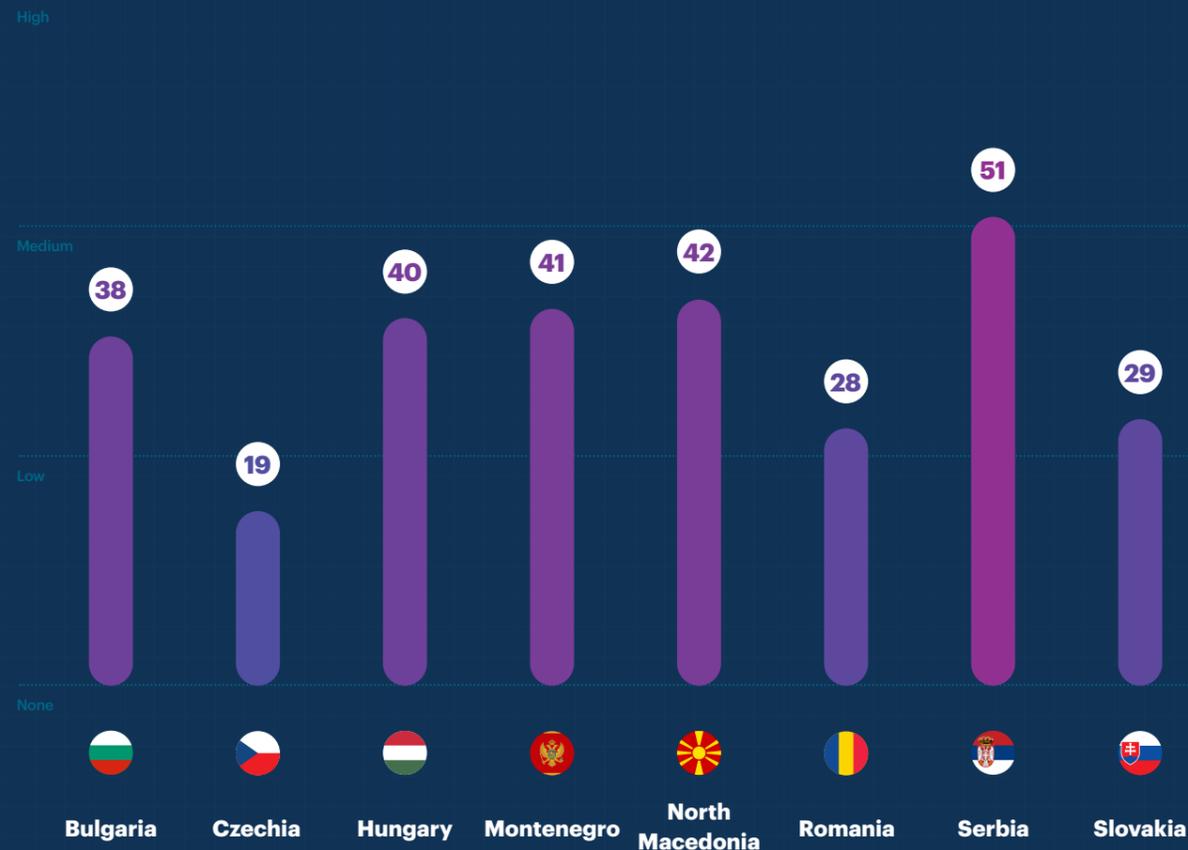
Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's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

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





# Public administration



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

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

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

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



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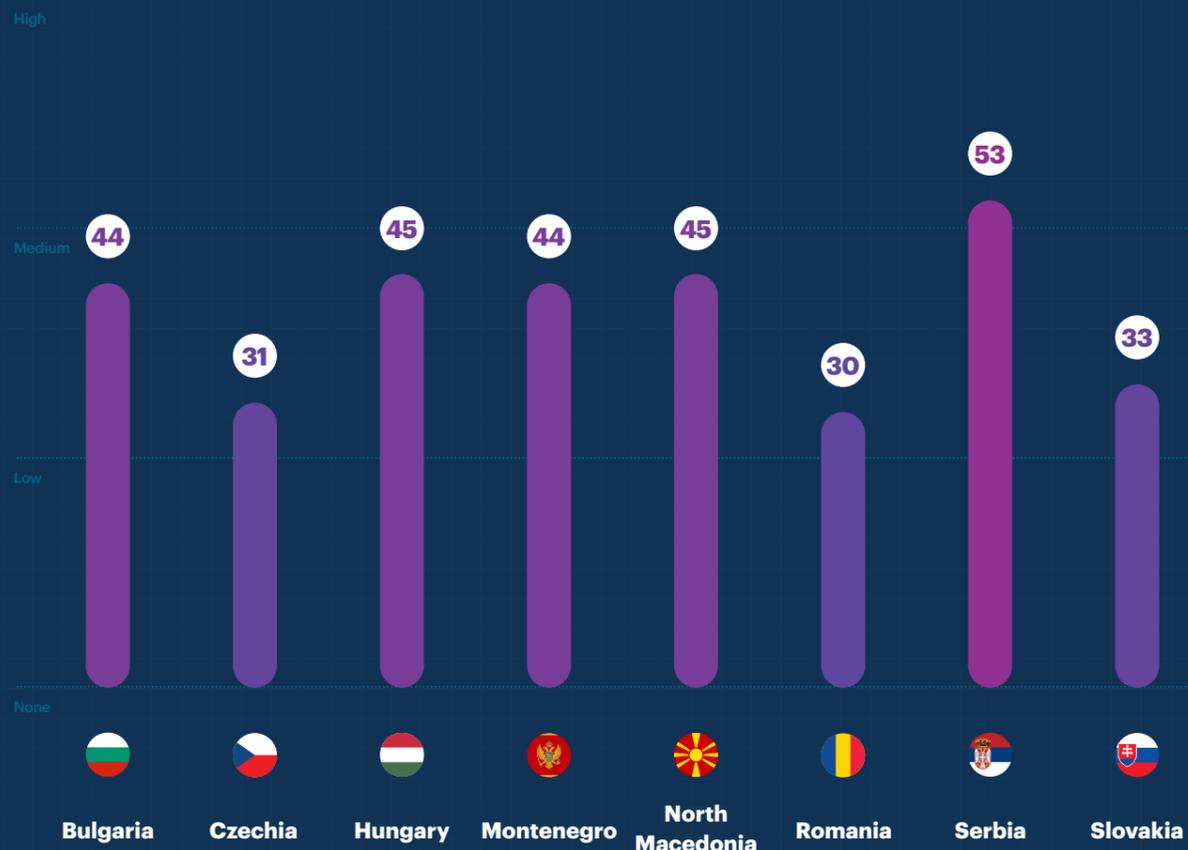
Limited and one-track understanding of threat perception is often the result of political leadership unwilling to change the status quo and establish new cooperation structures that emphasize whole-of-government and whole-of-society policies. These approaches have not been adopted in any of the analyzed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

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

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

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

# → Information landscape



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

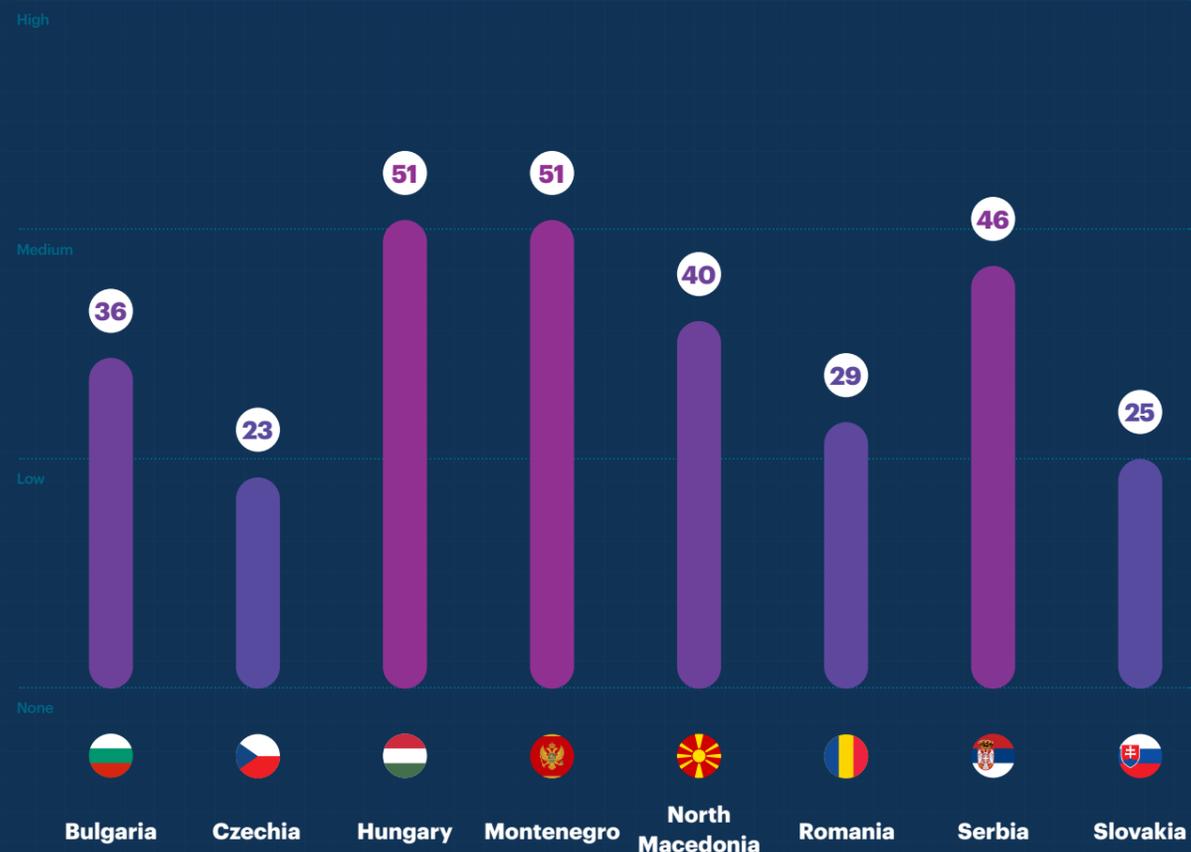
environments and at least basic protection of users in the digital space; mid-ranked countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) whose information environments display more vulnerabilities including weaker media freedom even as some points of resilience are present, such as relative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

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

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



# → Civic & academic space



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

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

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



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

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

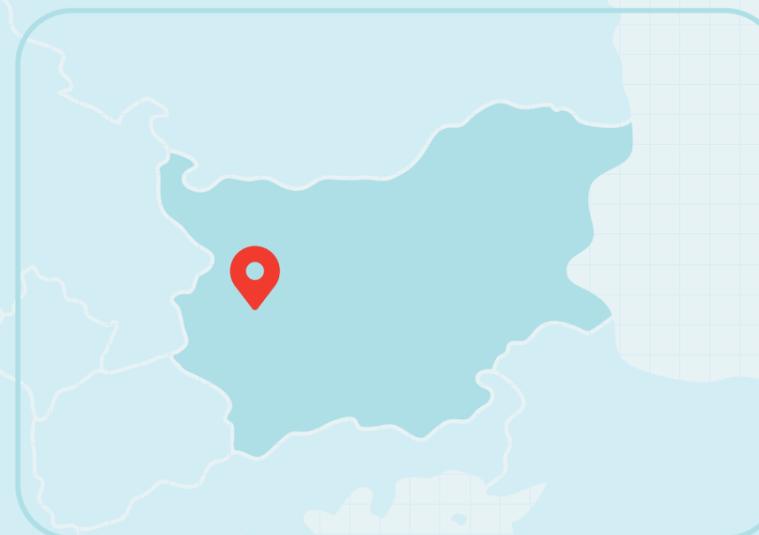
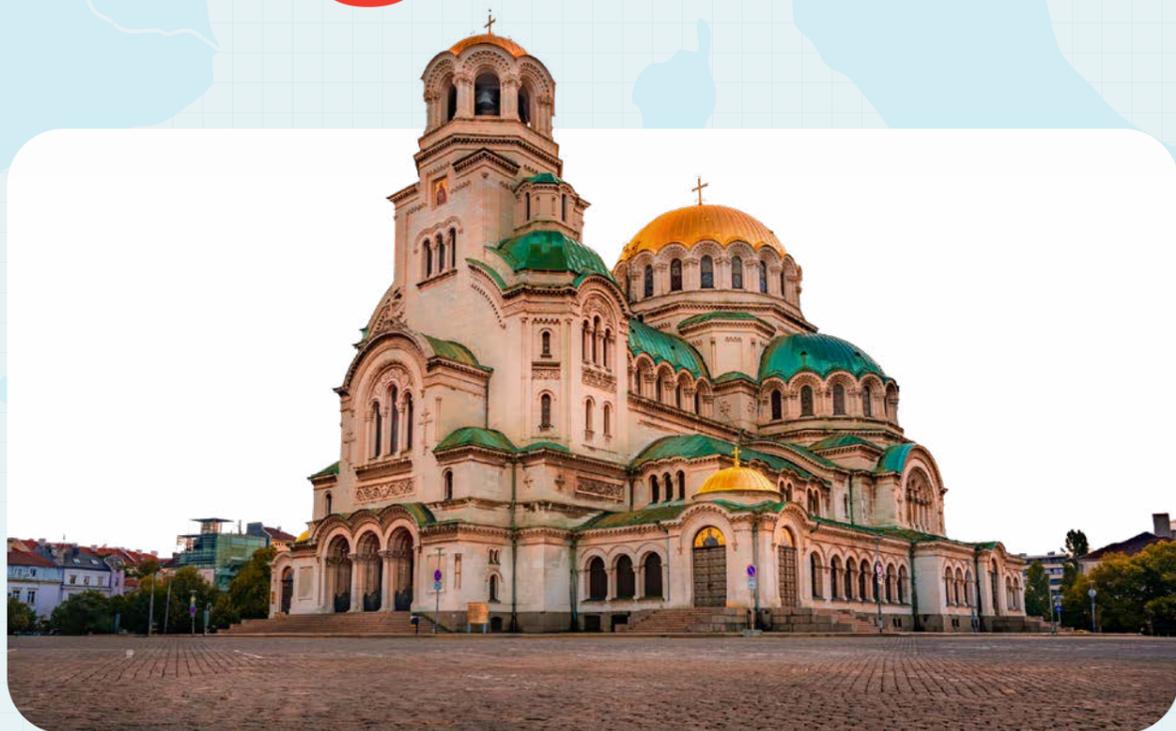
The Kremlin's influence cannot be overlooked either, particularly in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, where it is exerted mostly through NGOs and GONGOs that promote the interests of Moscow, albeit with limited impact. Beijing's influence, for its part, is most notable in Hungary's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

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

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

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

# Focus on Bulgaria



Vulnerability score

42 / 100

**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.

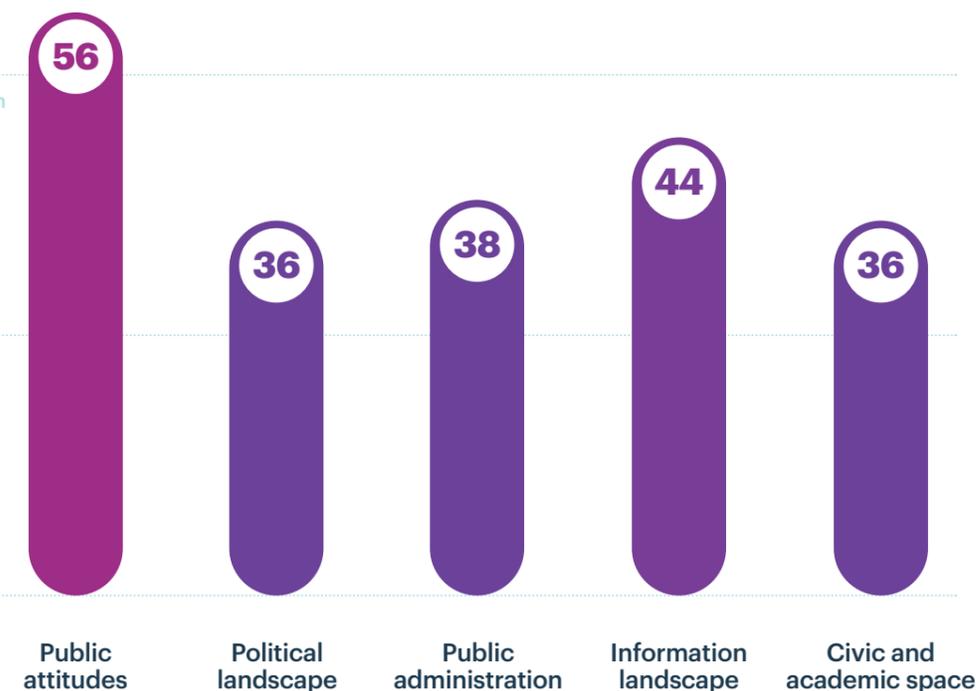
## Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



# Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

56  
/100

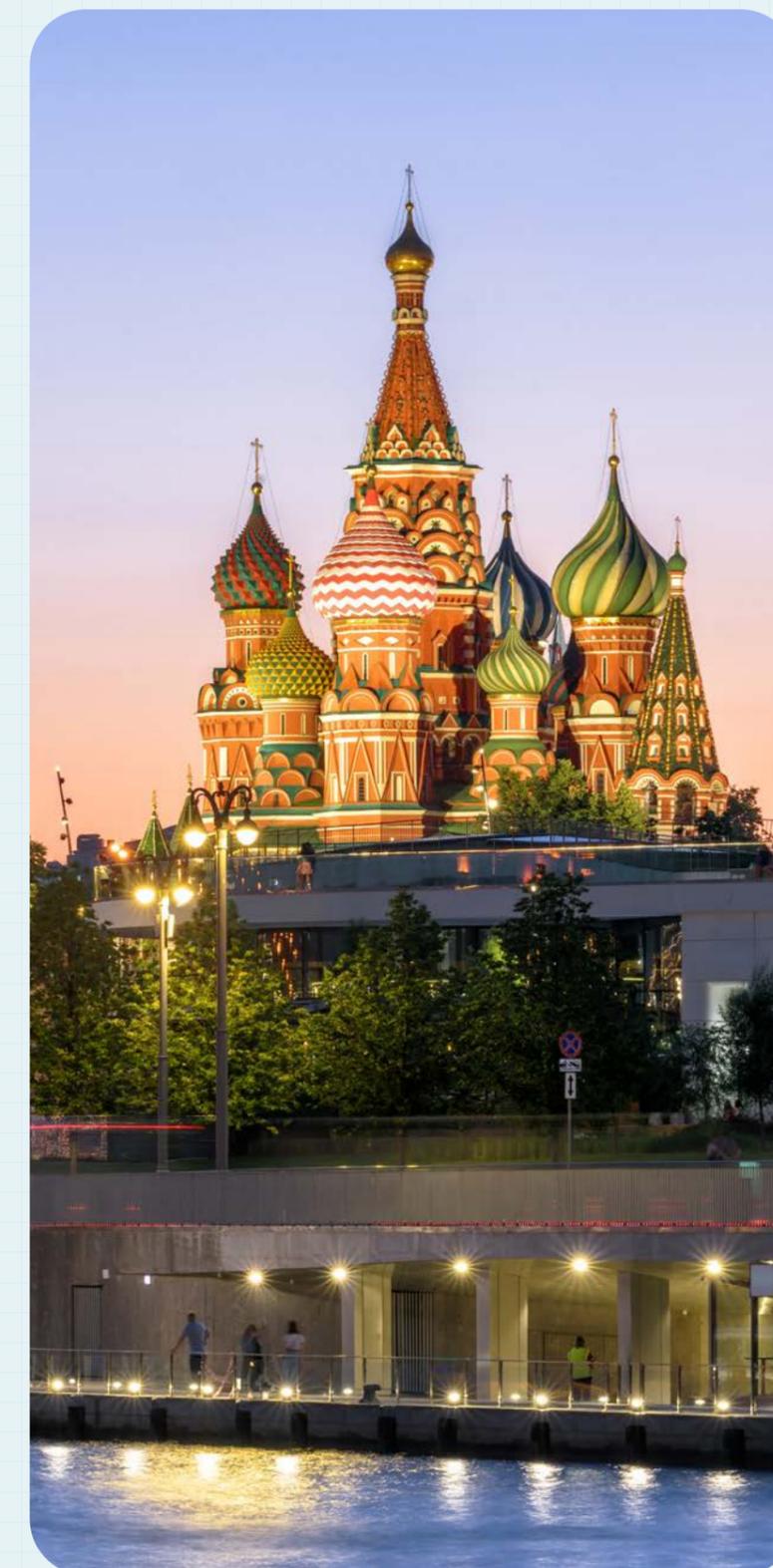
The Bulgarian public has long been vulnerable to malign Kremlin influence due to deep-seated historical and cultural ties,<sup>3</sup> susceptibility to conspiracy theories and disinformation<sup>4</sup> and a growing distrust in Euro-Atlantic integration, democratic institutions and liberal values.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

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>

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

## 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>



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# 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,



## 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.



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.

## 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>

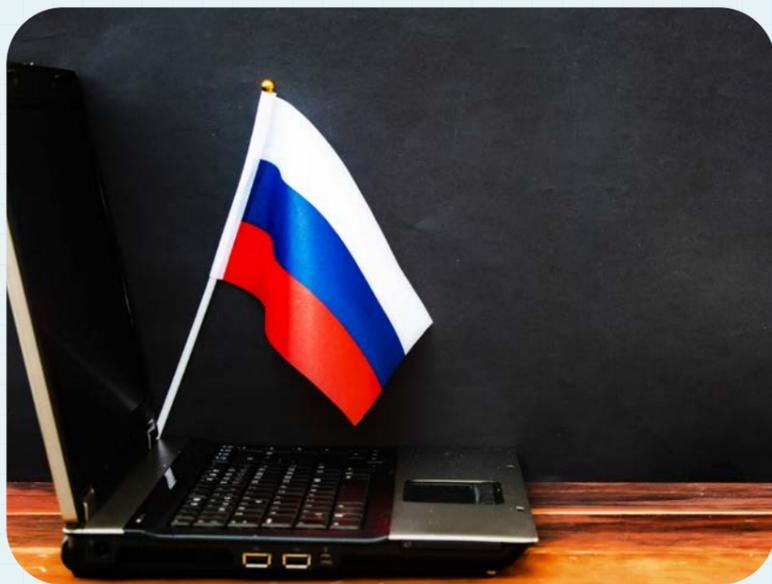
In attempt to strengthen anti-corruption policies, several existing institutions were merged to establish the Commission for Counteracting Corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (KPKONPI).<sup>60</sup> The Commission,<sup>61</sup>

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.



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## 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

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

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.

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

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**GLOBSEC**

myHive

Vajnorská 100/B, 831 04

Bratislava Slovak Republic

+421 2 321 378 00

[info@globsec.org](mailto:info@globsec.org)

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