

 **GLOBSEC**

**Vulnerability
Index 2021**

  **Czechia**

Hungary

Montenegro

North

Macedonia

Romania

Serbia

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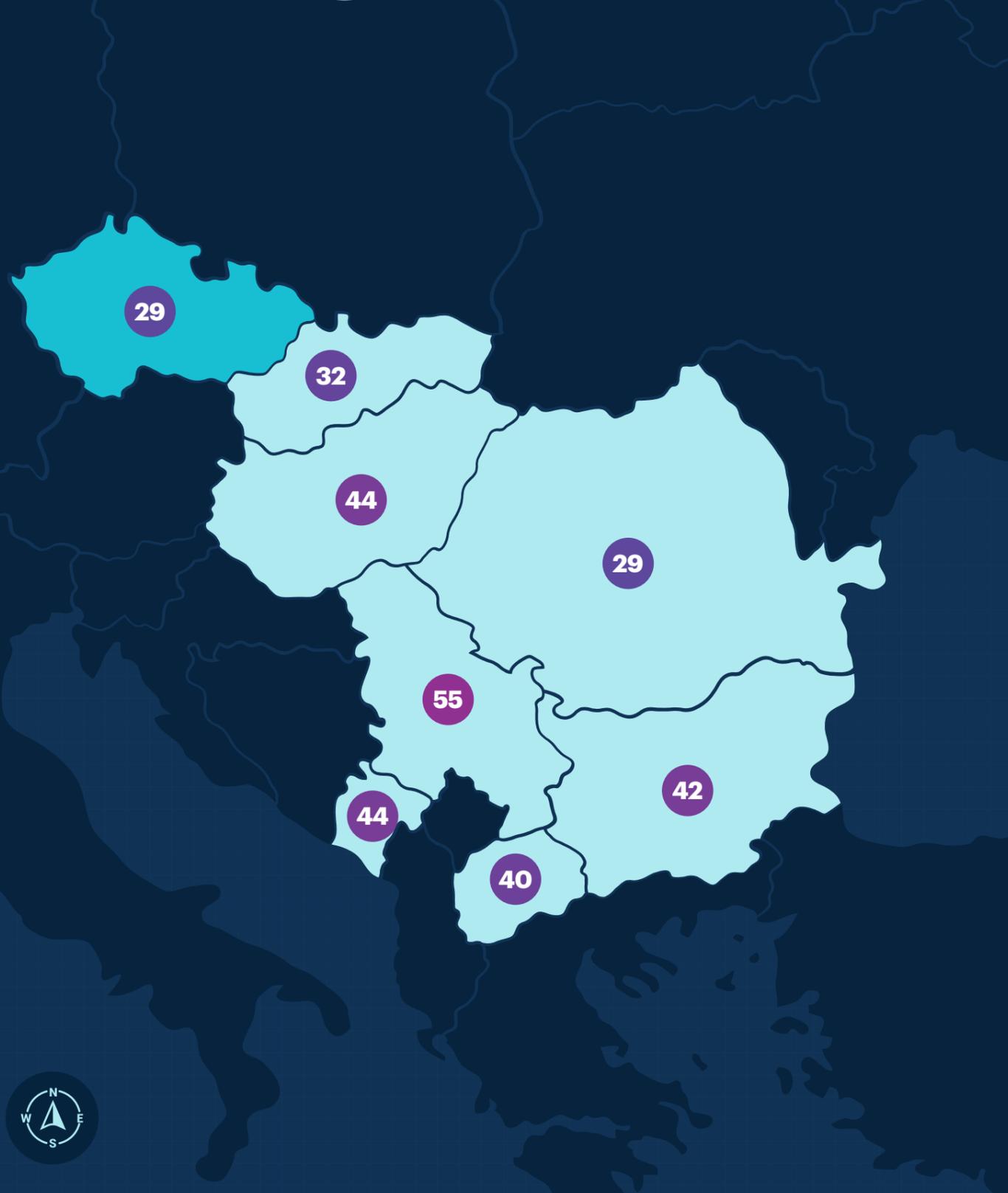
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→ What is this report about?

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

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

Why are we doing this?

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

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

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

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



Our theoretical approach

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

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

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

The countries we cover

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Our methodological approach

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

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

Consultants on measurement methods:

Kyle Marquard

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

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](#).

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➔ The vulnerability calculation was based on seven key data sources

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

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

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

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

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

➔ **Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index**

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

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

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

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

→ Vulnerability dimensions

1 Public attitudes

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

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

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



2 Political landscape

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

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

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

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

3 Public administration

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

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

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



4 Information landscape

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

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

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



5 Civic & academic space

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

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



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

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

[Learn more](#)





→ Strategic insight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, Miroslava Sawiris and Jakub Wiśniewski

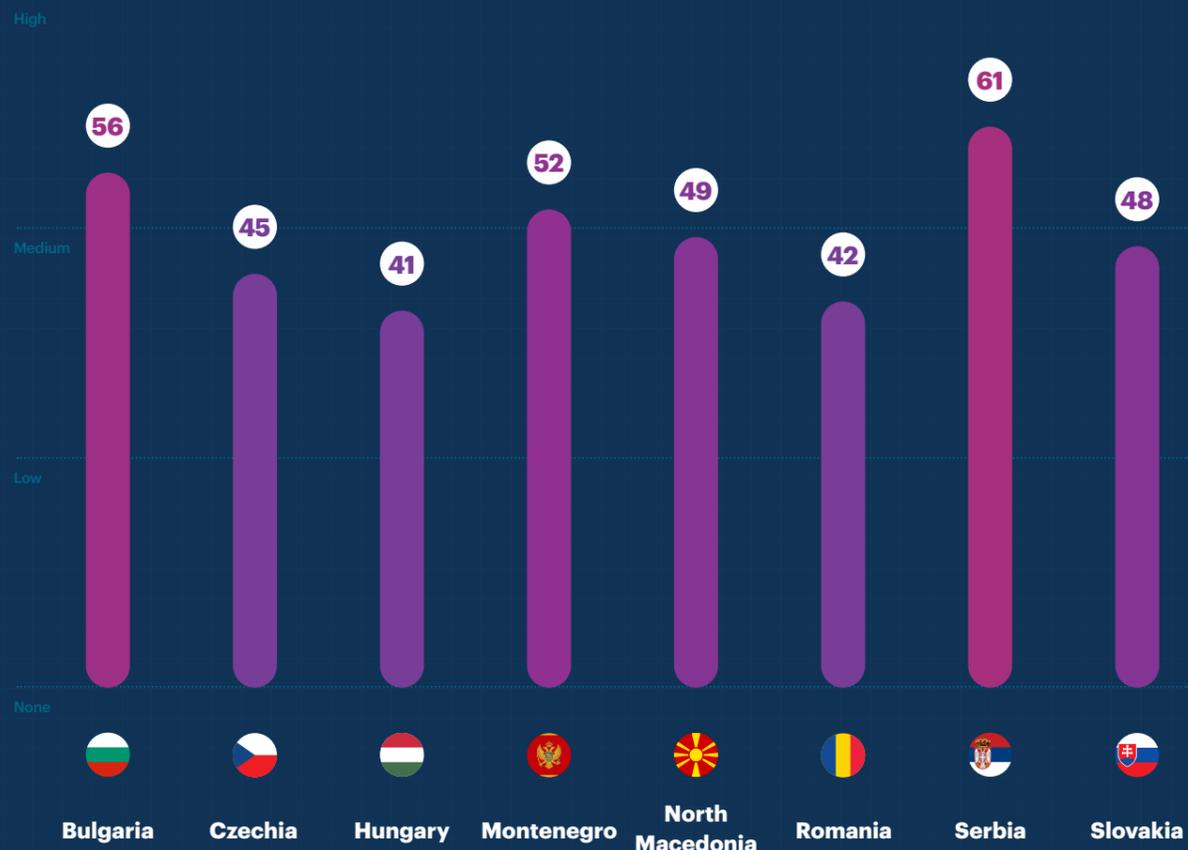


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina famously begins, "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".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





Public attitudes



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

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

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

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



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

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

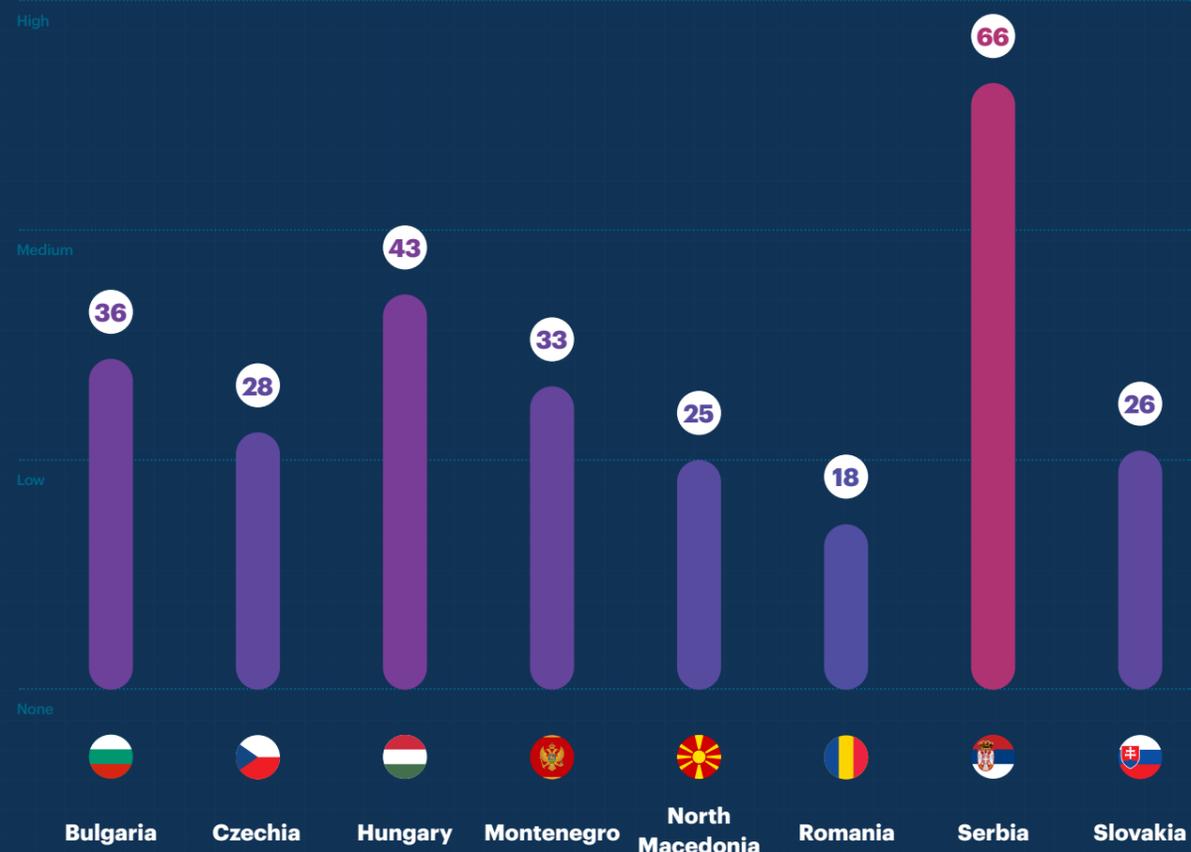
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

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

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



→ Political landscape



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

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

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

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



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

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

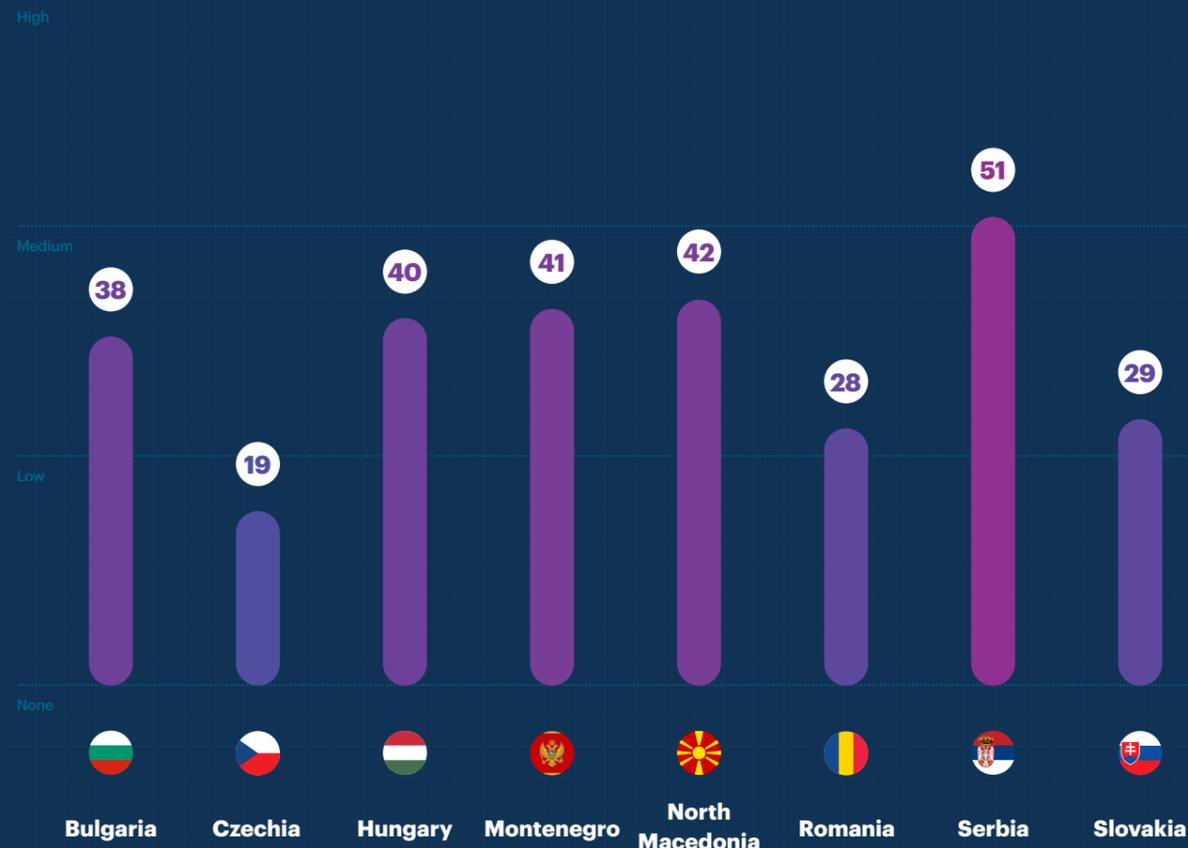
Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's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

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

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

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

→ Public administration



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

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

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

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

“Concerns about widespread corruption, state capture and the need for increased protection of the election system are present, at least in some form, in all analyzed countries.”

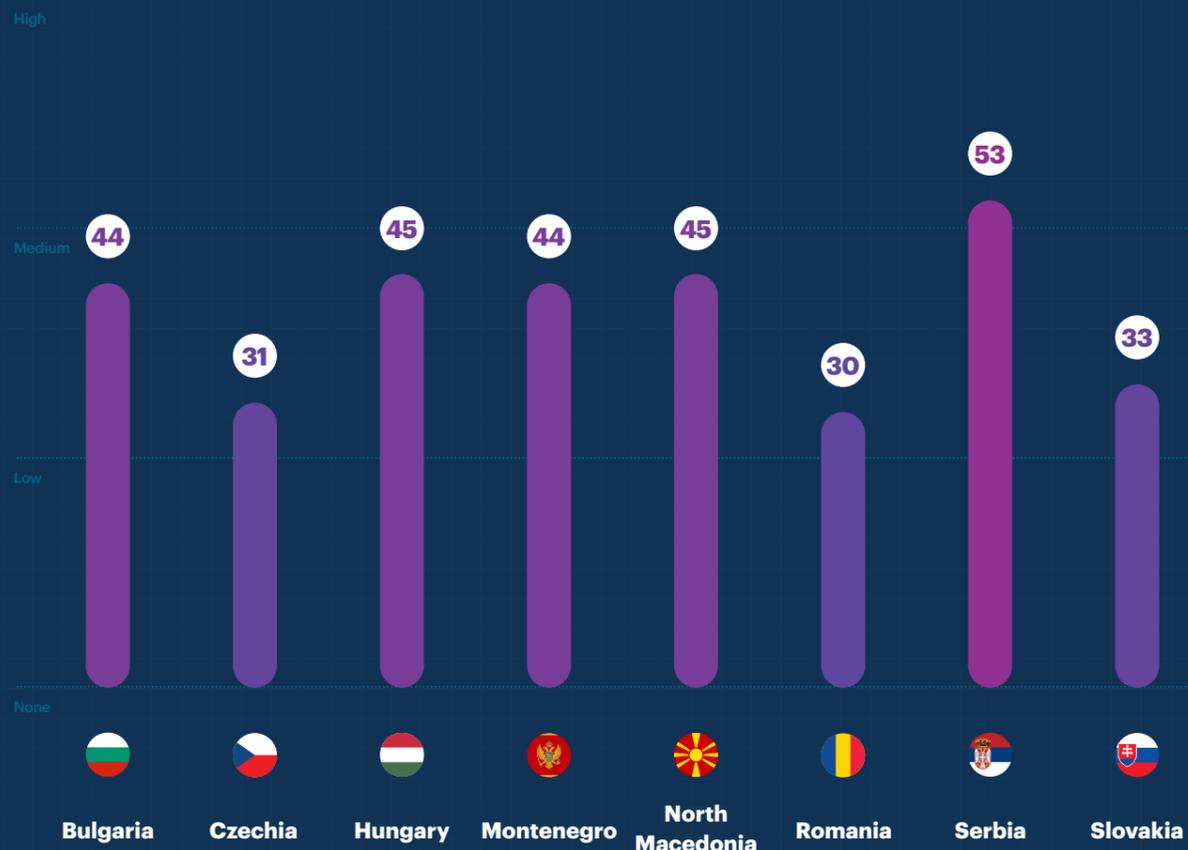
Limited and one-track understanding of threat perception is often the result of political leadership unwilling to change the status quo and establish new cooperation structures that emphasize whole-of-government and whole-of-society policies. These approaches have not been adopted in any of the analyzed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

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

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

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

→ Information landscape



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

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

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

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

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

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.

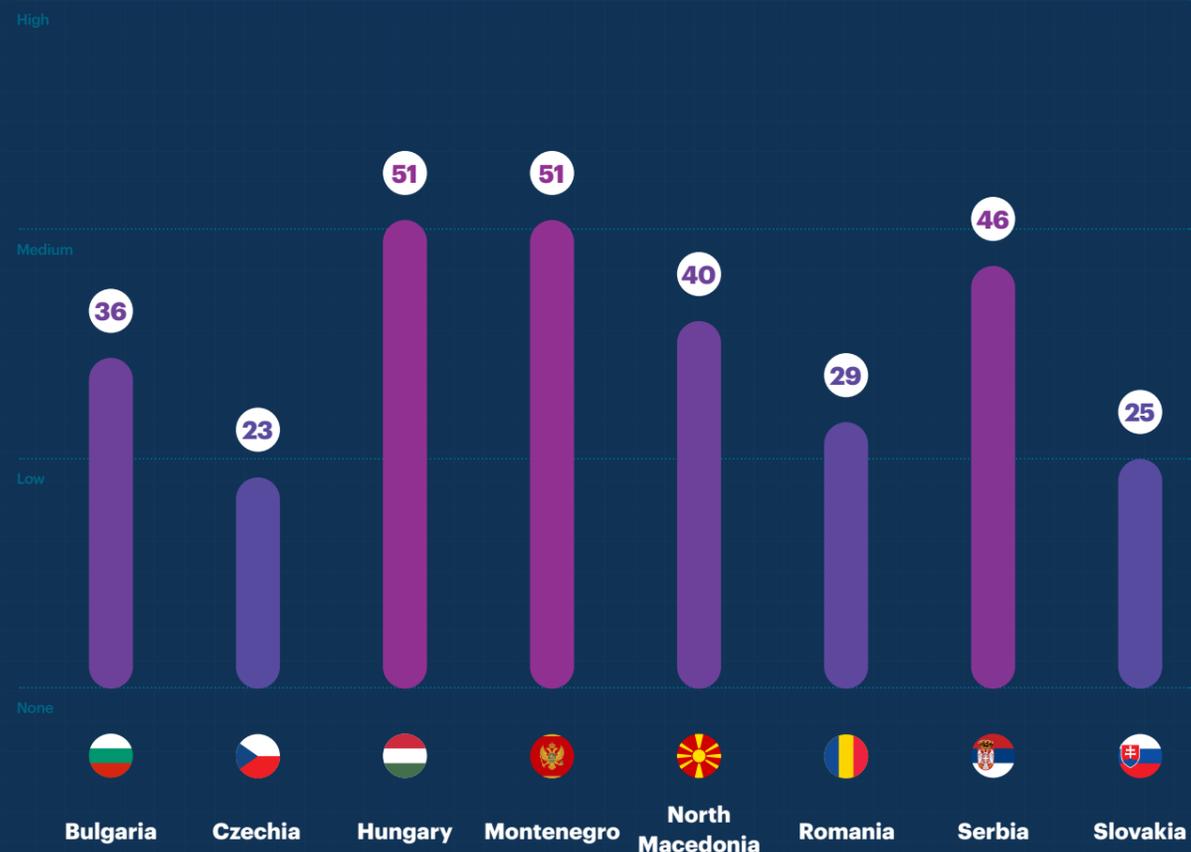
environments and at least basic protection of users in the digital space; mid-ranked countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) whose information environments display more vulnerabilities including weaker media freedom even as some points of resilience are present, such as relative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

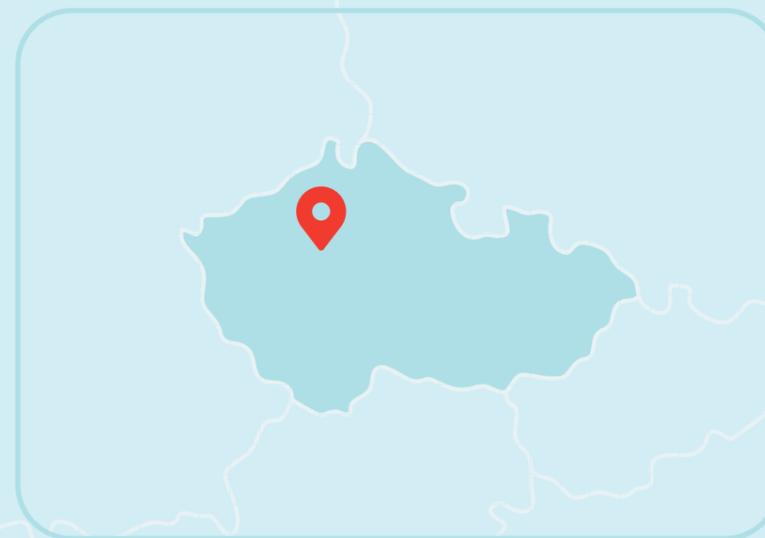
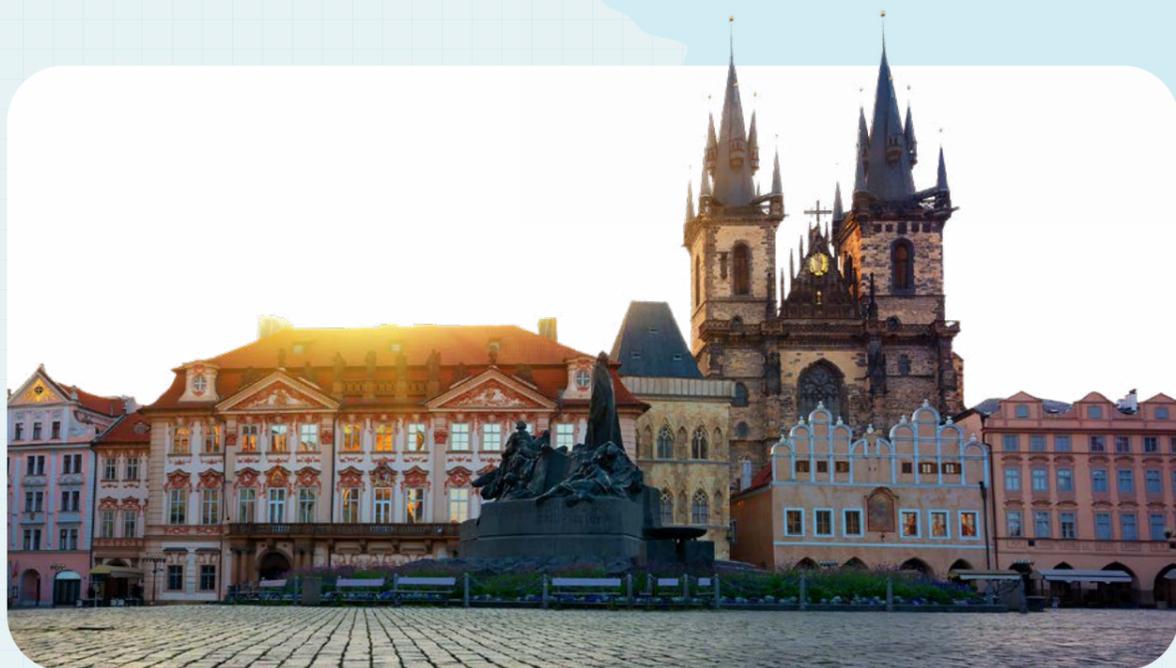
The Kremlin's influence cannot be overlooked either, particularly in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, where it is exerted mostly through NGOs and GONGOs that promote the interests of Moscow, albeit with limited impact. Beijing's influence, for its part, is most notable in Hungary's 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 Czechia



↓ Vulnerability score

29
/100

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

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

civic space, and a free academic environment.

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

The country's greatest vulnerability concerns the public's

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

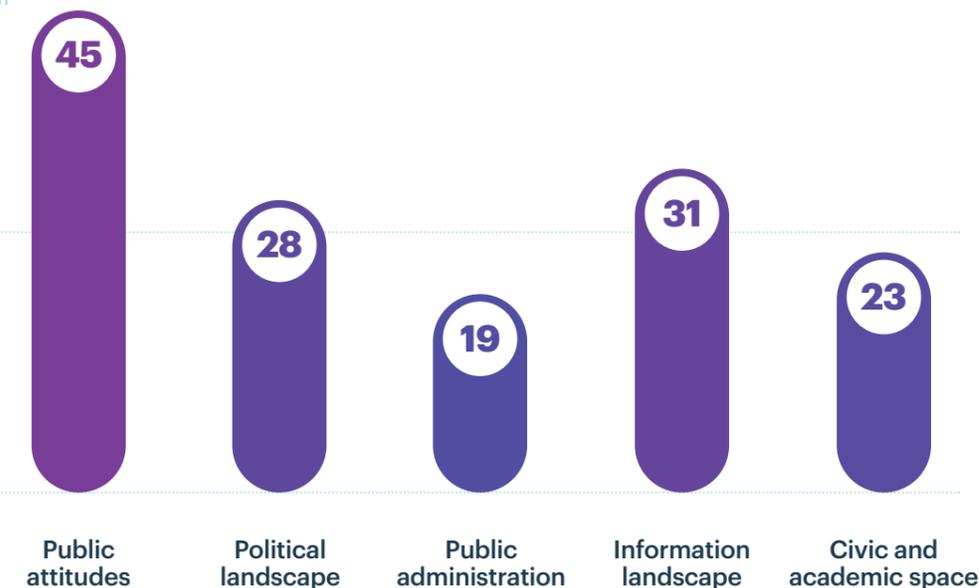
Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

45

/100



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

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

No one will tell us what to do

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



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

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

Russian influence well recognized

Russian attempts to influence Czech public attitudes also come up against formidable roadblocks including the past. The invasion by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 still strongly resonates in the public consciousness and is used as a point of reference when framing current events, such as the annexation of Crimea.⁴ The perception that Russia represents a security threat (38% of Czechs share this view according to CVVM sociological agency research from June 2021⁵) was only further reinforced by revelations that GRU, the Russian secret service, was involved in the explosion at the Vrbětice military depot. This incident likely has dampened any prospects for an improvement in Russia's image in Czechia for the foreseeable future. Aside from security concerns, Czechs hold little regard for Russia in the socio-economic sphere, witness the minimal demand for the Sputnik V vaccine (only 5% of Czechs would prefer it⁶). Societal groups supporting Russia – such as so-called “communist nostalgics”, “panslavists”, and right-wing extremists – find themselves on the fringes of public debate.⁷ A larger segment of the population, however, could be persuaded to back cooperation with Russia, spurred by economic benefits and/or disillusionment with the West.

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

Unsuccessful strategies

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

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



Choosing democracy

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



Political landscape

Chapter 2

Vulnerability score

28
/100



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

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



Role of Andrej Babiš and Miloš Zeman

The Czech political landscape has been dominated by Andrej Babiš, leader of the ANO political party and prime minister (at the time of writing).⁸ Despite his pragmatism and lack of a comprehensive foreign policy strategy⁹, he supports the membership of Czechia in Western institutions. His government has, additionally, enacted several decisions seeking to limit the vulnerability of the country to the influence of foreign authoritarian regimes. These policies include the exclusion of Russian and Chinese companies from the strategic tender for the construction of a new nuclear plant in Dukovany¹⁰ and significant limitations put on staffing numbers at the Russian embassy following revelations about GRU involvement in

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

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

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



Chinese promises fail to materialize

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

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



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Kremlin's limited influence

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

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

Consensus over friends and foes

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Public administration

Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

19
/100



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The Czech public administration, bolstered by strong institutions, a proactive civil service and relatively open state policy, boasts the greatest level of resilience of countries examined. At the government level, countering the influence of malign foreign actors has generally fallen under the purview of the country's intelligence services, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense and specialized departments (such as the Cyber Forces Command of the Armed Forces²⁵). Over the past year, multiple

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

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

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



Absence of lobbying regulation represents a blind spot

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

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



Loopholes in electoral regulation pose a vulnerability

The interviewed experts did not recall any proven and significant case of foreign interference in the past several Czech elections. However, Czech authorities take this possibility seriously. For instance, before the 2021 parliamentary elections, an interdepartmental working group was established tailored specifically to this problem. The unit is tasked with combatting moves, such as cyber-attacks or disinformation campaigns, that could put the reliability of electoral processes at risk.³² However, these measures only apply to disinformation related to electoral processes, leaving unaddressed the possibility that political parties could be targeted by smear campaigns.

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

Strategic infrastructure and money laundering

The key target of foreign influence are strategic projects focused on the development of critical infrastructure. In recent years, government institutions have started to prioritize the issue by, for example, issuing a warning against the involvement of the Chinese company Huawei in building 5G networks²⁹ and adopting a law on screening foreign investments in strategic economic sectors.³⁰ Interviewed experts pointed to a general lack of publicly available data about foreign investments as problematic. This is closely related to another significant vulnerability of the Czech Republic - money laundering. The Czech Republic is not the target destination of these activities but frequently serves as a transit country where changes of ownership take place - Czechia could even be one of the largest centers for these transactions in Europe according to some studies. The current restrictions

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

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

🗳️ **Activist** focused on corruption

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

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

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

Commitments awaiting implementation

Government institutions share the ambition to implement the latest developments in national security and adjust their capabilities to evolving threats. In 2016, a complex National Security Audit was published, with chapters focusing on the influence of foreign powers, hybrid threats, and cyberthreats.³⁶ While some of the recommendations were put to use, such as the establishment of the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats under the Ministry of Interior³⁷, political elites showed limited willingness to support the fulfillment of all goals recommended by the Audit. State institutions have recently developed other successful initiatives tackling new security challenges such as the National Cyber and Information Security Agency³⁸, Cyber Forces Command³⁹, and legislation on investment screening.⁴⁰ These institutions work rather well despite their limited access to resources, stemming from a lack of political elite interest in security matters. In 2021, the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference was adopted.⁴¹ Although the document covers the issue comprehensively, implementation again could suffer. This problematic cycle of planning, issuing strategic documents, and failing to fully implement them due to a lack of coordination and political will represents a threat to the development of truly robust Czech resilience, according to interviewed experts.

🗳️ **In 2021, the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference was adopted.**



Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

31
/100



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

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

Business influence

The weakening of media houses, combined with the departure of Western owners from the market, has allowed Czech influential businessmen to acquire control over all-important private outlets. This long-term development is, perhaps, best symbolized in the acquisition of Mafra, an influential media group, by billionaire and Prime Minister (at time of writing) Andrej Babiš in 2013.⁴⁶ The process was seemingly brought to its conclusion through PPF's 2020 purchase of the television station Nova.⁴⁷ Czech influential businessmen make no secret of the fact that the acquisitions are not merely business investments. As pointed out by Marek Dospiva of the PENTA financial group, ownership provides "assurance that it will be more difficult for anyone to irrationally attack us."⁴⁸ These expectations, nonetheless, tarnish the independent watchdog role of the media and pose a detrimental variable to the democratic political system.

Public broadcaster preserves reliability

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

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

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

Academic researcher focusing on media in Central Europe



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Journalistic standards

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

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

Analyst focusing on information operations



Pro-Russian networks

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

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

Future challenges

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

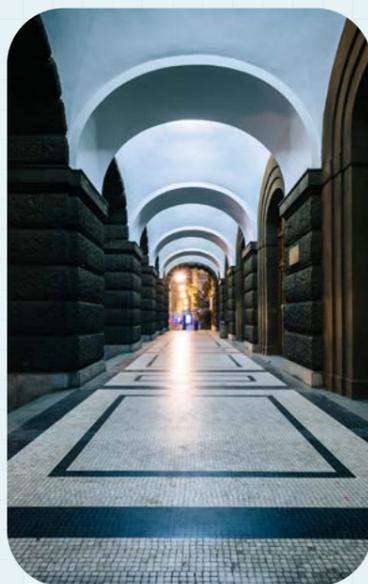


Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

Vulnerability score

23
/100



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

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



Fragmented society

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

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

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

NGO worker

📊 26% of Czechs, according to a 2019 survey, actively support civil society.⁶¹

Thriving NGOs

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

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

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

resonance with only a limited part of the population though (only 12% of Czechs are active opponents of NGOs⁶⁴) and has failed to translate into concrete political action.

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

Former director of a prominent NGO

Pro-Russian sympathizers as a potential gateway

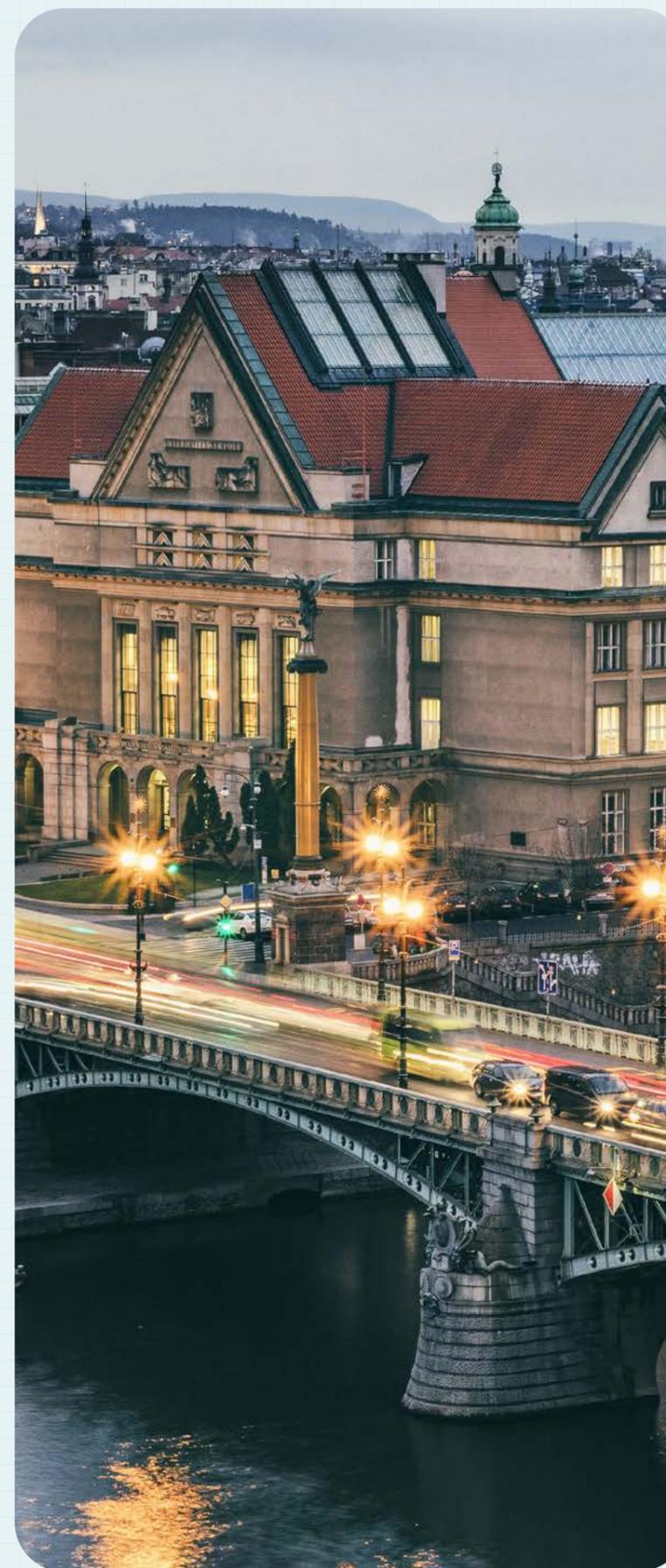
The influence of authoritarian states on Czech civil society remains muted - the promotion of the interests of these actors comes more easily through business or political lobbying according to interviewed experts. Russia could, nonetheless, benefit from the significant Russian-speaking community living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

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

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

Chinese research influence

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





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