



GLOBSEC

Vulnerability Index 2021



Montenegro

North

Macedonia

Romania

Serbia

Slovakia

Bulgaria

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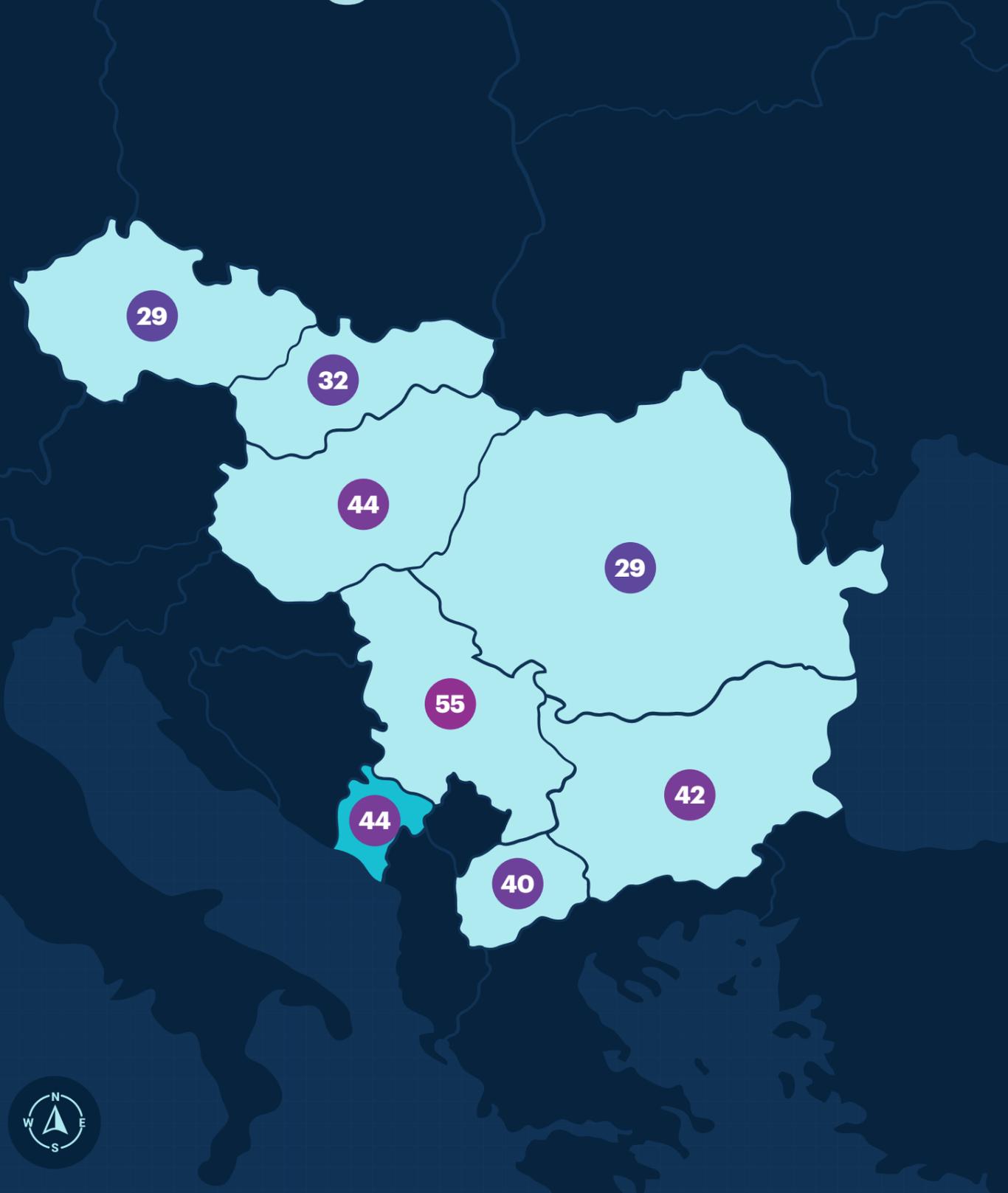
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➔ What is this report about?

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



The countries we cover

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

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

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



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

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

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

Our methodological approach

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

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

Consultants on measurement methods:

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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](#).

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

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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.

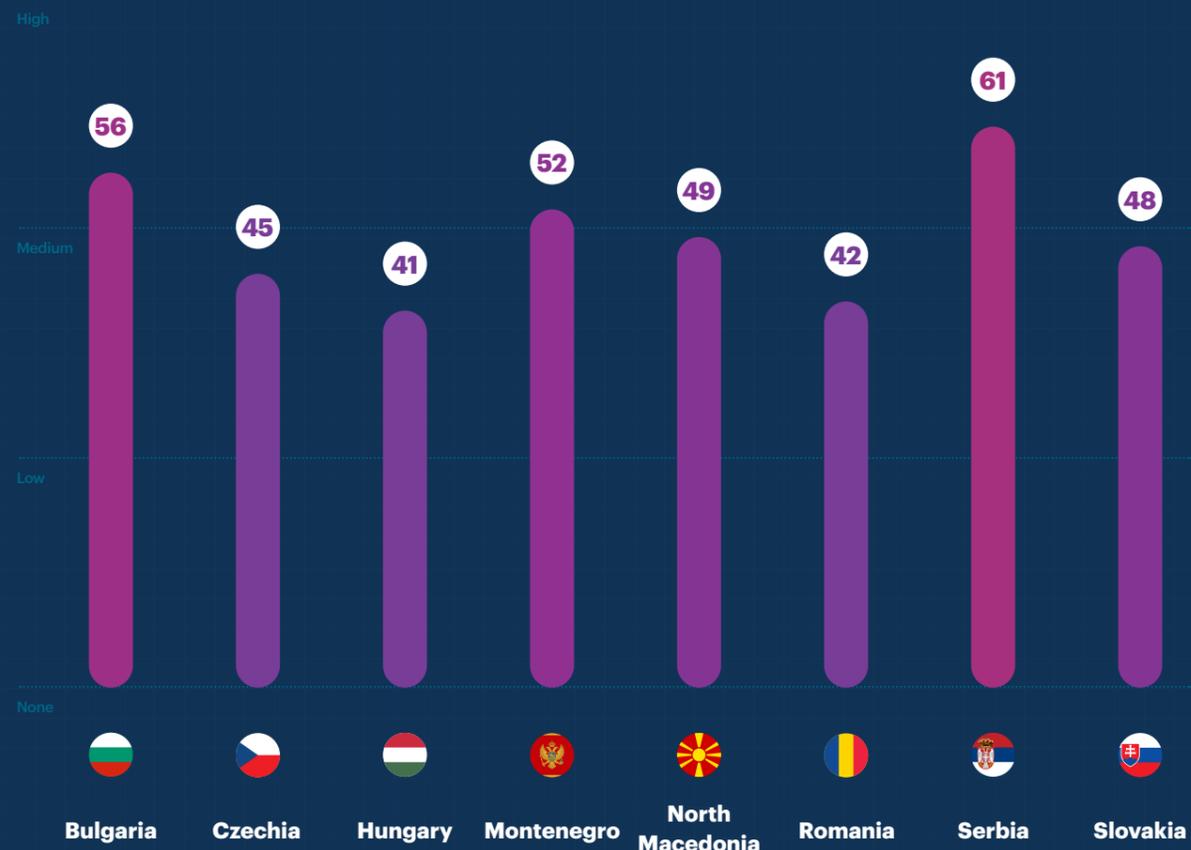
Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, Miroslava Sawiris and Jakub Wiśniewski



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.

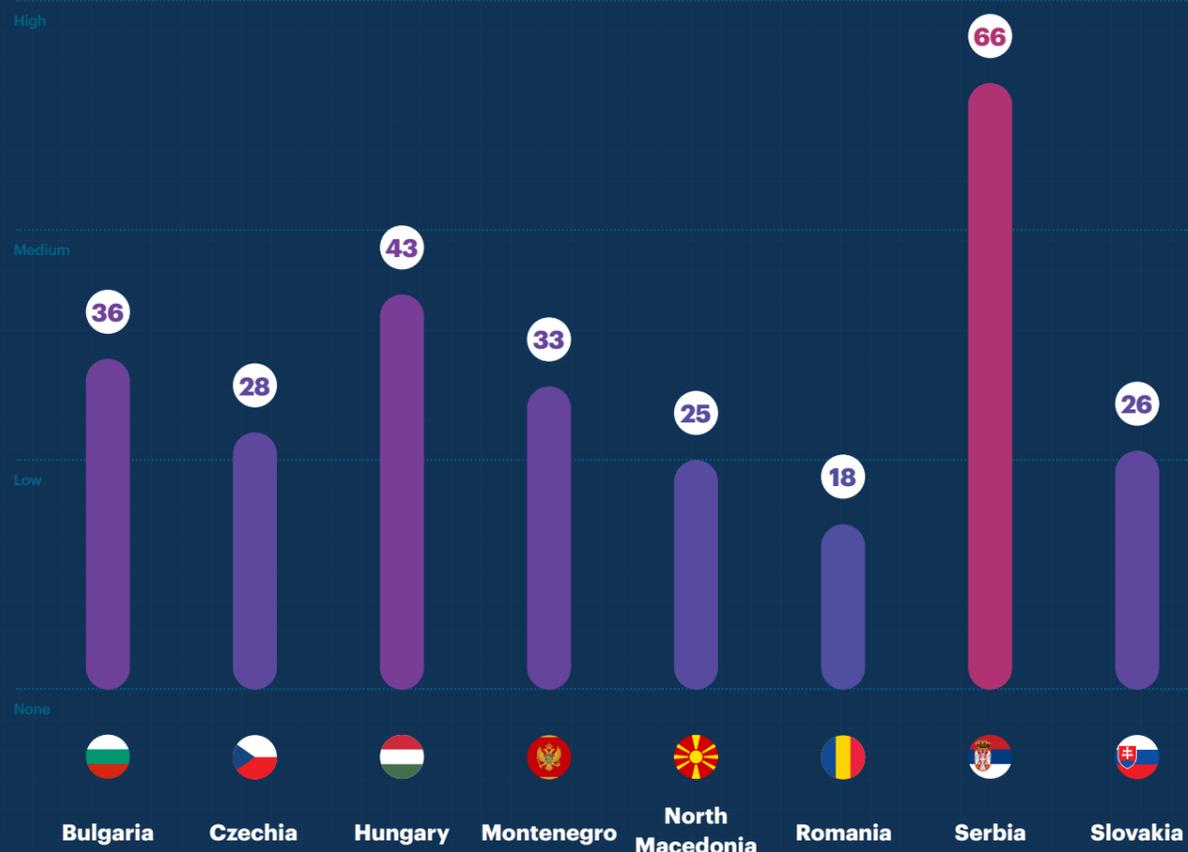
Additional exploitable vulnerabilities concern a lack of inherent and ingrained democratic principles among citizens, who apply them selectively, witness, for example, attitudes

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.

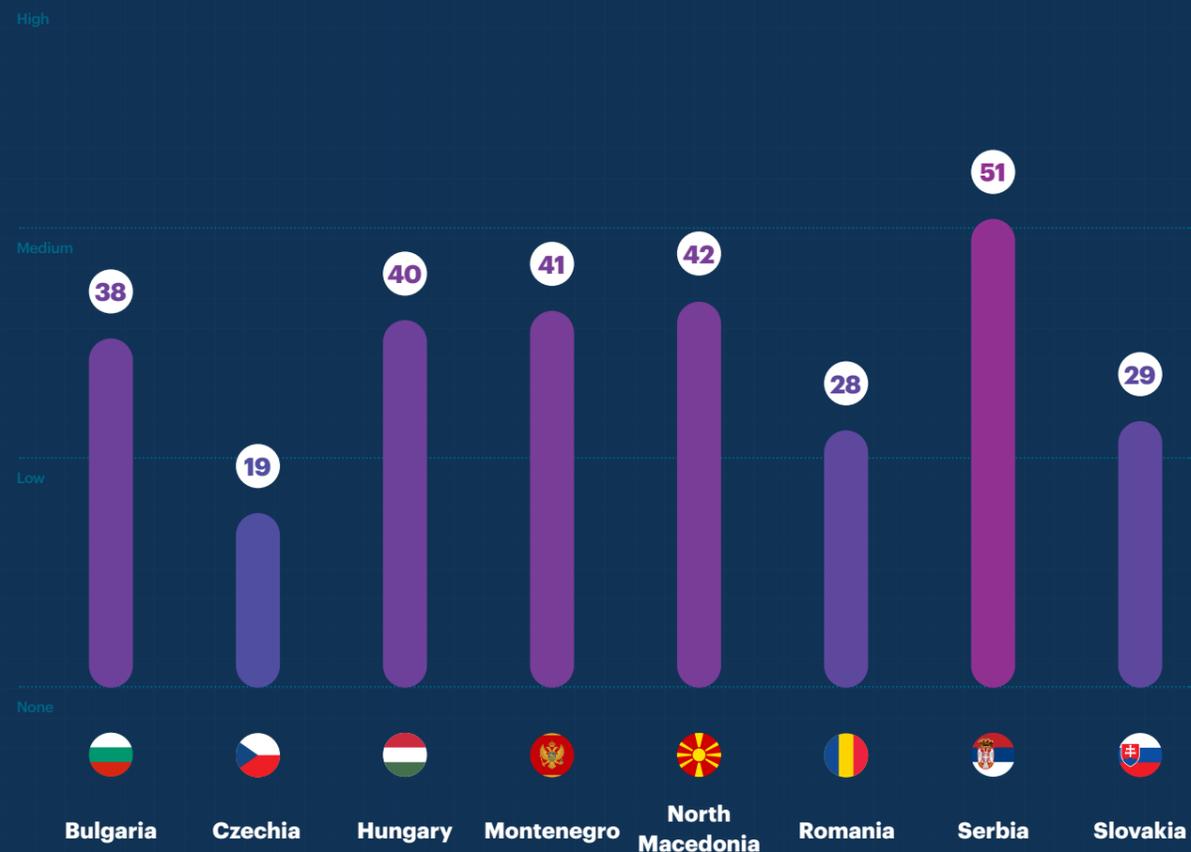
Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's 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.”

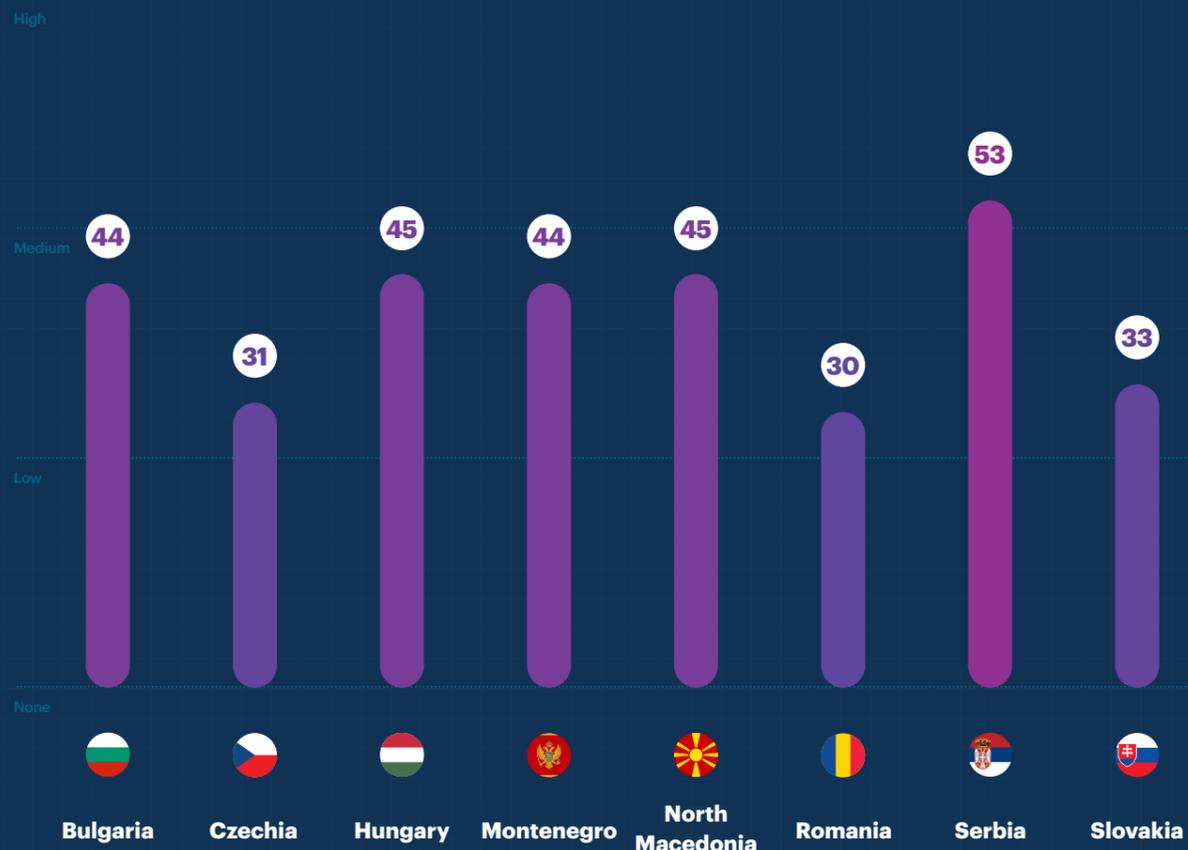
Limited and one-track understanding of threat perception is often the result of political leadership unwilling to change the status quo and establish new cooperation structures that emphasize whole-of-government and whole-of-society policies. These approaches have not been adopted in any of the analyzed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

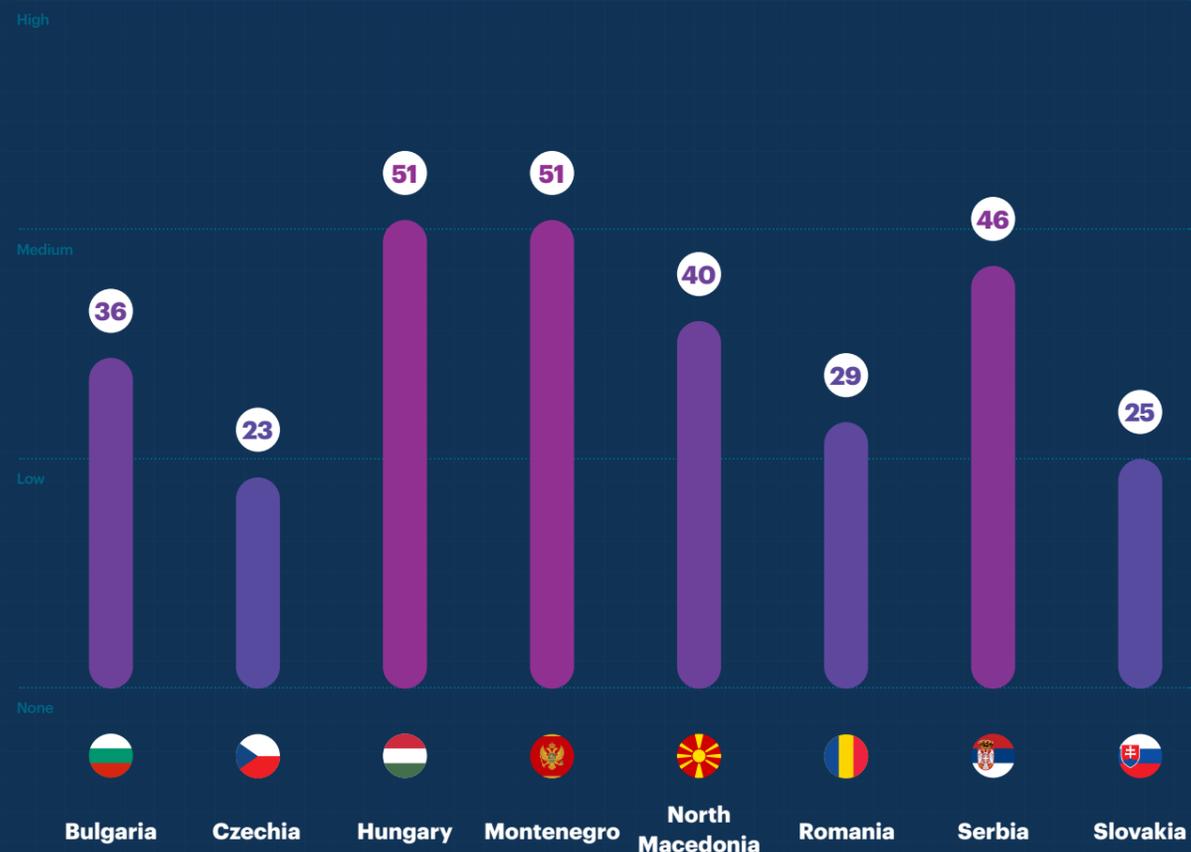
environments and at least basic protection of users in the digital space; mid-ranked countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) whose information environments display more vulnerabilities including weaker media freedom even as some points of resilience are present, such as relative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

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

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

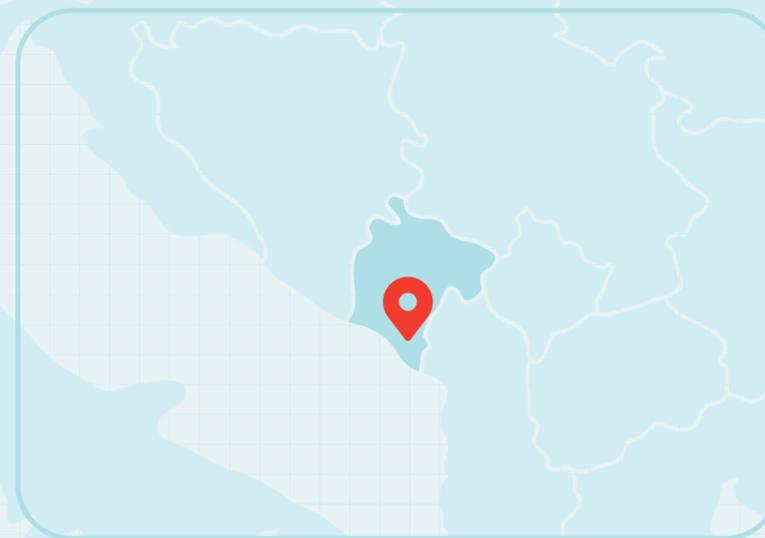
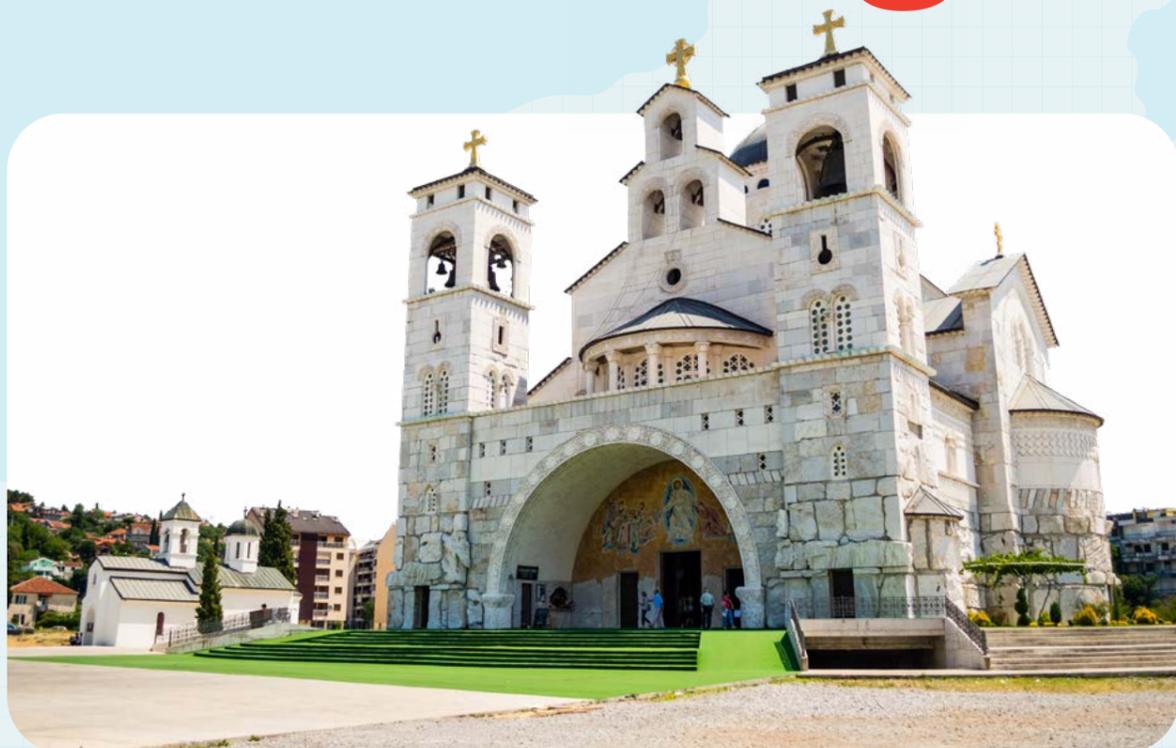
None of the countries analyzed can be considered to host truly sustainable civil societies. Sustainability is impacted by problems ranging from difficulties in securing funding to demonization campaigns aimed at democratic civil society actors and Kremlin-inspired legislative proposals to frame these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

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

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



Focus on Montenegro



↓ Vulnerability score

44

/100

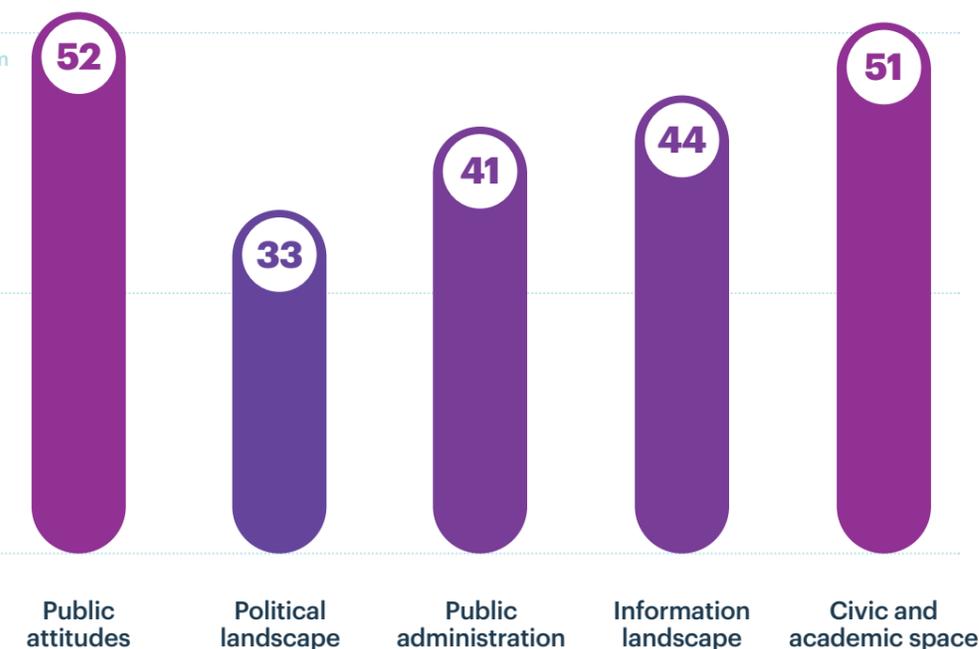
Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



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

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

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

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

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

Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

52
/100



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

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

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

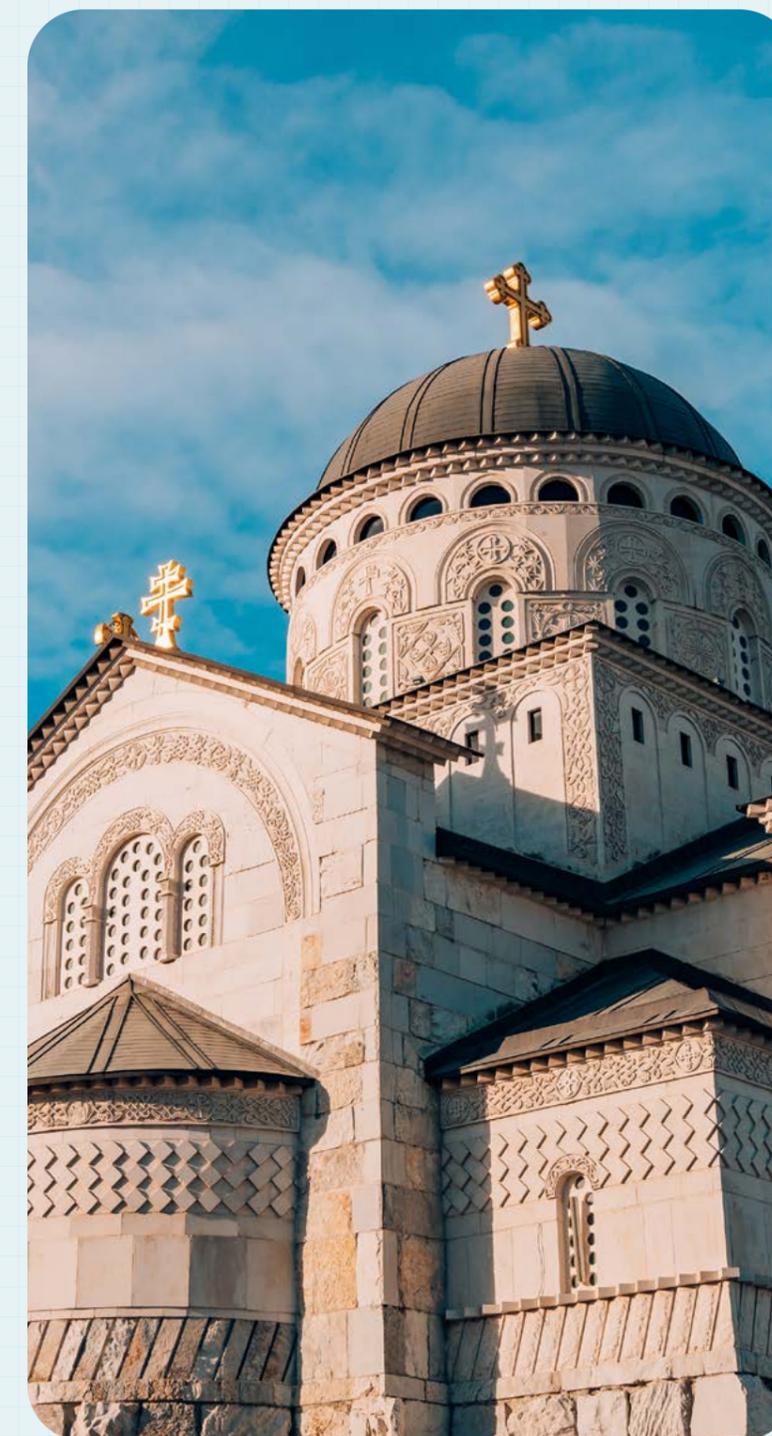
The Kremlin's influence in Montenegro, in this vein, is primarily exerted through the politics of identity (so-called 'Slavic brotherhood'), economics, and religion.

The role of the church

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

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

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



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

Demography

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

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

and history. Serbia, another close “Slavic brother”, is playing an important role in shaping the discourse too. Numerous Serbian media outlets extend their reach into Montenegro, with some spreading narratives in line with pro-Kremlin interests.¹¹ Moscow has also intensified its foreign policy activities, reflected in the frequent visits and meetings of Russian officials with their Montenegrin counterparts and vice-versa¹².

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

Expert on Montenegrin politics

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

EU perceived positively but unknown

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

NATO membership as a divisive issue

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

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



China’s money talks

Attitudes towards China are based largely on foreign investments¹⁹ and not well informed. They also lack balanced discussions weighing their potential negative impact on Montenegro’s democracy and any potential strings attached.

Numerous political parties and officials have often named China as Montenegro’s strategic partner²⁰ and this perception is mirrored in public attitudes (15% of respondents perceive China as a key strategic partner for their country).²¹

Weak public institutions, pervasive corruption, and nepotism were generally recognized by the focus groups²² as internal threats fostering societal divisions especially between pro-Western and conservative Orthodox segments of society. Citizens of Montenegro have, throughout history, preferred strong leaders and political parties. Frustrations with persistent shortcomings of the democratic system can steer people closer to the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin, with the disillusioned pulled in by the lure of an alternative system that has seen a perceived strong leader allegedly revitalizing the Russian government and economy.

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

Political landscape

Chapter 2

Vulnerability score

33
/100



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Montenegro is home to a complex and polarized political landscape - this has been especially true since the 2006 independence referendum.²³ Parliamentary elections in the summer of 2020 led to a change in government - after three decades of uninterrupted rule by President Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), Zdravko Krivokapić became the new Prime Minister as leader of a broad coalition of parties²⁴ (Black on White²⁵, Peace is Our Nation, and For the Future of Montenegro). Krivokapić led the

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

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

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

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

EU integration process as a driving force

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

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

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

While the new government signed a coalition agreement affirming Montenegro's commitment to joining the EU and strengthening its ties with NATO³², the government's foreign policy course has been contested, with various parties voicing differing attitudes towards NATO and policy towards Russia.³³



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50:50 on NATO

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

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

Montenegro officially became the 29th member of NATO on June 5th 2017, with membership a topic underscoring vehement societal³⁵ and political polarization. NATO is associated, on the one hand, with enhanced security for a small country with no army and perceived as positively impacting tourism and the economy. Ardent disapproval of NATO integration, however, is voiced by mostly right-wing political circles.³⁶

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

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

Milo Đukanović,
President of Montenegro, 2020

While DF, the largest party in the current coalition, is composed of several smaller parties, its leaders mostly express unfavorable views about NATO. Nebojša Medojević, a founding member and leader of the Movement for Changes (PzP), is a notable exception though. Generally, he is a stronger advocate of Montenegro's NATO membership³⁹.

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

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

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

★
Montenegro became NATO member in 2017.

Stronger pro-Russian attitudes in the government

The Kremlin can find numerous allies and supporters among the political class in Montenegro. Political parties, like NOVA, Real Montenegro, and the Democratic People's Party (DNP), staunchly defend Russian president Vladimir Putin⁴² and often criticize government and EU policies on Russia. The DPS and its partners, conversely, previously used its government pulpit to accuse Russia of foreign interference in domestic issues⁴³. The 2016 coup plot (now the subject of a retrial in court) is a prominent case in point.⁴⁴

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

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

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

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

Turn away from China

Since gaining a *vymazme* At the same time, since gaining independence in 2006, Montenegro has signed 17 cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding with China. The first agreement was signed in August 2006 and focused on economic and trade cooperation. A Memorandum of Cooperation was also signed within the Belt and Road Initiative during the first Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in 2017.⁴⁸ All these cooperation agreements were signed under the Đukanovic governments.

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

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

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

Dritan Abazovic,
Deputy Prime Minister, 2021



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Public administration

Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

41
/100



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

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

Ongoing reforms

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

State capture and corruption as a key challenge

A key challenge for Montenegro remains the need to effectively combat organized crime⁵⁸, corruption, and state capture (particularly at the highest levels).⁵⁹ Still, the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International ranks Montenegro 67th, the best ranking among the three Western Balkan countries included in the research.⁶⁰

State capture, incompetence and corruption were voiced as major internal threats to security and the democratic system during focus group discussions⁶¹ and have

been recognized as a challenge by the European Commission too⁶².

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



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

Focus group participant

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

Phantom voters and a coup

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

During the 2016 parliamentary elections, Montenegro was targeted by foreign adversaries (of Serbian and Russian origin) via a sophisticated influence operation that sought to prevent the country from joining NATO⁶⁶. The ploy involved a coup d'état and a planned attempt to assassinate the pro-Western then-PM Đukanović and seize parliament.⁶⁷ In May 2019, the court found 13 perpetrators,

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

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

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

the past few years, competent institutions have done little.⁷²

While suspicions were raised about Russian interference in the 2016 parliamentary elections⁷³, the 2020 elections were assessed as free and fair by ODIHR reports. The election was preceded, however, by political turmoil over the aforementioned religious legislation and the Serbian Orthodox Church. President Đukanović, in response, accused Serbia of meddling in the Montenegrin election.⁷⁴

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



Resilience to foreign influence

The attempted coup in 2016 and Montenegro's high indebtedness towards China from the financing and construction of a controversial highway project⁷⁵ underscore the active presence of Moscow and Beijing in the country. But the situational awareness towards foreign interference among state officials varies depending on the foreign actor concerned. While 17 of 25 surveyed experts declared that several public institutions are aware of Kremlin's influence, little, if anything at all, is known about Beijing's influence. 10 of 19 surveyed experts also suggested that the public administration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Information landscape

Chapter 4

Vulnerability score

44
/100



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

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

the publication of accurate and objective information.⁸²

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

Media freedom in Montenegro

The World Press Freedom Index⁸⁴ has been granting Montenegro a relatively steady score since 2016. According to their most recent report, Montenegro ranks 104th of 180 countries in media freedom. A 2020 European Commission report further concluded that the media scene continued its highly polarized dynamic and that self-regulatory mechanisms remained weak. An enlarged volume of regional disinformation permeated society in the aftermath of the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and during the 2020 electoral campaign.⁸⁵

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

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

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



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

Expert from the media sector

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

Pro-Kremlin interests in the media

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

Some of these websites primarily operate on social media networks and distribute mostly pro-Serbian stories and generally eschew criticism of the current government. They include, among others, Bunt⁸⁹, 24 časa⁹⁰, and Pogled⁹¹. The latter attracts approximately 50 thousand followers on Facebook.⁹²

Pro-Russian media, on the other hand, openly support and spread pro-Kremlin narratives. IN4S⁹³ (with around 50 thousand followers on Facebook) and Borba⁹⁴ are prominent examples. According to research conducted by the Center for Democratic Transition, IN4S is one of the top media outlets responsible for disseminating disinformation.⁹⁵

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

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

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

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



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

Future challenges

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

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

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



Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

51
/100



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The civic space in Montenegro is rather active and free but faces polarization like other aspects of society. Freedom of peaceful assembly is widely respected in Montenegro - frequent protests and religious gatherings have taken place over the past two years. The adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion⁹⁹ at the end of 2019 set in motion mass protests led by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)¹⁰⁰ that continued to August 2020¹⁰¹ and the defeat

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

Serbian Orthodox Church

Montenegrin divisions run primarily along nationalist lines. The Serbian Church, in particular, is recognized as a key means through which Serbian influence can be exerted on a country that declared its independence 15 years ago. The newly formed government consists of non-partisan ministers¹⁰³ even as many of them informally maintain close relations with the SOC. The current parliament, moreover, approved amendments to the freedom of religion law to nullify the contested sections that had sparked SOC protests in the country.¹⁰⁴

Deepening polarization has also galvanized Montenegrin nationalists, culminating in

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

Numerous violent incidents have taken place in Montenegro over the last couple of years. Feuds between party activists¹⁰⁶, attacks¹⁰⁷ on political activists and officials¹⁰⁸, and a flood of online hate speech have also raised grave concerns about growing conflict in Montenegro.

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



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Civil society's role is well recognized

Montenegrin civil society has remained at a stable score of 4 (scale of 1-7 whereby 1 equals enhanced civil society and 7 equates to a civil society that is impeded) since 2012 on the Civil Society Sustainability Index¹⁰⁹.

There are no influential NGOs in Montenegro that openly promote Russian or Chinese interests, a conclusion shared by surveyed experts, a majority of whom claimed they did not have knowledge about Russian or Chinese GONGOs in the country apart from the Confucius Institute in Montenegro¹¹⁰.

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

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

CSOs in Montenegro, nonetheless, also enjoy considerable opportunities to criticize government policies, promote their work, and communicate with the public through the media.¹¹³ Some NGO leaders have recently been appointed¹¹⁴ to the country's anti-corruption council.

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

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

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



Academic space needs fixing

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

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

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

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

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



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