

GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021

  **Romania**

Serbia
Slovakia
Bulgaria
Czechia
Hungary
Montenegro



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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](#).

Dan Pemstein

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

Alexander Stoyanov

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

➔ The vulnerability calculation was based on seven key data sources

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

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

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

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

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

➔ **Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index**

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

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

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

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



➔ Vulnerability dimensions

1 Public attitudes

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

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

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



2 Political landscape

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

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

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

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



3 Public administration

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

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

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





4 Information landscape

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

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

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



5 Civic & academic space

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

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



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

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

[Learn more](#)





→ Strategic insight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, Miroslava Sawiris and Jakub Wiśniewski

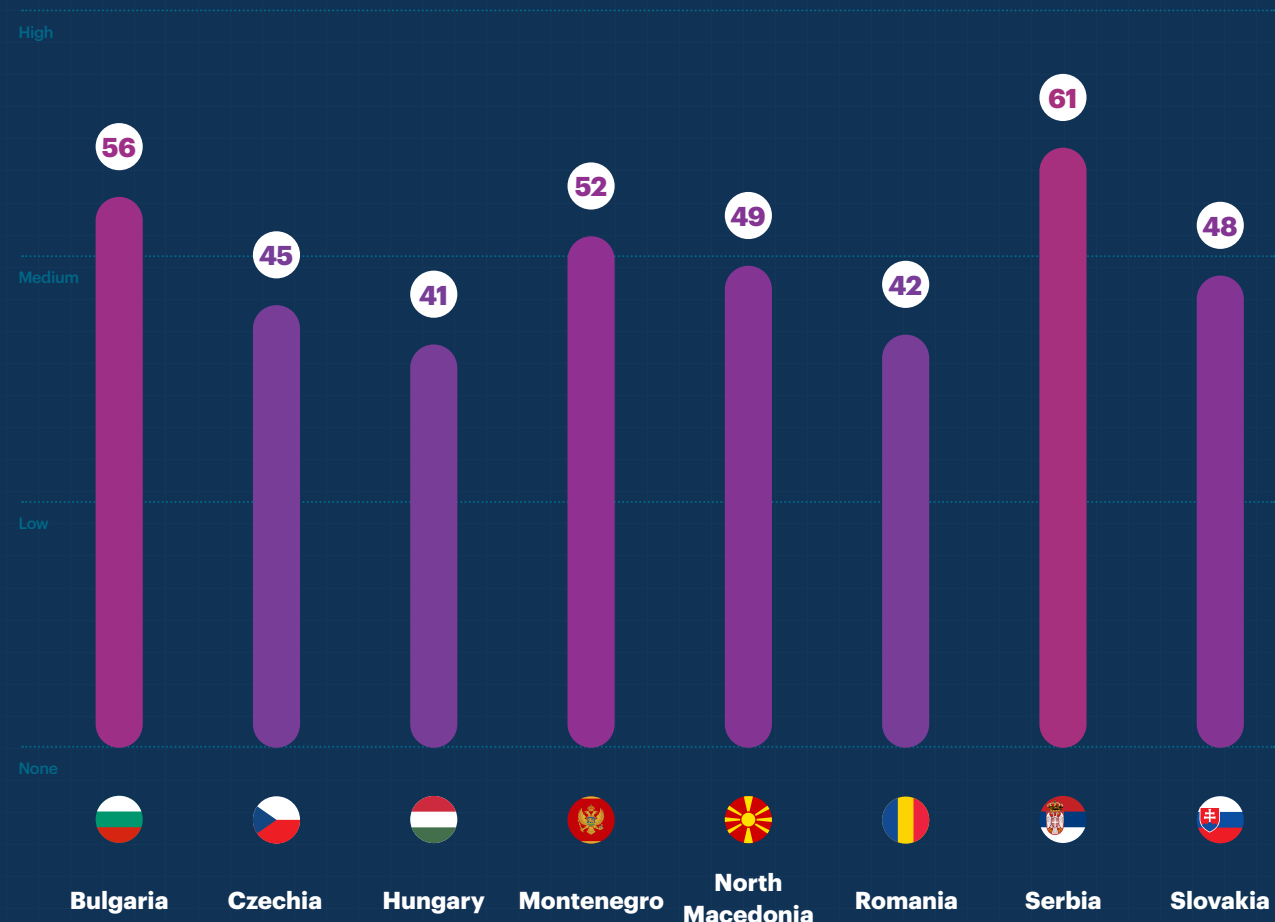


How do the countries under review compare against each other in the above-mentioned five areas of public life? What do the differences entail for the governments and societies? Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* famously begins, *"Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"*.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





→ Public attitudes



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

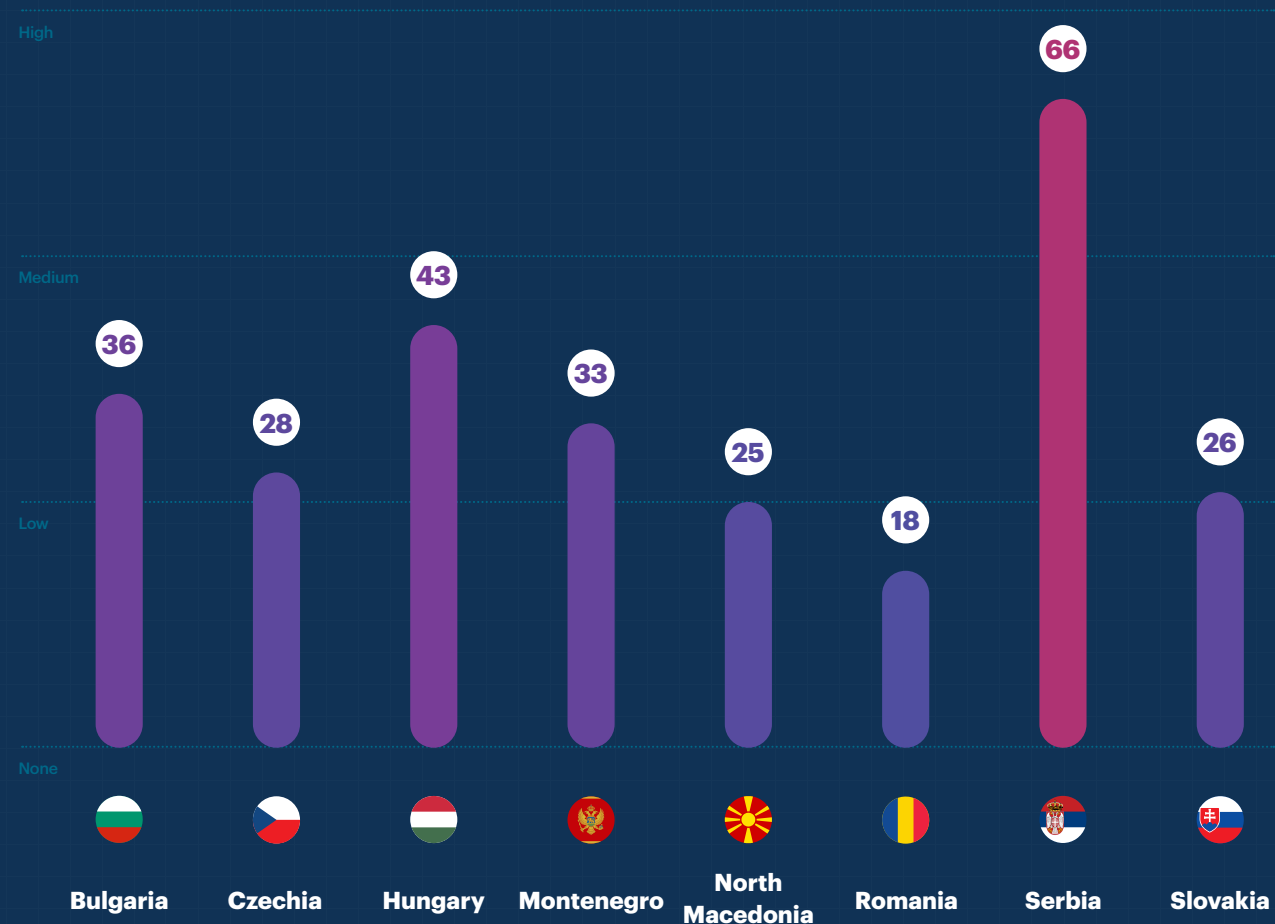
towards migrants and other minority groups. The inability to distinguish between “liberalism” as a concept and “liberal policies” contributes to the success of demagoguery and “othering” in further polarizing these societies. A total of 41% of respondents from analyzed countries think that liberal democracy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

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





→ Political landscape



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

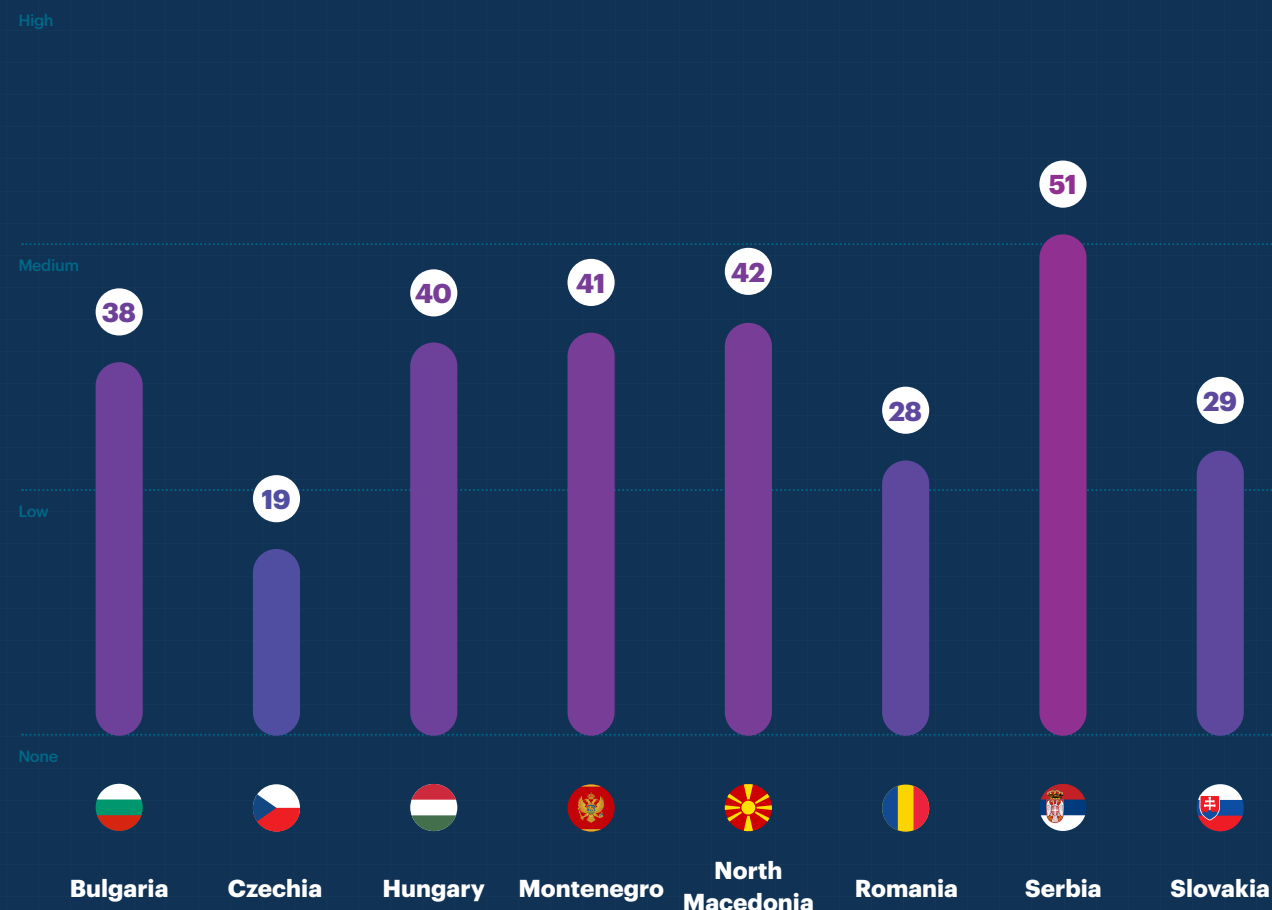
Countries in the bottom tier, by contrast, have seen their leaders exhibit strong anti-EU or anti-NATO rhetoric and actions and seek out and implement close ties with the Kremlin and Beijing – political elites in Serbia, for example, have been prodded in this direction due, in part, to the country's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

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





→ Public administration



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

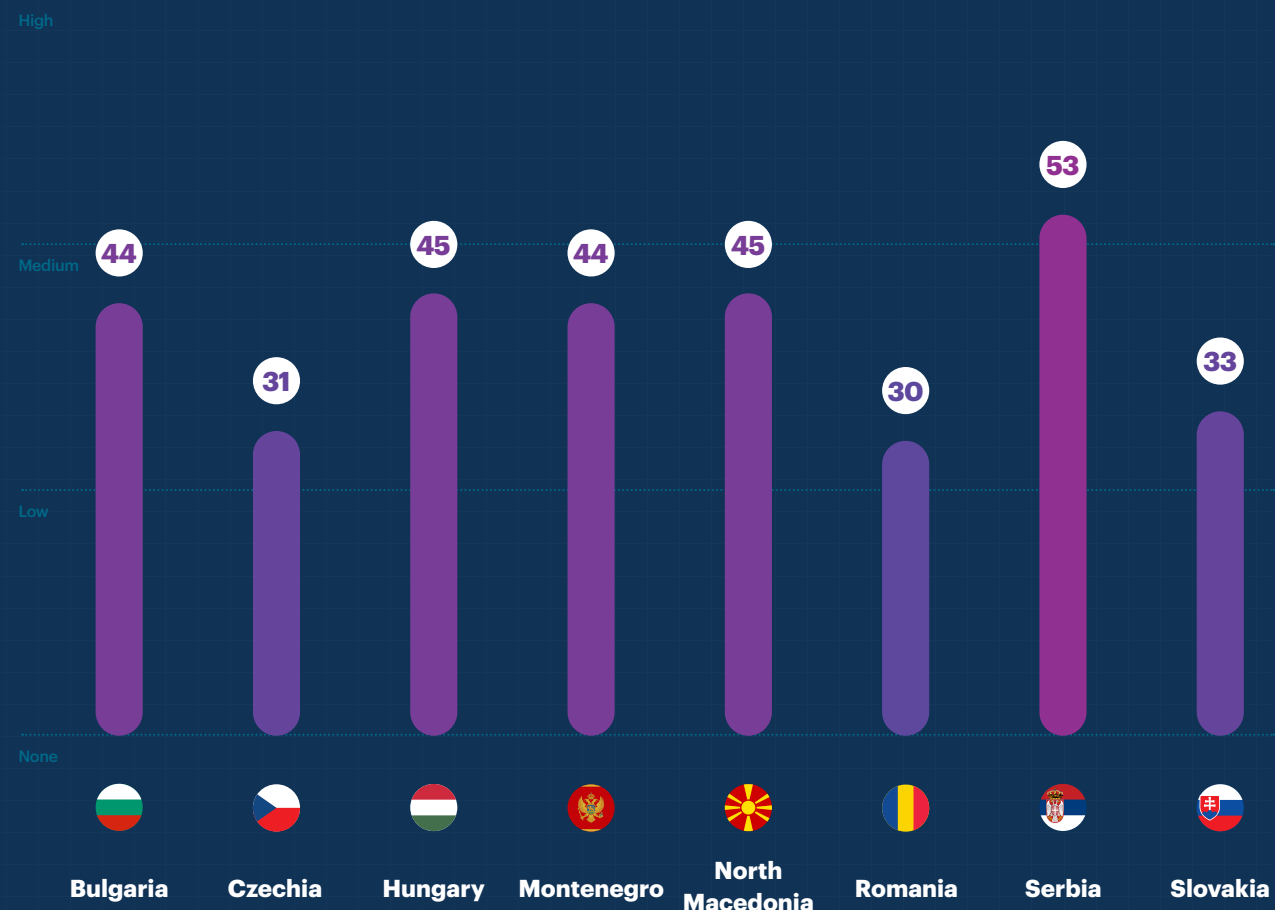
strategies across the region. Some countries (e.g. Czechia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia) clearly recognize the activities of foreign malign actors. Yet others (e.g. Hungary and Serbia) are reluctant to take a critical stance towards Russia and China and rather perceive them as strategic partners.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

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





→ Information landscape



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

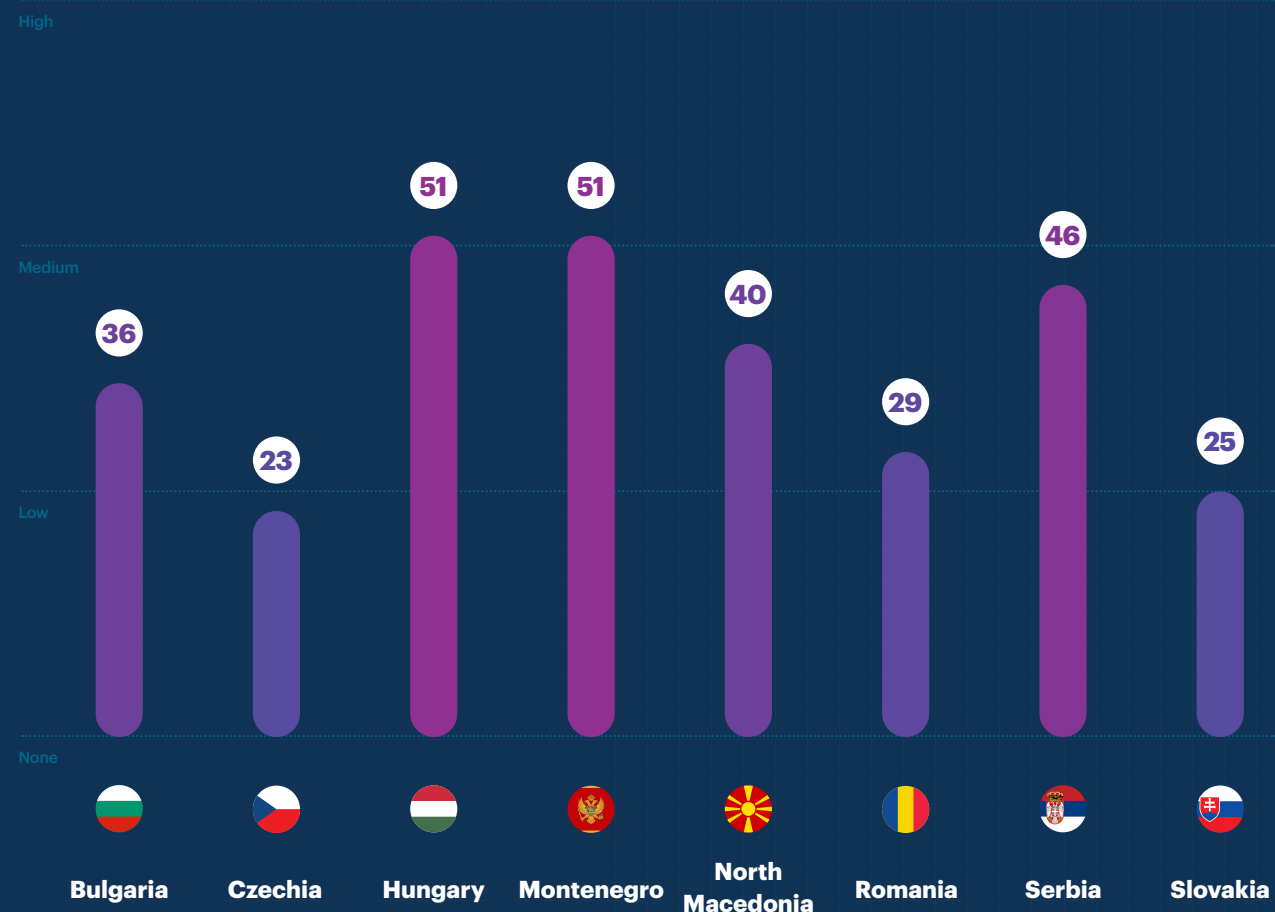
Also, perhaps unsurprisingly, the presence of disinformation in both the online and offline information space correlates with the presence and influence of pro-Kremlin actors and narratives in the media in the region. Given the information space in all monitored countries demonstrates varying degree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

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





→ Civic & academic space



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



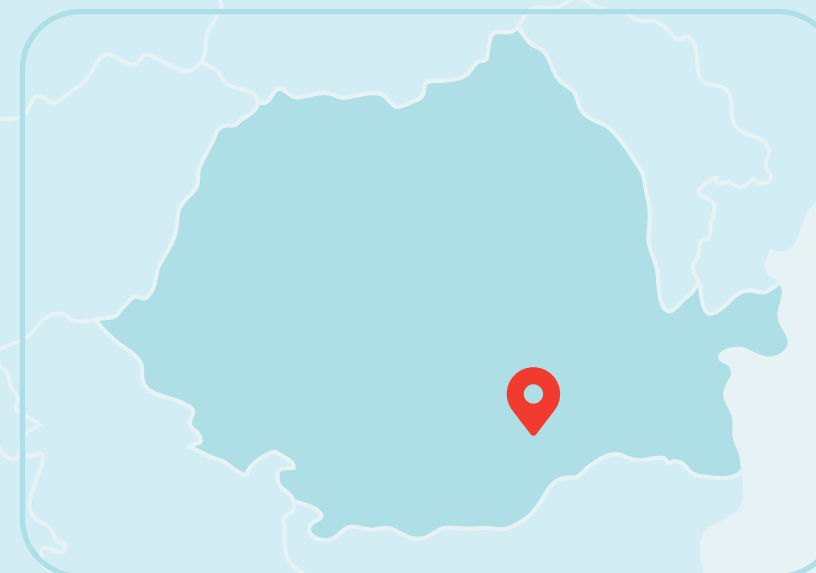
Focus on Romania



The long-standing and uncontested Euro-Atlantic orientation of prominent political figures, embraced (albeit formally) even by the radical AUR party, underpins Romania's resilience to malign foreign influence.

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

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



↓ Vulnerability score

29
/100

Vulnerability score overview

High

Medium

Low

None



Public attitudes



Political landscape



Public administration



Information landscape



Civic and academic space

Public attitudes

Chapter 1

↓ Vulnerability score

42

/100



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

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

Kremlin exploiting wedge issues

The long history of acrimonious relations between Romania and Russia³ has seen the population largely reject Kremlin propaganda. Romanians have been drawn, however, to certain ideas that cohere to Russian interests. Russia has sought to amplify and exploit a core set of fault lines within Romanian society: low confidence in state institutions⁴, authoritarian sympathies⁵, the prioritization of security over self-expression⁶, nationalism, and ethnocentrism⁷.

Explicitly pro-Kremlin narratives that present Russia as an alternative to the West are nearly non-existent (this blackout extends even to Russia-owned outlets like sputnik.md)⁸. Rather than pulling Romania into its 'fold', Moscow has merely sought to alienate the country from its Western allies, thereby sapping at the root of EU and NATO solidarity and unity. The Kremlin's strategy in Romania, in other words, is to exacerbate existing divisions to the point that the capacity of the state and society to maintain a functional democracy and Western alliances is exhausted⁹.



Strong support for EU & NATO

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

bases, 29% considering NATO to be an aggressive organization and a tool for the US to control other countries, and 37% agreeing that Western countries often unjustly accuse Russia of unlawful or fraudulent behavior¹⁰. The Kremlin, therefore, finds indirect support for its agenda through this Eurosceptic and anti-American sentiment and the purported shortcomings and hypocrisy of Romania's Western allies. Moscow has sought to magnify and exploit these perceptions to the greatest extent possible.

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

Kremlin's agenda aligned with nationalist elements

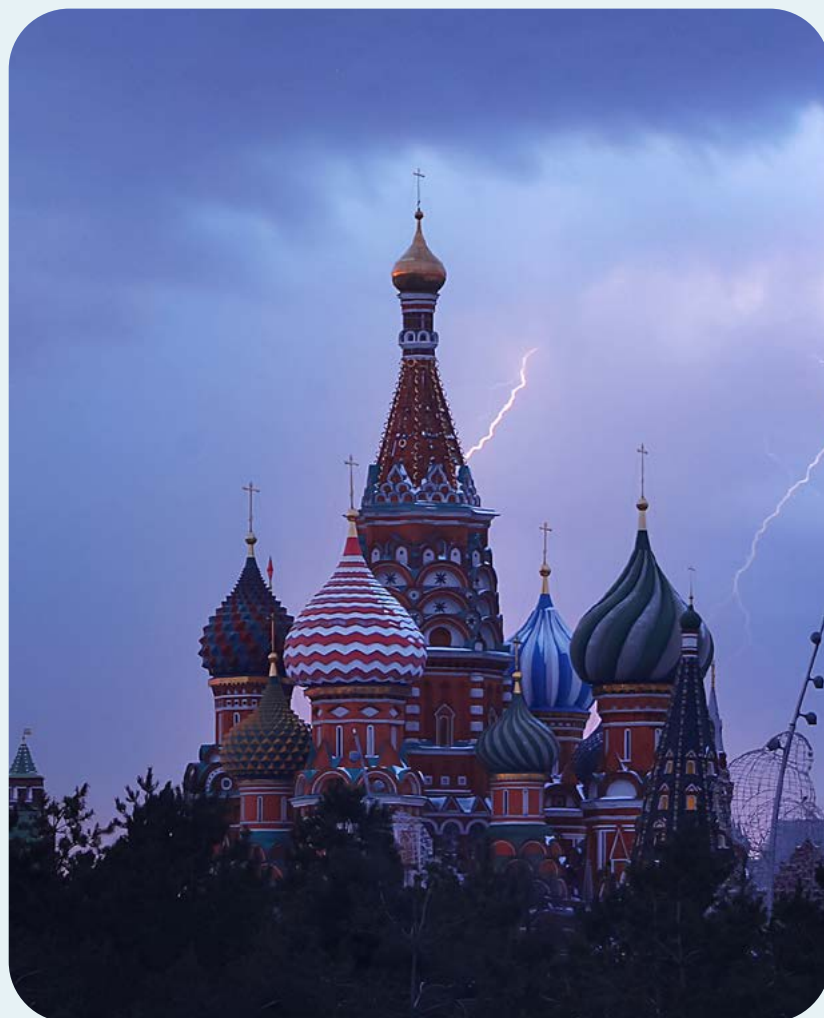
These beliefs broadly fall into two categories. The first concerns the ethnocentric idea that Romania is a victim of great power games – this narrative is prominent among a wide swath of mainstream society but also the fringe far-right (Romania's "great history" but "unjust destiny"). The second, meanwhile, alleges an "external conspiracy against Romania" ("Western disrespect towards the East", "foreigners hate us/ envy us", "the nefarious elites conspire with foreign powers out of self-interest"). The latter storyline is more prevalent on the fringe and frequently involves varying degrees of xenophobia, homophobia, and chauvinism¹¹. While it is difficult to ascertain whether formal ties to Moscow exist, the behavior of some radical influencers¹² indicates they are aware of overlaps between their own agendas and that of the Kremlin and use it to their advantage.

Russia perceived as an aggressor

The direct antipathy between Romania and Russia has only cemented itself since Romania's accession to NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007 (largely branded as a bulwark against potential Russian aggression¹³) and its strategic partnership with the US¹⁴ that has come to include the hosting of military bases and components of a missile defense shield. Russia's annexation of Crimea and military action in Ukraine and Georgia has

underlined Romanian perceptions of Russia as a regional aggressor. The image of Russia as an aggressor is reflected in public opinion – 58% of adult population considered Russia to be a threat in 2019.¹⁵

These views have been further fueled by Romania's and Russia's clashing strategic interests in Moldova. Romania claims special relations with the Republic of Moldova, which continues to be seen as Romanian territory unjustly "snatched" by the USSR after WWII¹⁶. Russia's interests in Moldova, on the other hand, are exercised through Moldova's large Russian-speaking minority and the internationally unrecognized independent region of Transnistria in the east of Moldova¹⁷.



Indifference to China

Simultaneously, building on constructive relations during communism, Beijing has for a long time sought to persuade political leaders in Bucharest to adopt a more China-friendly approach²¹. Despite the lack of results so far, the general indifference of the population and the presence of some positive attitudes towards China (30% of respondents think the Chinese regime could be a role model for Romania²²) could provide future inroads for Chinese influence in the country, against the background of intensifying efforts by Beijing itself to that end.

Disappointment with democracy

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

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



Political landscape

Chapter 2

↓ Vulnerability score

18
/100



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

Romania remains an imperfect democracy²⁵ that has, for several years, experienced a high degree of political instability, exemplified in the fact that ten prime ministers have taken office over the past ten years. While democratic institutions and processes appear to be resilient at present²⁶, this record of instability poses a potential vulnerability.

Even if Romanians hold rather conservative views²⁷, ultra-conservative movements and parties have systematically failed

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

Far-right or populist parties enter the Parliament every few cycles but they are kept out of the government, partly because the Hungarian minority party (UDMR – RDMSZ) is a much more reliable partner, willing to govern with any party to safeguard the representation of their constituency and the position of local ethnic Hungarian elites. Their participation in government also does not generate any major backlash from the Romanian majority²⁸.

The EU & NATO in mostly positive light

The Romanian political class is pro-European and favorable to NATO. Even the radical Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) declares the same orientation²⁸ although they promote starkly different values²⁹ and anti-EU disinformation narratives. The AUR party, for its part, has accused the EU³⁰ of “unequal treatment” of Eastern Europe and imposing perverted values³¹.

The largest parties in the country – the National Liberal Party and the Social Democrats – and UDMR were founders of the so-called Snagov consensus³² which articulated Romania’s EU and NATO membership as the country’s overarching aim. The parties have consistently refrained from jeopardizing this position. The Social Democrats are occasionally speaking of the need for self-determination and resistance to “foreign [Western] intrusion”, based on the narratives of preserving Romania’s “traditional values” or “sovereignty”.³²

The relatively new civic party USR PLUS (part of Renew Europe) is staunchly pro-European³³ and implicitly pro-NATO³⁴. They have on occasion affirmed their progressive support for minority rights³⁵ too.

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

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

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

Bogdan Aurescu,
Minister of Foreign Affairs,
2019



According to Transylvania-based analysts, the ethnic Hungarian party (UDMR) is becoming closer and closer to Viktor Orbán's regime³⁷ despite the fact that, in 2017, party leader Kelemen Hunor criticized the move to close the Central European University as undemocratic and antithetical to EU values.³⁸ The Hungarian government is expending significant resources to support Hungarian language media and NGOs in Transylvania³⁹ (albeit within the perceived parameters of the broad pro-Western consensus).

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

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

Resilience to Russian interference

A majority of surveyed experts⁴¹ believe that neither Russian nor Chinese interference pose an imminent threat and 19 of 22 experts believe that pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing interests have not been promoted successfully by either parliamentary or non-parliamentary actors.

Several factors contribute to the lack of success of foreign interference within the political system. I) Strident anti-Russian sentiment in Romania⁴² constitutes a quasi-impenetrable barrier to significant (visible) interference - the political class tends to respond to these preferences of the electorate. II) Many interviewed experts believe that the only rational agenda for Russia to pursue is to create discord and weaken Romania. However, Romanian politics is already quite discordant on its own, leaving Russia in a rather



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enviable position if it wishes to take advantage of internal vulnerabilities. III) The far-right is anti-Russian⁴³ and to a lesser extent anti-Chinese⁴⁴ and there is no far-left party present in the political sphere.

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

conservatives and the Kremlin.⁴⁵ There are, as such, occasional bridges between the two movements⁴⁶. And it is indeed impossible to rule out indirect cooperation. But apart from this value alignment, an anti-Russian platform remains paramount to the Romanian far-right, with pro-Russian voices competitors rather than allies of AUR.⁴⁷

Minimal Chinese presence

The political discourse or positions on China are rather spasmodic given Beijing's minimal presence in Romania, being blocked off by an establishment which has consistently assessed Chinese interests as clashing with Bucharest's pro-Western agenda. No party had China mentioned in their party manifesto. Some specific politicians have expressed favorable opinions of economic cooperation with China though⁴⁸. Most references to China have been tailored to economic cooperation and partnerships and failed to translate to cooperation at the institutional level. Former PM Victor Ponta's seeming willingness to break the strategic consensus⁴⁹ to take advantage of the promise of Chinese investment and cheap construction projects marked an exception.

The promise, however, never materialized against appearances that his Chinese counterparts seemed more interested in the Romanian state guaranteeing profits. With the US intensifying its pressure on EU allies on China relations, Romania staged a semi-boycott⁵⁰ at the last 17+1 summit, signed on to the US-led Huawei ban⁵¹, and enacted legislation⁵² that implicitly blocks Chinese participation in public tenders.



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

Public administration

Chapter 3

↓ Vulnerability score

28
/100



The public administration is vulnerable to corruption, nepotism and patronage from political and business interests. If these interests were to be aligned with foreign interference, they would find ways to sway the state apparatus, at least to some extent. However, for now at least, the pro-Western consensus among institutions and elites is still a strong buffer against foreign malign influence. Despite Romania scoring well in V-Dem's checks and balances index⁵³, there have been attempts

by previous governments to control the judiciary⁵⁴ and to adjudicate self-serving interpretations of the Constitution. Such constitutional instability may create the conditions for one power in the state to exert a controlling influence on all others and to serve as a privileged avenue.⁵⁵



Corruption as a challenge

Corruption and nepotism are a source of widespread distrust in public institutions⁵⁶ and of perceptions that civil servants, including high level representatives, are a liability and a potential channel for malign influence.⁵⁷ Romania ranked, alongside Hungary and Bulgaria, 69th in the Corruption Perceptions Index, which puts them among the most corrupt EU member countries.⁵⁸ Despite aspirations and the launch of reforms, the National Anticorruption Directorate has proven to be no magic bullet⁵⁹, with corruption remaining an issue within Romanian society at large.⁶⁰ Many civil servants feel personally threatened by EU values and regulations which

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

Luckily, most of the state apparatus, especially in foreign affairs, security and defense, is loyal to the country's Western orientation, and strong cooperation with NATO allies, especially the US, is an important buffer against backsliding⁶¹. While there is some controversy around the opacity of decision-making and the potentially excessive role of the secret services in internal affairs⁶², most legislation must be transparently posted for public scrutiny ahead of its adoption, limiting opportunities for discretionary power.

★ Romania scores 69th in the Corruption Perceptions Index.

Elements of resilience

The national defense strategy of Romania is updated each time the President is sworn into office, within six months of taking oath, as per constitutional requirements.⁶³ This regular update of national security policy is a good practice other countries in the region could emulate, enabling the government to routinely evaluate new security challenges facing the country. The 2020 version⁶⁴ provides a comprehensive understanding of the country's security environment, recognizing the need to build capabilities to counter malign influence. While the Supreme National Defense Council is responsible for coordinating defense and security

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

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

the corps of retired officers, is not acknowledged as a vulnerability. Hybrid threats and influence operations conducted by malign foreign actors are, however, presented in official documents as one of the most important security threats. They also featured as one of the priorities of the Romania, Finland and Croatia Presidency Trio of the Council of the EU in 2019⁶⁷. In February that year, a high-level conference on hybrid threats, resilience and strategic communication was organized in Bucharest⁶⁸.

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



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Response to malign influence

Romania maintains a rigid, outdated⁶⁹, reactive and state-centric approach to countering disinformation that relies on institutions of force and is led by the Ministry of Interior. While the National Security Strategy identifies "the dissemination of disinformation sponsored by malign foreign actors such as Russia" as a threat,⁷⁰ the strategic communication strategy elaborated following an inter-agency review of national responses⁷¹ has been shelved for now. Funding and support for broader resilience measures integrating the broader public, including civil society organizations and local authorities, to create a proper whole-of-society approach, are still not largely implemented.

Such deficiencies are visible, for example, in the absence of adequate measures to combat Hungarian interference activities directed at the Hungarian minority based in Romania. The Budapest government⁷² is allocating significant resources to the Hungarian Protestant Church, Hungarian media, and NGOs in Romania⁷³, potentially resulting in undue influence on local authorities.



Election integrity

Elections in Romania are assessed as being free and fair⁷⁴, with high voting transparency and without external interference. Political parties receive state funding for election campaigns, but strict financing laws govern campaign spending, especially barring funding from abroad⁷⁵.

Consequently, parties have shifted some of their focus onto intense pre-campaign efforts, i.e. more than one month prior to the electoral campaign. During this pre-campaign period, the spending of many interest groups to promote their agenda⁷⁶ lacks transparency, which creates a loophole for both domestic and foreign actors. Most of the surveyed experts also mentioned that the national election oversight body does not have a mandate to analyze foreign election interference.

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

Sorin Cucerei,
sociologist and political
campaigner

Information landscape

Chapter 4

↓ Vulnerability score

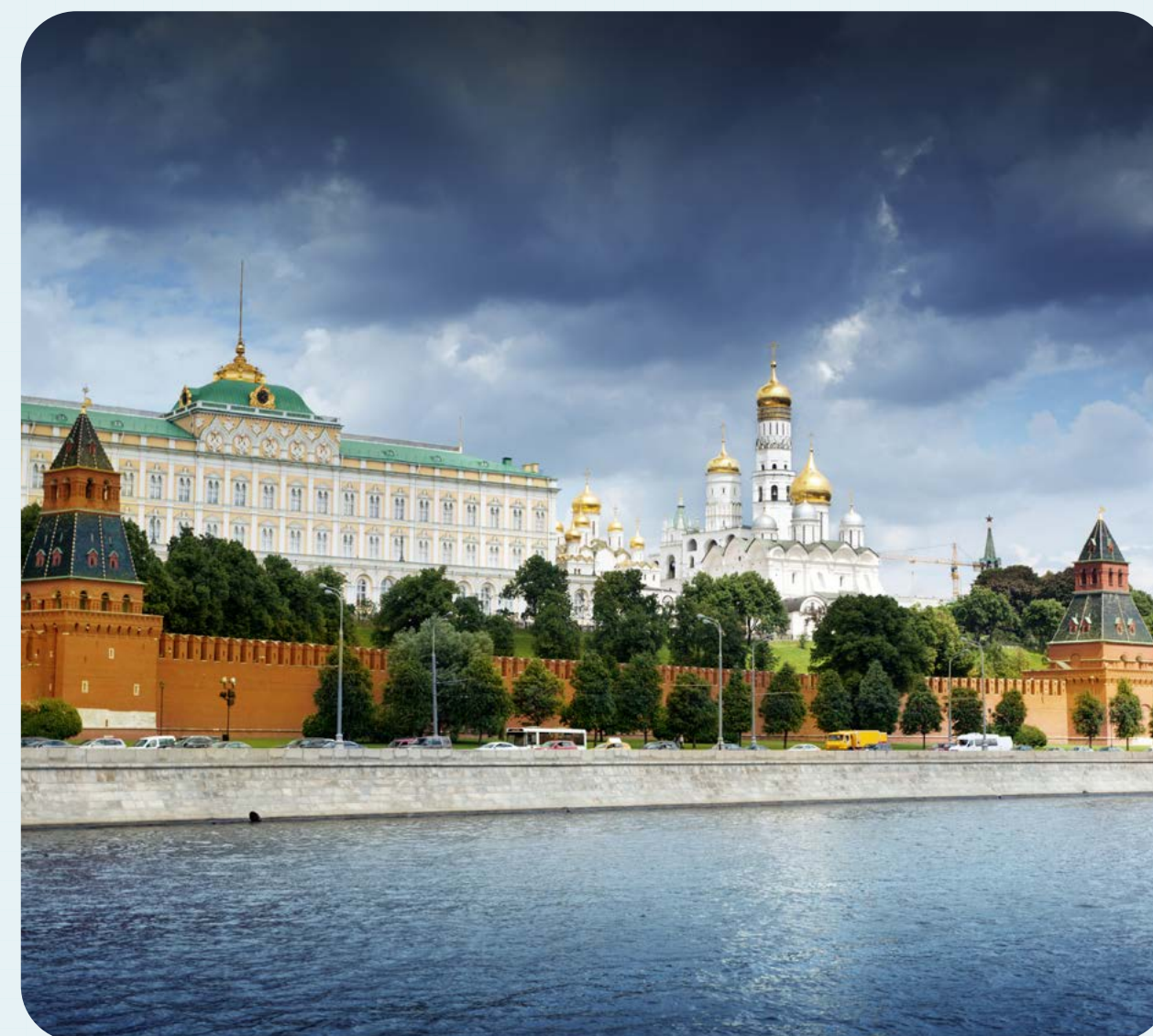
30
/100



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The disinformation problem in Romania is characterized by complexity - actors with partially overlapping agendas act through diverse means of communication and use both traditional and new media. Malign influence, moreover, derives from both domestic and foreign sources. Their strategies vary too: sometimes different entities coordinate their efforts to disseminate disinformation (such as partisan news outlets that have common ideological alignments⁷⁷ especially in the far-right sphere)

or merely direct their activities towards amplifying already existing narratives (the preferred approach of pro-Russian outlets⁷⁸). Although most foreign state-sponsored disinformation present in Romania can be traced back to Russia, China seems to be emerging as a new source of foreign influence in the country.



Russian indirect influence

Though its direct influence in Romania is not on par with its involvement in other countries in the region, Russia is still a relevant actor in disinformation dissemination in the country⁷⁹ (see Facebook's takedown of a propaganda network as an indication of the Kremlin's increasing presence).⁸⁰ China, on the other hand, is a new entry and as yet only a marginal influencer.

Moscow's disinformation diffusion approach seeks to exploit the vast network of local media outlets independently peddling narratives that overlap with the Kremlin's agenda⁸¹ (anti-West, anti-liberal, ultraconservative). Moscow's strategy of choice in Romania, therefore, is largely an indirect one: adapting narratives promoted by outlets under its direct control (such as sputnik.md⁸²) to disinformation narratives⁸³ already spreading in the country. Sputnik.md also extensively quotes Romania's most populist politicians in a positive light and provides a platform to illiberal voices (such as former⁸⁴ and current politicians⁸⁵).

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

Media freedom affected by corruption

According to the World Press Freedom Index, Romania ranks 48th in the world,⁸⁶ registering a slight deterioration of freedom of the press in the country in the last 5 years⁸⁷. The scarcity of truly independent journalism is due to media ownership by corrupt businessmen⁸⁸, that seek to directly influence editorial policy⁸⁹. Nearly all managers of private television outlets in Romania have been convicted or prosecuted for corruption.

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

Against all these counter currents, Romanian media still remain one of the most important points of resilience against foreign influence in the country⁹⁰. A fast-developing corpus of independent media outlets is catering to a



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

State interventions regulating the media space are initiated in compliance with the law, though often proving ineffective. During the COVID-19 state of emergency, for example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the National Communications Management Authority took a harsh stand against websites spreading blatant disinformation that hampered the government's efforts to combat the pandemic. The government, in fact, temporarily shut down some of these websites. Some of the outlets, however, were moved to different servers and swiftly relaunched, while others continued their disinformation campaigns on social media by slightly changing their names⁹³.



Dan Voiculescu

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



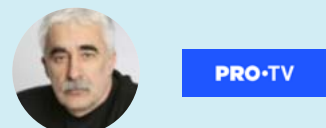
Sorin Ovidiu Vântu

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



Ioan Bendei

Sentenced in 2019 to 4 years in prison for bribery.



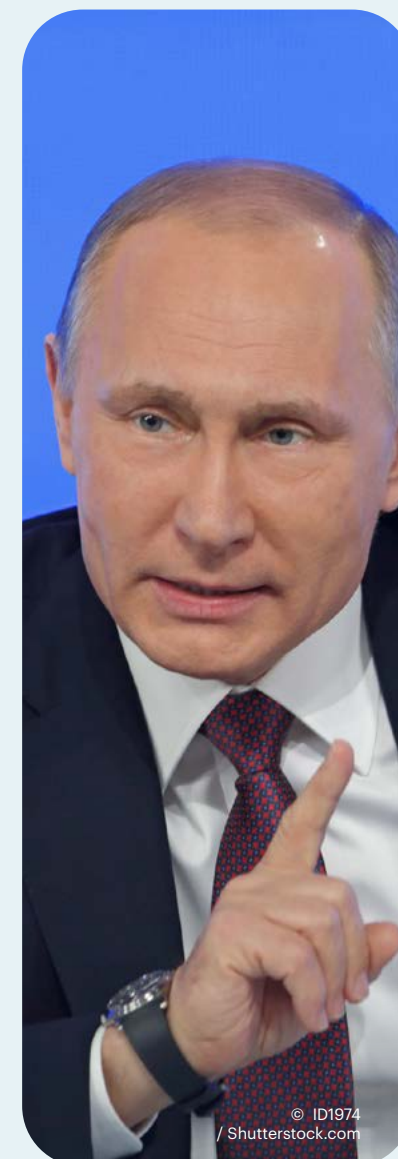
Adrian Sârbu

Prosecuted for money laundering and tax evasion charges.

Source: GlobalFocus Center

Pro-Kremlin interests in the media

While direct Russian influence over either Romanian mainstream or fringe media is difficult to ascertain, pro-Kremlin narratives are afforded significant space in all domestic public and commercial media, a conclusion affirmed by the survey conducted with the Romanian expert community⁹⁴. The central promoters of pro-Kremlin narratives in Romania rather often serve as "useful idiots".



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

Stanislav Secieru,
Senior Analyst, EUISS

In recent years, disinformation has gained increased traction as a considerable segment of Romanian society has transitioned to using social media.⁹⁵ Romanians are more active on social media than an average European⁹⁶, with 62% of Romanians maintaining at least one social media account. Considering the country's polarized population⁹⁷, its sizeable audience on social networks, and heightened uncertainty from the pandemic, the threat of disinformation is bound to grow and become more disruptive.

China's footprint

Although most foreign state-sponsored disinformation present in Romania can be traced back to Russia, China seems to be emerging as a new source of foreign influence in the country. A study conducted by GlobalFocus Center, in coordination with think-tanks in more than 17 European countries, revealed a significant (though sometimes difficult to attribute) cross-regional push to change the public narrative on COVID-19 in the early months of the pandemic⁹⁸. This effort sought to shift the prevailing narrative from one of "China as the source of the pandemic" to "China as a reliable partner and supporter", especially compared to the alleged inaction of the EU and US early on.

Apart from narratives disseminated by fringe media outlets, such messaging could be found on the social media pages of the Chinese Embassy in Romania⁹⁹.

Civic & academic space

Chapter 5

↓ Vulnerability score

29
/100



The civic space in Romania is primarily defined by a high degree of freedom of assembly and expression¹⁰⁰ and the absence of significant efforts by state actors to control or restrict said liberties. It scores highly¹⁰¹ on media pluralism, the ease of starting a blog or news website and open and unrestricted access to the internet.

Illiberal tendencies

This environment, however, cannot be equally capitalized on by all, with the chronically poor population in small urban and rural areas¹⁰² feeling marginalized from the civic space and underrepresented politically. Such groups often react to this climate through excessive traditionalism, nationalism and support for the political re-centralization of power¹⁰³. Recent years, consequently, have seen the emergence of ultraconservative and nationalistic associative activities, where none used to exist - supported by the Orthodox Church and neo-evangelist groups in the US¹⁰⁴. Their activities led to the constitutional referendum in 2018 to outlaw same-sex marriage, organized by the Coalition for Family. Although unsuccessful, it has energized the radical base^{105, 106} and served as a precursor to the radical party AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians), which also has a nationalistic predecessor - Action 2012 movement for Romania's unification with the Republic of Moldova¹⁰⁷. This pushback against liberalism and modernization is the main avenue for anti-Western influence in Romania, according to former presidential adviser Iulian Fota¹⁰⁸.



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Civil society as a buffer

The overall impact of civil society on political processes remains limited primarily due to pertaining social polarization¹⁰⁹, scarce availability of funding, marginalization of independent voices by decision-makers and low levels of political activism. In recent years though, civic action led by an increasingly liberal, urban, pro-Western and financially independent middle-class harboring ambitions to reclaim political agency has served as the main buffer against democratic backsliding.

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

protection, public administration reform, the integration of ethnic minorities, etc. The availability of funding, support from Western partners, and the saliency of the problems, nonetheless, enabled the development of vibrant NGOs in the different spheres¹¹⁰. The same EU entry requirements have contributed to the creation of a legal framework prioritizing social dialogue, government transparency and accountability, and the inclusion of NGOs in consultations during the decision-making process. The lifting of the EU monitoring check and funding reductions, however, have seen the voice and influence of civil society markedly diminish¹¹¹. The three-year term of the PSD government witnessed activists branded as "Soros agents" or "foreign agents" and attempts were made to draft "foreign agents-type" legislation restraining their activity¹¹².



Institutions with links to Russia and China

The rise of independent think-tanks in foreign policy and security, meanwhile, has been mostly neutralized by the promotion of so-called experts and NGOs loyal to the administration – these entities serve as echo chambers for the government to help it preserve a monopoly over the narrative space¹¹³. Such organizations and individuals drown out independent voices and serve as the (willing or involuntary) mouthpieces for the Kremlin and Beijing interests. These include the Titulescu Foundation, where former PM Adrian Nastase and former MEP Adrian Severin, both previously jailed for corruption,

are the leading voices, or the recently established New Strategy Center, or Strategikon, all with a pro-Western front, but rooted in groups of interests in the intelligence services and institutions of force, which abound in toxic nationalistic and autocratic worldviews¹¹⁴.

Direct Russian or Chinese interference through GONGOs or the funding of civil society remains relatively low according to surveyed experts, and limited to the Confucius Institutes, the Russian Cultural Center, some suspected funding for religious NGOs and environment organizations, or indirect ideological influence through Viktor Orbán's funding of soft power tools such as media¹¹⁵ and football teams in Transylvania¹¹⁶.

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

and Beijing's interests has taken on unexpected energy with the AUR's entry into parliament in 2020 and COVID-19 restrictions, which have provided an impetus for frequent street protests¹¹⁷.

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

Activism against corruption

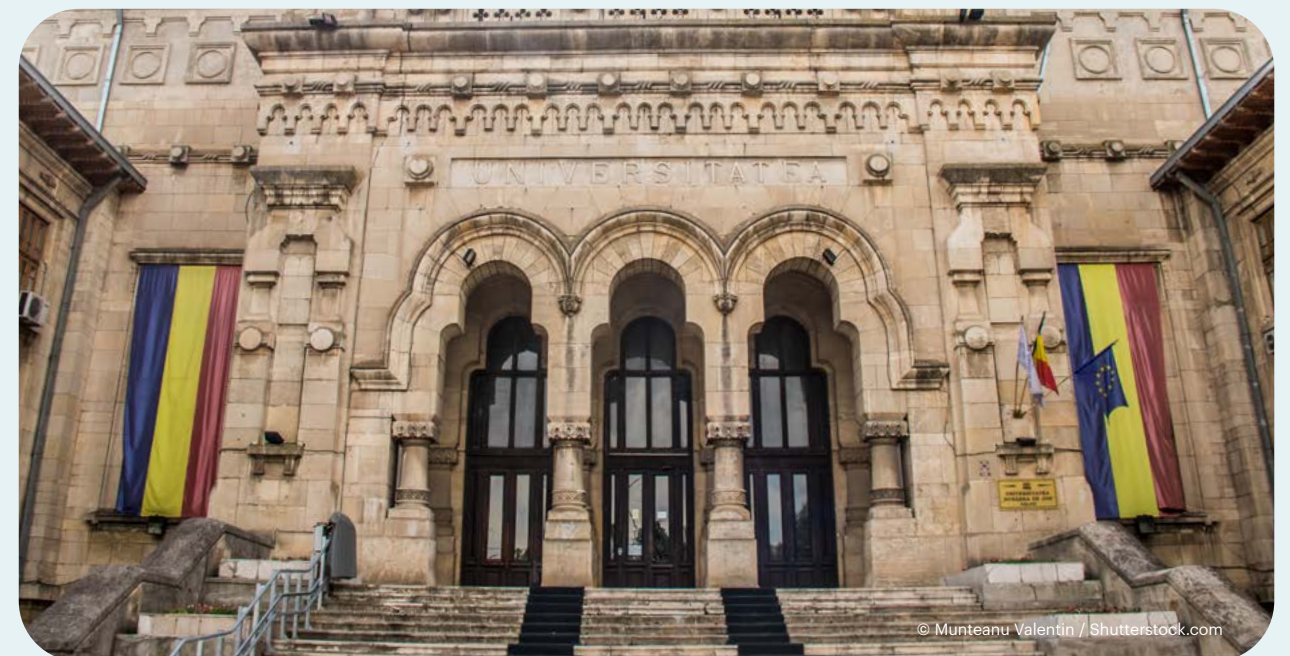
Liberal middle-class activism, however, brought Romania back from the brink between 2017 and 2019 as the Social-Democrat government engaged in a sustained campaign to reverse anticorruption reforms. The movement would morph into the largest protests since the 1989 anti-communist revolution. But it was not started by formal civil society institutions but rather the spontaneous mobilization of people on social media valuing rule of law and anticorruption principles¹¹⁸ as measures of genuine reform. These citizens now make up the electoral base of the new civic parties (the USR-PLUS alliance). The parties are currently on a downward polling trend¹¹⁹ and remain vulnerable to anti-Western manipulation coming in the form of "alternative" ideas packaged as democratic pluralism.

Academia prone to political influence

The academic sector is afflicted by institutions such as the Academy for Security Sciences or the National Defense College proven by courts to be facilitating the distribution of titles to legitimize shady figures¹²⁰. Academia also harbors high-profile ultraconservative and nationalistic elements. The head of the Romanian Academy, Prof. Ioan-Aurel Pop, and the institution itself, have released official statements advancing views questioning some scientific evidence,¹²¹ opposing sex education and digitalization¹²². Its International Relations Institute is run by Prof. Dan Dungaciu, a promoter of unionist narratives on Moldova, which fuel Moscow's allegations of Romanian "imperialism"¹²³. The University of Craiova hosted

the influential Russian diplomat Alexey Gromyko with his anti-NATO, anti-EU messaging, while universities in Bucharest, Cluj, Pitesti and Targoviste have invited outspoken Russian Ambassador Valery Kuzmin to lecture at various events. Aleksandr Dugin appeared in Romania twice, launching a book in the presence of Romanian academics and politicians¹²⁴.

Though the country's liberal legal framework grants autonomy to academic institutions¹²⁵, most universities have recorded shoddy levels of scientific performance and remain prone to political influence¹²⁶. Additionally, the intellectual movement in Romania post-1989 primarily has its origins in the anti-communist ideology and has predominantly been liberal-conservative in orientation even as far-right tendencies take hold too frequently (the Iași local branch is the most notorious example¹²⁷).





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