



Foreign Malign Influence in Central Europe and the Western Balkans

Factors, techniques
and recommendations

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This brief constitutes the final output of the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index¹, a project that mapped susceptibility to foreign malign influence in eight Central European and Western Balkan countries (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). The primary aims here are to (1) summarize the key factors enabling and facilitating foreign influence across the two regions and (2) identify common points of resilience and suggest practical recommendations and best practices for international stakeholders.

Weak democracies make easy targets

Foreign malign influence represents both a cause and consequence of weak and vulnerable societies and governments. Even in the absence of interference from Beijing or the Kremlin, Central European and Western Balkan countries would still be struggling with corruption, state capture, the erosion of press

freedoms and attacks on civil society. These vulnerabilities, indicative of democratic fragility, are present to a varying degree across all studied countries. Foreign interference, therefore, should not be understood as the sole explanation (nor as an excuse) for all deficiencies present in the public sphere in the region. That said, foreign actors, undoubtedly, are eager to exploit any susceptibility present. Like a virus making the most out of a weak immune system, malign actors can, owing to these shortcomings, sabotage democratic processes and/or diminish the pro-Western orientation of respective countries.

Factors and tactics undergirding foreign malign influence

Several key factors play an important role in facilitating foreign malign influence across Central Europe and the Western Balkans including a shared communist past, deeply embedded cultures of corruption, state capture, information environments affected by rampant disinformation and information manipulation, the notion of Pan-Slavism and the role of the Orthodox Church.

Pan-Slavism

A deeply rooted notion of pan-Slavism, often nurtured for centuries, resonates in countries

where a considerable segment of the population identifies as ethnically Slavic and speaks a Slavic language. From the era of romantic nationalism of the 19th century² to the Cold War³ onwards, these ideas have presented an important vehicle for Kremlin influence to seep in.

This cultural affinity is indeed all too easily exploited by Moscow. Four of the six analyzed Slavic countries use the Cyrillic script and share a joint Eastern Orthodox heritage cemented throughout the 9th and 10th centuries.⁴ And even if Slovakia and Czechia use the Latin script now, the remnants of past cultural and religious influences are still visible. These two countries, for example, celebrate Saint Cyril and Methodius Day, in reverence of the Slavic missionaries, as national holidays⁵ and the “Cyrilo-Methodius tradition” is even embedded in the Slovak constitution.⁶

Although seemingly benign, the fostering of national myths based on an idealized perception of Slavic unity provides an optimal channel (given the deep symbolic nature of the matter) for the Kremlin to secure a continuing imprint on the public consciousness. Even in a country, like Czechia, where atheism is prevalent⁷, pan-Slavism is evident in public perceptions that Russia is a traditional Slavic brother. These ideas have been planted and reinforced by pro-Kremlin outlets and actors, with 47% of Czechs and an even greater percentage of Serbs (89%) and Bulgarians (84%) subscribing to them.⁸

Orthodox Church

In the examined countries where the Orthodox Church plays a significant role, it too is co-opted as a platform for Kremlin influence. This is particularly true in Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia and to a lesser extent North Macedonia and Romania.

The revival of the Orthodox Church in Russia over the past twenty years, namely during Vladimir Putin's time in power, has not been inadvertent. The regime rather often promulgates itself as the defender of orthodox beliefs and "traditional values".⁹

The combined return of Soviet-era symbols and the prominence given to the Russian Orthodox Church as a key pillar of society¹⁰ echoing Tsarist Russia¹¹ may seem contradictory at first glance. However, both symbols - the atheist USSR and the evocation of the ultraconservative world order of Imperial Russia - serve the same goal: re-assertion of the perceived claim to Russia's former Cold-War era sphere of influence. This model envisions a stable centuries-spanning fatherland governed by strict patriarchal notions and one unquestioned leader at the top of the social hierarchy.

Close association between the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church, consequently, provides an important source of legitimacy for Putin's regime. The relationship, furthermore, seeks to put forward an alternative governance system to the alleged "messy and decadent" Western democracies. This model, based on common cultural affinities and demonization of the West, is attractive to many.

The Orthodox Church is often co-opted through entities such as the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (IFUOCN) in Bulgaria. This foundation, under the guise of improving Russian Orthodox Church's activities across different countries, operates under the direct influence of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹²

Narratives promoting ultraconservative worldviews at the expense of human rights purport a binary portrayal of "liberal" EU/West¹³ on the one hand and a "common sense traditional" Russia on the other. And they have gained significant traction within recent years even in countries where the Orthodox Church is not widely present (Slovakia and Czechia).¹⁴ The Catholic Church and other political actors sensing opportunities in these cases, wittingly or unwittingly, often play into the hands of the Kremlin.

Post-communist legacy

The legacy of the communist regime, chaotic reforms of the 1990s and the failure of democratically elected governments to deliver on their promises are reflected now in the instability of political institutions, societal distrust among citizens and between citizens and authorities, as well as deeply entrenched corruption, nepotism and clientelism. Despite attempts to curb corruption through legislation and more effective institutional structures, it poses a significant source of vulnerability in all examined countries (scores varied from 45 to 60 points on the GLOBSEC vulnerability scale). This problem is exploited by malign actors who seek to influence

policy-making from within through clientelist networks (especially through local oligarchs).

Though few reports have directly linked foreign entities to government institutions in the analyzed countries, in June 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned three individuals in Bulgaria – an oligarch, an MP and a civil servant - under the Global Magnitsky Act. The decision was undertaken based on the determination that Vassil Kroumov Bojkov, a prominent oligarch, had facilitated "a channel for Russian political leaders to influence Bulgarian government officials".¹⁵

Corrupt governance models, strong oligarchic influence, a lack of effective lobbying legislation and deficient transparency standards all provide openings for foreign influence to rear its ugly head in.

The strong top-down approaches of some government systems, paired with state capture, further enables foreign powers to directly interact with key government officials and networks and pursue their interests without institutional checks. These practices, which make effective resilience building nearly unattainable, are particularly pervasive in Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro and Serbia. Russian and Chinese companies use existing state capture networks in these settings to exert outsized influence over decision-making processes of respective countries.¹⁶

Information landscapes reflect vulnerabilities

The aforementioned factors all play an integral role in the ultimate shape that information landscapes take in different countries and their exploitability potential. Where state control over the media is particularly assertive, pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives can seamlessly infiltrate the public media space through official state channels and public broadcasters. Even in countries, like Slovakia and Czechia, where press freedom is protected, numerous fringe sources engaging in information manipulation have been able to develop into influential outlets, some aided by Moscow and/or pro-Kremlin actors. The Czech and Serbian versions of the Russian Sputnik news agency, furthermore, operate in their respective national languages, serving as a source of information also for some local media outlets.¹⁷

The Kremlin, seeking to splinter and destabilize fragile democracies, continues to exploit polarizing issues in each country. As an appeal to those dissatisfied with their respective governance systems or harboring general insecurities, for example, the Russian model is portrayed as a viable alternative to Western democracies and Moscow as a protector of traditional values.

China, meanwhile, has sought to develop networks with journalists and the media more generally to promote its agenda and communicate a favorable story about itself. Beijing further relies on these networks to shape views on Hong Kong, Taiwan and/or human rights violations. Chinese influence is most apparent in the Western Balkans

where it is tied to large-scale infrastructure investments, while less prevalent in Central Europe. A lack of awareness concerning China's influence operations, nevertheless, constitutes a major vulnerability that could catch the region off guard if Beijing were to decide to lead an even sharper campaign.

→ Recommendations

1

Be present in the region

Russia and China are filling the void left by the communication shortcomings of both national public institutions and international organizations such as the EU and NATO. A lack of strategic communication regarding EU and NATO activities in the region is utilized to spread disinformation about these institutions and promote Kremlin and Chinese propaganda. The continued presence of the EU and NATO and their fervent backing of both development and reforms in the region are necessary. But these measures must also be accompanied by effective communication to limit the maneuvering space and foreclose opportunities for malign actors.

2

More communication about the functions and activities of the EU and NATO

The Central European and Western Balkan publics generally lack knowledge about the EU and NATO including their different functions and the activities they are involved in. This ignorance extends to the role/power of member states within these organizations. Assumption that people know how these institutions function should

not be taken for granted. To address these gaps, the active engagement of societies in EU decision-making processes and EU-led debates should be fostered. The integration of these principles into school curricula represents a potential focal point. A similar emphasis should be placed on raising awareness about the role of NATO in both military and non-military areas and its investments and added value to member state armies.

3

Localized PR and strategic communication

The diversity of beliefs among different societal groups within the analyzed countries makes a one-size-fits-all approach to communication and awareness-raising inadequate. Western institutions and countries should rather adopt a more localized approach – this starts with using language and terminology that people can understand. Governments should also, where feasible, seek support from domestic public institutions, local influencers and other stakeholders. While trust in national governments is exceedingly low across the region, local public administrations still enjoy relatively robust support and trust. If Western countries/institutions want to reach the hearts and minds of people, therefore, it is paramount that they

share information and personal stories related to their impact in various regions.

4

Enhance situational awareness among civil servants

The majority of analyzed countries suffer from low situational awareness stemming from a narrow perception of security threats, a deficient understanding of the security environment, a lack of well-developed structures enabling the horizontal and vertical exchange of information and the absence of adequate monitoring capacities. Satisfactory situational awareness is a cornerstone of resilience building, effective whole-of-government policies and strategic foresight. Western countries should share know-how and best practices on developing these capabilities and measures and make trainings available to civil servants in the region. Peer-to-peer exchange of information and trainings will cultivate important regional and international interpersonal contact. This is particularly pertinent given that civil servants tend to be more open to accepting information and advice from their foreign counterparts than from, for example, researchers or people from the think tank community who are often targets of intensive smear campaigns in the region.

5

Encourage open communication about hybrid threats posed by Russia & China

Both a significant segment of political leadership and society more broadly across Central Europe and the Western Balkans lack understanding about Russian influence operations. This problem is even more acute with respect to China. A total of 46% of respondents in CEE have indeed “never heard of” and/or “do not know” who the Chinese president is.¹⁸ People in the region also generally hold very limited knowledge about current events in Russia or China including human rights violations. This ignorance poses a significant vulnerability exploited by both actors. The domestic policies and foreign activities, including malign influence operations, of Moscow and Beijing need to become part of public debate in Central Europe. Responding to this deficit, notably, entails raising awareness about already ongoing malign activities in the region and sharing experiences on how to prevent and counter them.

6

Develop sustainable finance models and make quality journalism available in local languages free of charge

The creation of quality content and good investigative journalism comes not without costs and

access to it often necessitates getting past paywalls. Yet Central Europeans have generally not yet become accustomed to paying for information. Media outlets that provide free content (e.g. the Serbian version of Sputnik), consequently, have become important regional hubs of information with their content amplified by a number of small (local) media outlets. Developing models based on delivering content from international news agencies free of charge, especially in countries where governments exert stronger control over the media, will enhance the spectrum of information available and balance out one-sided perspectives of global events currently presented.

7

Support independent quality media and civil society

In countries experiencing state capture of public administration and the press, independent media outlets and civil society organizations often serve as the sole source of constructive criticism of governments. They also play a fundamental role in calling for reforms/policies aimed at increasing transparency and the situational awareness and resilience of society. These institutions, however, are frequently targeted by intensive smear campaigns. And they face numerous financial and administrative barriers that considerably hinder their work. The sustained support of quality media and civil society organizations, therefore, can

enhance societal resilience and encourage democratic debate in many countries.

8

Limit the capacities of social media platforms to amplify hate and disinformation content

Social media platforms are an important and influential space for malign propaganda and disinformation that undermine democratic processes and principles in the region. While social media companies have taken some steps to increase transparency and curb inauthentic behavior, a significant lack of operational transparency and an inability of the platforms to enforce their own rules of conduct and policies remains a problem – this is particularly pressing in smaller markets like those found in Central Europe and the Western Balkans. Oversight and regulation of social media platforms could significantly improve the information landscape in the region. Strategies should include an emphasis on the demonetization of disinformation. The search for [transatlantic](#) solutions in internet governance will foster the development of a global democratic online space as a counterbalance to the dystopian Chinese model.

9

Remind societies of their connections to the West

The Kremlin has nurtured historical revisionism and self-reflection in Central European and Western Balkan countries. This process has been bolstered by Russia's repeated deployment of historical propaganda to exert its "interpretation" of numerous historical events and victories. Through strategic communication efforts, it is important, therefore, to continue rearticulating the achievements of Western countries in the region, the historical ties between countries and the role Western institutions/countries played in the liberation or self-recognition of these nations.

10

Develop funding schemes beyond geographical areas

The vulnerabilities assessment underlines that a geographical-oriented approach to the region is generally outdated - Central European countries are taking diverging paths resulting in different vulnerabilities. An assessment of vulnerabilities of Western European countries was beyond the scope of the project though. The funding schemes should reflect these developments, nonetheless, in the region and be based on larger scale assessments that can identify commonalities across Europe and allow for more topical projects including both East and West.

→ Good practices

Within the research period, the team identified several best practices which could be utilized in other countries to improve resilience across the region.

1

Regular update of security strategies

In Romania, the national defense strategy is updated at the beginning of each presidential term and presented to parliament within six months.¹⁹ Broader adoption of this practice in the region could help prevent irregular and lengthy updates of strategies that include outdated definitions and understandings of security challenges.

2

Open communication of intelligence services

Intelligence agencies in some countries (e.g. Czechia) have adopted, where plausible and appropriate dependent on the respective issue, open and transparent communication with citizens. This approach helps build public trust in security institutions.

3

Empowering security authorities to debunk disinformation and conduct strategic communication

Security institutions rank among the most trusted public institutions across the region. It would, consequently, be beneficial to put these institutions front and center in communicating issues of strategic importance. The Slovak Police, for example, has established a Facebook profile, called *Hoaxes and fakes – Police SR*²⁰, where the institution debunks prominent hoaxes spread online, including COVID-19 related information, using humor and naming and shaming techniques. The profile has attracted 121k followers (growing nearly 100% since the beginning of the pandemic).

4

Manual on countering foreign influence for universities

Charles University in the Czech Republic requested the Center for Terrorism and Hybrid Threats to develop a manual on countering foreign influence at the university

sector. The manual explains why the academic sphere is a potential target for influence operations and recommends resilience-building measures.²¹

5

Action Plans integrating timetables, to-do lists and cross-sectoral impact

Whereas security and defense/military strategies put forward a strategic outlook from the vantage of a particular country, action plans enable state administrations to address issues from a pragmatic perspective and facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation. North Macedonia, for example, adopted an Action Plan for Countering Disinformation and Czechia developed one on Countering Hybrid Threats. To optimize effectiveness, however, it is important to always include specific to-dos and deadlines for all relevant institutions - not all Action Plans we identified in the research, notably, contained these features.

6

Manifestos declaring the foreign policy orientation of countries

Slovakia, three times over the past five years, has witnessed its three highest ranked public officials – the President, the Speaker of the Parliament and the Prime Minister – jointly sign a declaration purporting that the country is strongly committed to maintaining and nurturing its relations with the EU and NATO. Although not legally binding, the declarations symbolically bind officials to refrain from using the EU and NATO as scapegoats for their own failures. And in 1995 in Romania, key political parties signed the so-called Snagov consensus, which articulated the country’s EU and NATO membership as the primary goal for the country. The parties signing the declaration have maintained their support for the Euro-Atlantic community ever since.

7

List of professional media outlets based on impartial criteria and assessment

In North Macedonia, a non-governmental Council of Media Ethics in the country, serving as an association of organizations and media upholding the principle of ethics and professional standards in journalism. The members decided to develop a list of professional media outlets based on criteria of professionalism

and ethics. “White lists” of media based on transparent criteria and independent board could serve as an important source of information for both civil society and users when promoting or searching for reliable content. In Slovakia, a reverse approach of creating a “black list” was established in a project konspiratori.sk by a group of experts and communication specialists to help businesses exclude problematic outlets, often spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, from their online advertising.

8

Leading state representatives communicating the importance of digital skills

In Slovakia, President Zuzana Čaputová launched the social media video series *Think with the Head of the State*²² in which she and leading experts on internet governance and disinformation discuss different elements of digital experiences such as the use of social media algorithms. The first video, which generated over 470,000 views on Facebook, boasted a compelling design, clear message and mix of speakers. The initiative, which has generated over 470,000 views on Facebook, serves as an emblematic case on the potential power of strategic communication and awareness-raising.

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13 It is important to note that the term “liberal” has recently gained a negative connotation. 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.

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