RESILIENCE OF EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD & WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES TO THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Working Paper, the second deliverable of REUNIR Work Package 5, aims to understand how resilient the nine Candidate Countries (CC) of the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) are to political threats, as well as the EU's capacity to assist in building resilience in these countries.

All CCs face multiple threats, both in the realm of political instruments and cultural diplomacy, most acutely stemming from Russia, but also to a lesser extent China, Türkiye, the US, and the Gulf countries. CCs present major domestic vulnerabilities to those threats. Ukraine stands as an exception in this regard, as it has overcome many of its vulnerabilities, largely as a consequence of Russian aggression. Nevertheless, WB and EN countries have developed resilience capacities to cope, adapt and bounce back when faced with those threats, often with EU support. CCs have adopted legislative, institutional and political frameworks in response to political interference, though many weaknesses and loopholes remain. Resilience to cultural diplomacy instruments comes from below and draws upon cohesive national identities going beyond ethnolinguistic divisions, as well as trust within society and towards the institutions.

The resilience assessment reveals that whereas some CCs have enhanced their resilience capacities to external political threats in recent years (Ukraine and, to a certain extent, Moldova), others see their resilience severely diminished faced with escalating domestic challenges, notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Georgia. The analysis also highlights the growing role played by civil society in countering those threats, taking over in areas where the state fails.

1. INTRODUCTION

Resilience and resilience building have become core elements of the EU's foreign policy discourse, and more particularly with regard to its relations with neighbouring countries. In the 2016 EU Global Strategy, resilience was defined as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EEAS 2016). It has become a priority objective for the EU to enhance the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) countries' resilience capacities, acknowledging the necessity for a preventive approach to crises (Lange, Nechev & Trauner 2017). In the Joint Communication "Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all" (European Commission 2020a), the EU reiterates its commitments, delineating priority areas for resilience building, seeking to enhance cooperation towards a stronger economy, stronger connectivity, stronger society, and stronger governance in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries (Petrov & Holovko-Havrysheva 2021). The EU's engagement in enhancing resilience is also repeatedly underlined with regard to the Western Balkans.

There are multiple definitions of the rather wide concept of resilience, from the focus on resilience-building of external actors to efforts towards self-reliance and empowerment through transformation and adaptation, to looking at state or societal resilience (Joseph & Juncos 2024, Kurnyshova 2023). Kaunert, Bosse, and Vieira (2023) identify the "many faces of resilience" in EU discourses, highlighting the tension between a societal resilience agenda—focused on bottom-up empowerment, civil society, and democratic transformation—and a more security-oriented approach, particularly in response to autocratic or hybrid regimes. This tension has only deepened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which significantly altered the strategic meaning of resilience, shifting it from a developmental framework associated with democratic transition to a more geopolitical and securitised paradigm.

Resilience, in its more expansive reading, encompasses both state and societal dimensions. While state resilience refers to the ability of formal institutions to adapt and withstand shocks, societal resilience emphasises the agency of individuals, communities, and civil society to reorganise, improvise, and resist in times of crisis (Brandt et al. 2024). This duality is critical, as resilience should not be reduced to institutional robustness alone. As the literature shows, the origin of the resilience concept in ecological systems theory (Holling, 1973) underscores its inherently adaptive, bottom-up, and systemic nature. Resilience involves not just returning to the status quo, but the ability to transform structures, embrace complexity, and sustain social cohesion under pressure. Yet, as Brandt et al. (2024) argue, while resilience has rhetorical appeal as a human-centric and transformative approach, it is often implemented through top-down frameworks, diluting its emancipatory potential. This critique is echoed by Ejdus and Juncos (2018), who advocate for reclaiming a "local turn" in EU resilience governance – one that respects contextual conditions, supports community agency, and enables genuine partnership rather than imposed templates.

Interestingly, some scholars suggest that resilience is not just about absorbing shocks but also about resisting domination – a notion especially pertinent in asymmetric geopolitical contexts like the EaP. Aall and Crocker (2019) frame resilience through three interrelated dimensions: maintaining institutional equilibrium, adaptive reform, and radical change aligned with historical continuity. This framing highlights that resilience is not synonymous with passivity – it entails tactical dexterity, soft power resources, and creative resistance,

even among actors with limited capabilities. Such a reading opens possibilities for rethinking EU-EaP relations, especially in light of the increased agency of eastern societies post-Ukraine war. As Kaunert et al. (2023) note, the conflict has catalysed a shift in European identity and solidarity, drawing EaP societies closer to the EU "Self" and reshaping the contours of enlargement and neighbourhood policy.

In this Working Paper, we use the latest definition of resilience by the European Commission, namely "the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner" (European Commission 2020b, 6). This understanding encompasses the dual nature of resilience and its underlying tension between "bouncing back", meaning recovering and returning to the initial state, and "moving forward" in a transformative sense, emphasising the ability to adapt (Copeland et al. 2020, Lebanidze & Kakabadze 2023, 2).

Our aim is to assess the vulnerabilities and resilience capabilities of the EN and WB countries against the political threats stemming from external actors that were identified in a previous report (Burmester et al. 2025). The resilience to security and socio-economic threats are tackled in other REUNIR Working Papers (Akhvlediani et al. 2025b, Lawrence et al. 2025). Threats are understood as a function of capabilities and intent to exploit vulnerabilities. From this perspective, vulnerabilities are seen as structures that create exposure to specific exogenous shocks (Briguglio 1995, 2003 cited in Akhvlediani et al. 2025), such as weak institutions, restricted media freedom, and socio-economic instability (Burmester et al. 2025). Resilience focuses on the other, positive side of the coin, namely the capacity to cope or overcome the impact of those threats, even when unexpected, by adapting their habits or behaviours, responding to them and bouncing back (Humbert & Joseph 2019, Tocci 2020).

The EU's development of its approach to resilience initially came from linking its humanitarian aid policies with its development policies, thus from predominantly economic and environmental perspectives (Petrov & Holovko-Havrysheva 2021). Nevertheless, it has been extended to the political field, becoming central to the understanding of successful governance (Lebanidze & Kakachia 2023). In the broad array of studies examining the building of political resilience, particularly in the EU's neighbourhood, the emphasis is placed on trust in institutions, the rule of law, the solidity and transparency of governance and institutions at the central and local levels, societal cohesion, and the informational sphere, among other factors (Kurnyshova 2023, Meszaros & Țoca 2020, Petrov & Holovko-Havrysheva 2021). Whereas some have demonstrated the shift in the EU's approach in its external intervention mode towards support for self-empowerment under the banner of resilience building (Natorski 2023), Joseph and Juncos (2024) argue that the EU's approach to resilience in its neighbourhood combines a definition focused on the countries' adaptability and implementation largely based on external resilience building. While many existing studies have examined internal weaknesses and threats, such as the Orthodox Church's impact on societal resilience, or the weakness of civil society in some CCs (Gherasim 2025, Lebanidze & Kakabadze 2023), this Working Paper seeks to shed more light on externally-driven ones.

In a previous REUNIR Working Paper (Burmester et al. 2025), we identified two broad categories of threats from external actors, stemming from Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and the Gulf States. Given recent developments – especially in relation to Ukraine – we also include the US among these actors. These categories are political interference aimed at destabilisation – which encompasses disinformation, electoral interference, support for separatists, pro-Russian political parties and anti-EU governments – and cultural diplomacy for

influence – which is grounded in fostering religious and cultural closeness while promoting discourses and values at odds with European integration. The analysis indicated that Russia poses the most significant threats to the democratisation and EU integration processes, in terms of likelihood and impact, through both political interference and cultural diplomacy, particularly in the EN3, but also in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Threats from other external actors emerge as less intense and primarily rely on cultural diplomacy, which can nonetheless have political effects on CC alignment with the EU and democratic principles. China's growing geopolitical ambition and presence in these regions are particularly noticeable in this regard. Though still at the inception stage, they could have cumulative effects, combined with Russia's disruptive narratives and practices.

Based on these initial threat scans conducted across the various CCs – assessing both the likelihood and impact of these threats materialising – this Working Paper delves into these countries' vulnerabilities. These include the lack of transparency in political and informational spheres, the openness of the media space, low media and information literacy, public distrust in institutions, and political polarisation. Building on this, we examine their associated resilience capabilities existing at the state and societal levels, looking at concrete tools, practices, and institutional or legal frameworks that enhance political and societal resilience to face existing threats. Whereas political interference leads to identifiable risks and thereby concrete tools to control their effects and become, as a side effect, more resilient, cultural diplomacy's impacts develop in the realm of uncertainty, requiring more general resilience building in order to be able to cope with uncertainties.

Finally, we will also outline the EU's available tools at a regional and national level that contribute to the building of resilience capabilities in the WB and EN countries. This will allow us to generate targeted options for new or revised EU policy instruments in further publications, aiming to address the most pressing vulnerabilities, in order to prioritise the most critical areas for resilience building. While also enhancing general resilience in the candidate countries against uncertain futures, this will help avoid the pitfall of a long list of recommendations that may not be feasible. Our analysis relies on the review of government and EU documents, complemented by elite interviews with local actors and stakeholder consultations in the CCs, as part of a dataset compiled in the context of WP6, and secondary data. The findings are presented below, while country profiles regarding vulnerabilities are in annexes.

1.1. Resilience indicators

In order to assess the resilience to political interference, we used the following indicators: the existence of specific legal and institutional frameworks; the efforts of the government and civil society in the informational sphere; transparency in party and campaign financing; and election monitoring. In order to analyse CC resilience in its broader sense, and thereby cover the wider field of uncertainties, we draw on the State Resilience Index, which refers to pillars such as inclusion, social cohesion, state capacity, individual capabilities and civic space. Apart from this set of indicators, we also assess societal resilience by examining social trust, the unity and strength of national identity, the legitimacy of governance actors and the effective design of governance institutions (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023, Stollenwerk et al. 2021).

The final resilience assessment is based on the expert judgment of the authors of the paper. While grounded in qualitative evidence, evaluations may be influenced by individual biases, the availability or interpretation

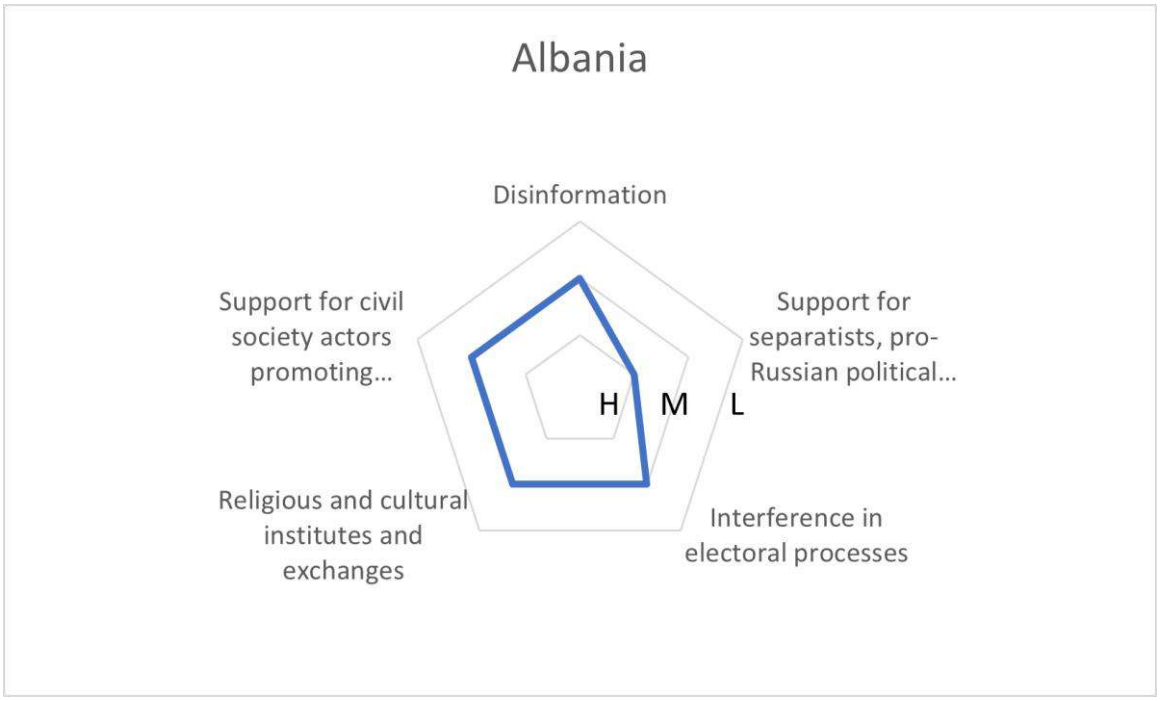
of information. Moreover, the three-point scale – high, medium, low – allows us to qualify the levels of resilience and compare between the CCs. However, it may not fully capture the nuances of resilience levels.

Type of instrument	Instrument	High resilience	Medium resilience	Low resilience
Political interference	Disinformation	- Existence of a (coherent and functioning) legal and institutional framework (e.g., law against disinformation, department or agency against disinformation) - Competencies of National Audio-Visual Council - Fact-checking efforts (by government and/or civil society) - Strategic communication efforts of the government	- Parts of a legal and institutional framework (e.g., law against disinformation, department or agency against disinformation) - Some competencies of National Audio-Visual Council - Some fact-checking efforts (by government and/or civil society) - Some strategic communication efforts of the government	- No legal and institutional framework (e.g., law against disinformation, department or agency against disinformation) - No (competencies of) National Audio-Visual Council - No fact-checking efforts (by government and/or civil society) - No strategic communication efforts of the government
	Support for separatists, pro-Russian political parties, anti-EU governments	-Existence of a coherent legal and institutional framework for reintegration -(Adapted) strategies for reintegration related to the evolving context taking into account the various military, economic, social aspects -Political gestures to de-escalate tensions -Existence of a strong and adaptive legal framework to ensure transparency, with resources and implementation/sanctions capacities	-Parts of a legal and institutional framework for reintegration -Strategies for reintegration, though not addressing the various aspects -Parts of a legal framework for transparency, with many loopholes, lack of resources, implementation and sanctions capacities	-No legal and institutional framework for reintegration -No (adapted) strategies for reintegration related to the evolving context taking into account the various military, economic, social aspects -No political gestures to de-escalate tensions -No legal framework to ensure transparency
	Interference in electoral processes	-Existence of a comprehensive and coherent legal and institutional framework covering the	-Existence of a partial legal and institutional framework covering the design of the electoral	-No legal and institutional framework covering the design of the electoral system, the

		design of the electoral system, the composition of the electoral administration, the mapping of electoral districts and the organisation of voting operations -Existence of a strong legal framework to ensure transparency of, and effective judiciary decisions related to party/campaign financing -Participation of international organisations and international/local watchdog in election monitoring, and effective implementation of their recommendations	system, the composition of the electoral administration, the mapping of electoral districts and the organisation of voting operations -Existence of a legal framework to ensure transparency of party/campaign financing, with loopholes and limited sanctions/judiciary decisions -Participation of international organisations and international/local watchdog in election monitoring, yet partial implementation of their recommendations	composition of the electoral administration, the mapping of electoral districts and the organisation of voting operations -No legal framework to ensure transparency of party/campaign financing -Limited or no participation of international organisations and international/local watchdog in election monitoring
Cultural diplomacy	-Religious and cultural institutes and exchanges -Support for civil society actors promoting traditional values	-Strong horizontal and vertical trust in society, high inclusiveness of coexisting social/ethnic groups -Strong national cohesiveness, existence of a civic identity - Strong level of trust towards and legitimacy of governance actors - Existence of a comprehensive legal framework for minority rights	-Limited level of horizontal and/or vertical trust in society, partial inclusion of certain social/ethnic groups -Existence of internal divisions, limited sense of a common civic identity -Limited trust towards and legitimacy of governance actors - Existence of a partial and/or inefficient legal framework for minority rights	-No horizontal and vertical trust, exclusion of social/ethnic groups -High internal divisions, no sense of a common civic identity - Distrust towards and illegitimacy of governance actors - No legal framework for minority rights - Prevalence of informal and clientelist networks

2. RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT

2.1. Albania



2.1.1. Political interference

Albania does not have specific legislation addressing **disinformation**, nor a legal definition of the term. However, certain Criminal Code provisions indirectly target its effects, criminalising the spread of false information intended to incite public panic, and sanctioning the intentional dissemination of disinformation to obstruct emergency services. The Broadcasting Code also prohibits audiovisual content from being misleading or distorted reporting. Despite this framework, enforcement has raised concerns. Ahead of Albania's parliamentary elections on 11 May 2025, political parties signed a new Code of Conduct on Digital Campaigns, which promotes fair and respectful campaigning by tackling disinformation, hate speech, data misuse, and opaque online political advertising. As a self-regulatory tool, the Code complements existing laws and aims to close legal gaps in digital campaigning. The Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) serves as Albania's independent regulatory body for audio and audiovisual broadcasting services, including digital media. With amendments to the Media Law in 2023, AMA's mandate expanded to include video-sharing platforms, aligning regulation with the EU's Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD). In 2024, AMA launched a cooperation initiative with TikTok, aimed at curbing harmful content. While praised for fostering safer digital spaces, it has also raised concerns over the lack of a formal agreement, legal clarity, and transparency regarding procedures, oversight, and data protection. The initiative illustrates AMA's proactive stance on digital regulation but also highlights the need for clearer legal frameworks, cooperation agreements, responsibilities, and safeguards. There were also concerns following the government's decision to close access to

TikTok, as it was two months prior to the election. This was also seen as a potential way to silence the opposition.

Albania's approach to self-regulation in the media sector relies on voluntary adherence to ethical standards, guided by the 2018 Code of Ethics, which addresses hate speech, sensationalism, and the accuracy of reporting. Its impact remains limited due to voluntary compliance and the lack of enforcement power. To encourage accountability, the Albanian Media Council launched the Alliance for Ethical Media in 2020, involving 23 online outlets that agree to respond to public complaints in accordance with the Code of Ethics. However, the visibility and effectiveness of this mechanism remain a work in progress (Londo, 2021). Fact-checking is led by organisations like *Faktoje.al*, which began by verifying statements from public officials and has since expanded to debunk misinformation (Greene et al., 2021, Londo, 2021).

Regarding **support to secessionists and to pro-Russian, anti-European parties**, Albania is less targeted (Burmester et al. 2025) and demonstrates high resilience potential, being the only WB country to have incorporated provisions on the transparency of political party financing into its Constitution. It has established a solid legal framework to prevent foreign influence over the functioning of its political parties (Kume 2023). Regarding **interference in electoral processes,** in 2020 Albania adopted legislative amendments to its electoral legislation, as well as laws on political party and campaign financing,[1] in line with Council of Europe (CoE) recommendations. However, Albania has faced recurrent problems in conducting democratic elections in full conformity with OSCE and CoE commitments. Due to severe polarisation and a lack of trust among the two main political parties, the electoral law has not been implemented in an impartial and fair manner, with reports about the misuse of state resources by the ruling party and other public figures. While the July 2020 amendments to the Electoral Code sought to depoliticise the Central Election Commission, commissioners remain divided along political parties. The legal framework regulating political financing is robust. Foreign donations to political parties are banned, however, this does not apply to gifts and assistance from foreign political parties and political foundations. In addition, financial reporting obligations are among the most comprehensive in the region; for instance, only Albania published donor unique IDs. Despite this robust framework, concerns have arisen regarding foreign interference in election campaigns, in the form of illegal donations that bypass Albanian legislation. In 2022, the Democratic Party was accused of receiving USD 500 000 from Russia through fictitious companies during the run-up to the 2017 general election. The last parliamentary elections in May 2025 also revealed signs of US interference in Albanian electoral affairs, with Trump's Republican strategist backing the main opposition party to oust the incumbent Prime Minister – while both sides were trying to court Trump's camp. Lack of resources is an important factor accounting for limitations in political finance oversight. Moreover, while sanctions are prescribed by law, they are relatively low.

In sum, while Albania does not face high threats of political interference, it has also developed relatively robust resilience capacities, compared to the WB average. Nevertheless, despite comprehensive frameworks, democratic shortcomings, political polarisation, and legal or material gaps, create openings for foreign exploitation.

[1] Electoral Code and Law on Financing of Political Parties and Electoral Subjects

2.1.2. Cultural diplomacy

Albania has a relatively homogenous ethnic composition, with the main ethnic groups being Albanians (91 %), Greeks (1 %), Egyptians (0.5 %), Romani people (0.4 %) and Bulgarians (0.3 %), according to the 2023 census. This ethno-national homogeneity has contributed to a broad societal consensus on the normative boundaries of citizenship and has facilitated the construction of a civic identity largely uncontested by competing national or ethnic claims, a condition that distinguishes Albania from other, more ethnically fragmented states in the Western Balkans (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024a). However, the formal universality of citizenship rights has not translated into substantive equality for all social groups. Persistent marginalisation of minority populations—particularly Roma communities and members of the LGBT+ community—highlights ongoing disparities in access to social services, employment, and political representation. These exclusions are often rooted less in formal legal discrimination than in patriarchal cultural norms and societal attitudes, contributing to low social cohesion in Albania (Kuçi 2023).

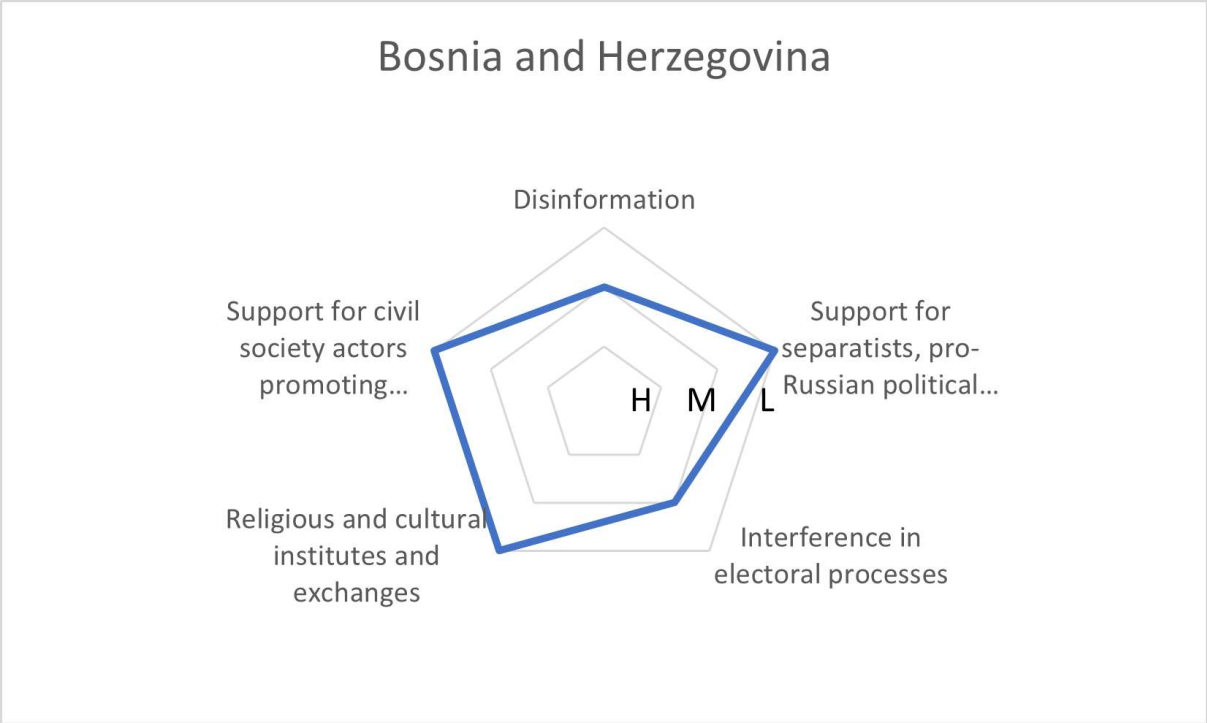
The secular character of the Albanian state enjoys broad public and institutional support, consistent with the legacy of Albania's strict state atheism under communism. The most recent 2023 census revealed that, while 67 % of population declared following a specific religion or faith, a significant proportion of 17 % declared to be a believer, but not to belong to any religion or faith or to be 'atheist'. Official religious organisations representing the country's four major faith communities —Sunni Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox and Bektashi Muslims —also generally endorse the institutional separation of religion and state. Although transnational movements—including some espousing radical ideologies—have sought to promote alternative models of political-religious organisation, such efforts have been largely unsuccessful. The penetration of radical narratives remains confined to marginal actors, with limited societal resonance (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024a). At the same time, Albania's long-standing secular tradition makes the state reluctant to actively support religious groups, opening up opportunities for external interference by state actors such as Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, who are eagerly filling these gaps by building mosques and offering scholarships (Varagur 2019).

Social relations in Albania are based primarily on family and clan affiliations, and trust is largely confined to the private sphere, with limited extension into the public domain (Holland 1998, 65). Interpersonal trust is highest within the nuclear family, which is trusted by an overwhelming majority of Albanians (99.3 %), with levels of trust decreasing as the social circle widens: 69.6 % of respondents to the WVS wave 7 (2017-2022) expressed trust in their neighbours, while only 8.7 % said they trusted people they meet for the first time (EVS/WVS 2022). These social structures reflect Albania's historical continuity as a traditional society, in which personal networks serve as primary mechanisms of support and reciprocity. Political elites have strategically exploited these forms of bonding social capital to reinforce patronage-based networks, thereby embedding political clientelism within pre-existing social cleavages (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024a). These informal structures have played a stabilising role during the country's turbulent post-communist transition, however, while contributing to short-term resilience and localised forms of trust, they simultaneously inhibit the emergence of generalised trust and broader civic engagement. Levels of interpersonal trust have been relatively low and have decreased alarmingly over the past two decades: if in 1998 and 2002, roughly 24 % and 23 % of surveyed Albanians, respectively, believed that most people can be trusted, this percentage had dwindled to only 2.8 % in 2017-2022 (Inglehart et al 2014; EVS/WVS 2022). The widespread societal distrust

in Albania has resulted in weak political culture and entrenched quasi-feudal systems that hindered modernisation. The resulting governance vacuum has been increasingly exploited by organised criminal networks, whose resilience and influence are rooted in exclusive, kinship-based social structures.

While the low levels of trust and the predominance of informal clientelist networks in Albanian society contribute to a highly polarised political environment, its ethnic homogeneity has arguably functioned as a stabilising factor, reducing the risk of ethnopolitical fragmentation that has plagued other post-Yugoslav states. In addition, Albania's secularism has acted as a source of medium resilience in the face of external attempts to expand soft power through cultural diplomacy (i.e. by actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia).

2.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina



2.2.1. Political interference

The legal and institutional framework for regulating **disinformation** in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) does not adequately equip the government with the means to combat disinformation. Legal provisions on defamation and presenting false information exist, but are used to restrict freedom of expression or not used at all (Sokol, 2021, 17). The 2002 Law on Communications governs broadcast media but attempts to amend it failed. Nevertheless, the 2010 Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) has been incorporated into secondary legislation, expanding regulation to include on-demand and online audiovisual services. Transposing the revised 2018 Directive, which will extend regulation to video-sharing platforms, is underway (Kevin & Roksa-Zubcevic, 2023). In April 2023, Sarajevo Canton proposed a draft law treating the internet as a public space and introducing harsh penalties for vaguely defined "fake news," raising concerns over misuse against

free expression.[2] The Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) oversees audiovisual media services and licenses internet service providers (ISPs), who are prohibited from blocking lawful content unless ordered by competent authorities - a measure that has yet to be enacted, revealing a legislative gap with regard to the Digital Services Act (Kevin & Roksa-Zubcevic, 2023). The CRA's lack of full political and financial independence undermines its credibility. Additionally, laws on data protection and access to information are applied in ways that prioritise private over public interest.[3] There are some self-regulation and fact-checking efforts, mainly by the Press and Online Media Council (Sokol, 2021), which receives a growing number of complaints, mainly about online media content. In response, the 2021 amendments to the Code of Ethics strengthened and extended editorial responsibility to all website content. Despite severe challenges, the Council's powers are limited to mediation and non-binding decisions, limiting its effectiveness (Kevin & Roksa-Zubcevic, 2023). There are also some civil society-run fact-checking initiatives (Greene et al., 2021).

Regarding **support for separatists and pro-Russian political parties**, the situation in Republika Srpska (RS) has recently escalated, exposing the apparent difficulties faced by authorities in maintaining control. National authorities rely on two primary mechanisms to combat secessionist threats, namely the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which defines offenses related to violations of the constitutional order and territorial integrity, and the Constitutional Court, which has suspended contested laws taken by the RS leader considered to violate the constitutional order (Kanlić E. & Petrić 2025). Moreover, the international authority in BiH – the High Representative – also plays a role in enforcing the peace settlement and has the power to remove public officials from office and to impose laws. There has been some back-and-forth between these actors — on the one hand, attempts to enforce the authorities' decisions, and on the other, responses aimed at challenging them. This dynamic has resulted in judicial measures against secessionist leaders for violating the constitutional order, including prison sentences and bans from holding public office (Wankiewicz 2025). However, Bosnian and international authorities have faced refusals to comply with verdicts. In sum, although BiH has mechanisms in place to withstand the secessionist threat, they do not appear sufficient if RS authorities a more significant steps towards implementing their separatist agenda.

Regarding **interference in electoral processes**, despite repeated recommendations by the OSCE ODIHR and the CoE's GRECO and Venice Commission, BiH's Election Law is not in line with international standards and best practices for democratic elections. As noted by the EU, the conduct of elections is negatively affected by discriminatory elements of the constitutional system and the lack of integrity of the electoral process. Attempts to reform the law have failed due to an inability to reach agreement in parliament. In March 2024, the Office of the High Representative (OHR) imposed extensive amendments to the Election Law, which generally received ODIHR's agreement. The EU and the Council of Europe called for the reopening of political cross-party negotiations on electoral law. BiH's legal framework on political financing highlights loopholes and can be circumvented. Foreign donations are only partly banned. Regulations forbid donations to political parties through third parties, but not candidates' self-financing and campaign activities by third parties. Regulations governing accountability are equally incomplete. While political parties and independent candidates

[2] European Commission, SWD(2023) 691 final, 8 November 2023.

[3] European Commission, SWD(2023) 691 final, 8 November 2023.

have reporting obligations, reporting forms do not display individual expenses, nor do they reveal the identities of individuals receiving funds from political parties or the companies offering services to these parties. In addition, the Central Election Commission, which is responsible for implementing the law on political party financing, lacks human resources and independence. The framework on political financing thus suffers from a lack of harmonisation and oversight capacities (Hogić 2023, Popović 2022, Transparency International Bosna i Hercegovina 2023), and thereby demonstrates low resilience to foreign meddling in political parties' affairs.

BiH thus demonstrates low resilience to political interference, lacking adequate and adapted frameworks to address its multiple vulnerabilities. Despite European recommendations, progress towards alignment with democratic standards remains stalled, primarily due to deep internal divisions, particularly around Republika Srpska.

2.2.2. Cultural diplomacy

While in principle the Dayton Agreement had the potential to provide the basis for the creation of a civic national identity through its design of inclusive political institutions meant to accommodate the three constituent groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in reality, the constitutional framework has failed to articulate a coherent and unified conception of statehood. Instead, it has institutionalised competing monoethnic and multiethnic narratives, deepened ethnic cleavages and fostered the ethnicisation of politics, thereby undermining the legitimacy and functionality of the state (Tzvetkova and Todorova 2021).

In this vacuum, nationalist political elites have intensified their efforts to challenge the state's integrity, often through ethnically divisive rhetoric and the instrumentalisation of group-based fears. In the context of the country's first census as an independent state in 2013, tensions flared up between, on the one hand, political and religious elites who urged citizens to declare their ethnic affiliation as a matter of national duty, and, on the other hand, civic activists who appealed to the population to resist such pressures and to reject ethnonational and religious categorisations, viewing them as inherently divisive and contrary to democratic pluralism (Harris 2013). The results of the census – challenged by the Republika Srpska statistical office and by Bosnian Serb politicians – pointed to the salience of ethnic politics, with 50 % of BiH's population self-identifying as Bosniak, 31 % as Serb and 15 % as Croat, and only about 3 % as Other. This has incentivised political actors to perpetuate identity-based divisions for electoral gain. Such instrumentalisation of ethnic tension was particularly evident during the 2022 general elections, when political campaigns heavily relied on divisive ethnic rhetoric.

Surveys indicate that top-down nationalist mobilisation has had a significant impact on interethnic trust and identity formation. While Bosniaks support a unified BiH, identification with the state remains markedly lower among Croats and Serbs (Gunnarsson Popović 2020, 6). At the same time, broader segments of the population tend to prioritise socio-economic issues – such as corruption, unemployment, and social justice – over identity-based or secessionist concerns, as evidenced by the 2014 protests.

The political leadership of Republika Srpska (RS) has been at the forefront of the challenge to BiH's integrity, regularly asserting unconstitutional claims to secession and most recently adopting a series of radical decisions undermining BiH's sovereignty and constitutional order.[4] In parallel, Croat nationalist parties have advocated for electoral reforms designed to establish de facto or de jure ethnoterritorial autonomy, including proposals amounting to ethnic gerrymandering. In an effort at a strategic ethno-political alliance aimed at weakening BiH state institutions, Croats also frequently support Serbian secessionist claims (Tepšić and Džuverović 2018, 34).

Electoral structures in BiH further entrench ethnic division. Key state offices—including seats in the tripartite presidency and the House of Peoples—are accessible only to candidates belonging to one of the three "constituent peoples" (Bosniak, Croat, and Serb), and are elected based on rigid territorial-ethnic lines. This institutional design systematically excludes individuals who do not identify with these groups, despite several rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and the BiH Constitutional Court since 2009 declaring such provisions as being discriminatory (Sticks 2011, 259).

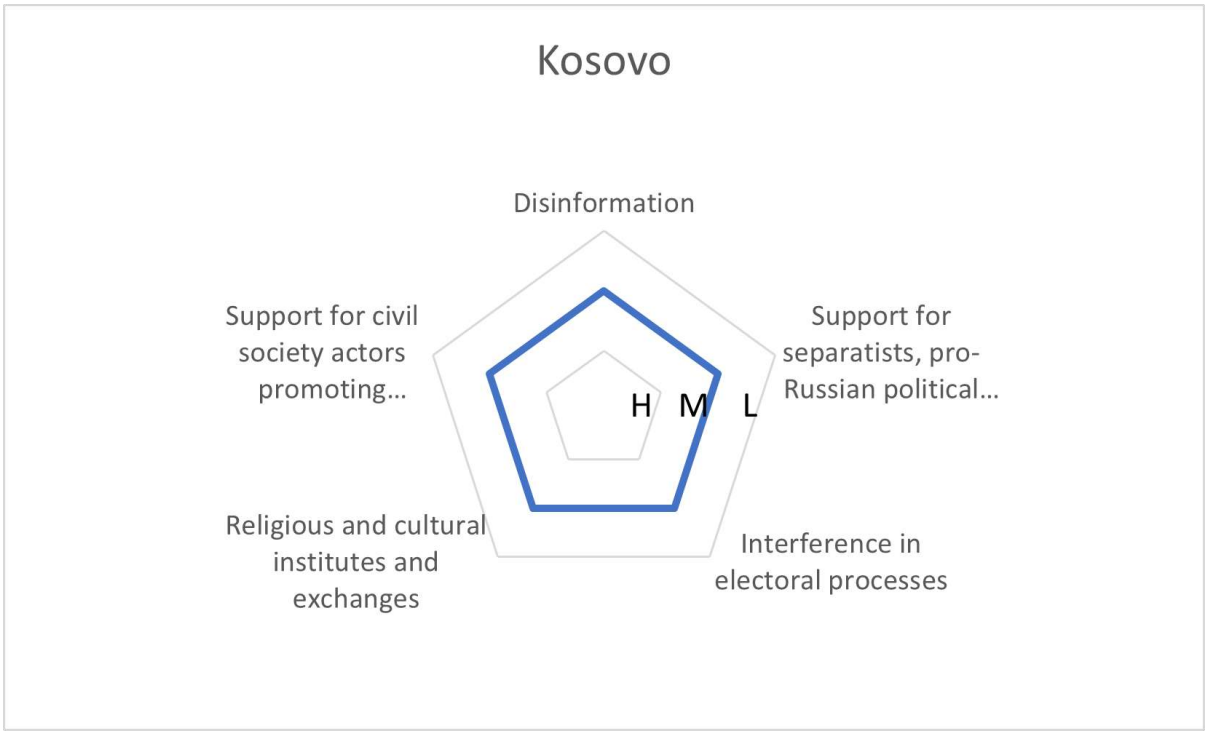
Levels of social trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are markedly low, having been consistently declining over the course of the last three decades. According to the World Values Survey (WVS), trust in others stood at 26.9 % in 1994-98, decreased to 15.6 % in 1999-2004 and plummeted even further in 2017-2022, reaching 9.6 % - a level indicative of pervasive social distrust (Inglehart et al 2014; EVS/WVS 2022). The highest levels of interpersonal trust are within traditional familial structures and generalised social trust beyond kinship networks remains limited. A pattern of declining trust can be observed, the socially further away a certain group is from an individual: the WVS Wave 7 (2017-2022) found that 99 % of respondents trusted their family, 69 % trusted their neighbours, and only 23.4 % trusted people they had met for the first time (EVS/WVS 2022). Particularly striking are the extremely limited levels of trust toward individuals of different ethnic (5.7 %) or religious (5.9 %) backgrounds, as measured by the 2019 European Values Study (EVS) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c). These patterns suggest that BiH remains a society fragmented not only institutionally but also socially, with interethnic mistrust constituting a core structural challenge. Indeed, studies have found that people in ethnically heterogeneous regions in BiH tend to express lower levels of trust than people in ethnically homogenous regions (Håkansson and Sjöholm 2007, 972).

BiH's deeply ingrained internal political divisions along ethnic lines, the deep mistrust between ethnic groups and the weak state structures create a low resilience environment where external influence can be exploited. Religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are deeply intertwined with the country's three dominant ethnonational groups—Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats (Catholics), and Serbs (Orthodox Christians)—and function as both religious authorities and key markers of national identity (see country report in Annex). This has enabled kin-states such as Serbia and Croatia to exert not only cultural influence, but also to involve themselves extensively in Bosnian domestic politics. Muslim-majority external actors such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states have also attempted to promote cultural and religious ties, with some of their

[4] Since March 2025, the leadership of RS has enacted legislation aimed at prohibiting the operations of state-level judicial and law enforcement institutions on the territory of RS; established parallel judicial and prosecutorial councils at the entity level, and amended the RS Criminal Code to enable the prosecution of RS civil servants who continue to serve in institutions at the state level, effectively criminalising participation in central government structures (Kanlić E. & Petrić 2025).

Islamic traditions coming into conflict with the more liberal Bosnian Islamic interpretation (see country report in Annexe).

2.3. Kosovo



2.3.1. Political interference

Kosovo does not have a specific legal framework targeting **disinformation**, but several laws and regulatory instruments indirectly address its effects. The 2008 Law against Defamation and Insults allows individuals to seek redress for reputational harm caused by false or defamatory content. The Independent Media Commission's (IMC) Code of Ethics requires Media Service Providers to report news accurately, correct errors, and distinguish fact from opinion. However, enforcement remains inconsistent. While Kosovo's regulatory approach reflects growing awareness of disinformation threats, the framework remains general, relying on broad media standards rather than tailored legislation (Mehmeti, 2021). Kosovo's media regulation is overseen by two key institutions: the Independent Media Commission (IMC), a statutory body, and the Press Council of Kosovo (PCK), a self-regulatory entity. The IMC licenses broadcasters and enforces standards for audio and audiovisual media, generally aligning with the EU's Audiovisual Media Services Directive. The IMC is also drafting new rules on media ownership to safeguard pluralism and independence. The PCK is focused on online news portals and promotes ethical journalism, but lacks enforcement powers and struggles with financial instability. This limits its capacity to fulfil its mandate effectively. Attempts to formally regulate online media in Kosovo have faced opposition from journalists and civil society, concerned about media freedom and freedom of expression, overregulation and the lack of meaningful consultation with media stakeholders (NDI, 2022).

Kosovo has developed a growing ecosystem of initiatives to combat disinformation and hate speech. Alongside the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and the Ombudsperson Institution, media regulators handle complaints on incitement to hatred and journalistic misconduct. Citizens also have recourse to the judicial system for cases related to hate speech. Civil society organisations play a key role in fact-checking and public awareness (Mehmeti, 2021).

Regarding **support for separatists**, Kosovo is confronted with severe tensions with the Serb minority in Northern Kosovo, backed by Serbia and Russia. Measures taken by the Kosovar government recently have resulted in amplified tensions, with the Serb minority and with Belgrade (e.g., the harmonisation of licence plates requiring EU mediation in 2022, and the imposition of the euro as the sole legal currency in 2024). Moreover, Kosovo's authorities have opposed resistance to the implementation of certain obligations, such as the creation of an Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities, in the framework of the EU-facilitated Pristina-Belgrade dialogue – a tool supposed to lead to the pacification of the situation (Ilazi 2025). The latter appears to be at a standstill, and Kosovo has been under EU sanctions after the escalation in 2022-2023 in Northern Kosovo, attributed to the central government's unilateral actions (Zorić & Deda 2024). There is, at the moment, no visible strategy to de-escalate the situation.

In terms of **interference in electoral processes**, Kosovo has a new electoral legal framework, which it has continued consolidating. The 2023 Law on General Elections further aligned the electoral legal framework with international standards, in line with recommendations from international observers. The law enhances the financial autonomy of the CEC and introduces provisions to ensure media plurality, while removing those that could lead to arbitrary withdrawal of observers' accreditation. The participation of all communities in the election process is an important challenge. During the April 2024 mayoral vote, parties representing Kosovo Serbs in the north boycotted the elections. Some of these parties, such as the Serbian List (Lista Serbe), are regarded as channels of foreign interference and the umbrella organisation orchestrating all forms of electoral interference. The 2025 elections were generally assessed positively by the Council of Europe and the EU election observation mission, despite harsh rhetoric reflecting deep divisions. Another challenge pertains to the politicisation of key institutions by the ruling party. In particular, the CEC became entangled in political disputes and politicised certain technical aspects of the electoral process. Kosovo has laid the legal foundations to regulate political financing, including through the 2023 Law on General Elections, which established an oversight authority for campaign financing. Political parties – but not candidates – have reporting obligations. Resources for political finance oversight are insufficient. The country also lacks strong control and sanctions mechanisms (Ilazi & Elshani 2023). Thus, Kosovo has limited tools to prevent external support, especially to political parties in the Serb-majority areas. Overall, Kosovo demonstrates moderate resilience to political interference, having made strides in electoral reform and disinformation awareness. However, weak enforcement, politicisation of institutions, and unresolved Serb minority tensions – exacerbated by foreign backing – continue to expose the country to external threats.

2.3.2. Cultural diplomacy

Conceived as an inclusive and overarching civic identity, the new Kosovan identity was intended to transcend ethnic and religious divisions, particularly between Albanians and Serbs, who represent 91 % and 3 % of the total population respectively according to the 2024 census. In an effort to establish a national identity devoid of explicit ethno-national references, in the wake of the unilateral declaration of independence of 2008, the

symbols of the Republic of Kosovo were deliberately designed with neutrality in mind. The national anthem consists solely of instrumental music, avoiding any linguistic content that might privilege one ethnic group over another. Similarly, the national flag adopts a blue background reminiscent of the European Union flag, with a gold map of Kosovo at its centre (Maloku et al 2016, 247).

Notwithstanding these official efforts, the fact remains that the Albanian and Serbian Kosovars relate very differently to the new Kosovar state and the national identity it is trying to advance (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024d). On the one hand, the legitimacy of the Kosovar state is broadly accepted by the predominantly ethnic Albanian majority of its population, who perceive the independent republic as the culmination of a protracted national struggle for liberation from Serbian domination. On the other hand, Kosovo Serbs largely reject the legitimacy of the Kosovar state, primarily because recognition of citizenship would imply tacit acceptance of Kosovo's independence—a position at odds with Belgrade's official stance. These diametrically opposite views of Kosovar identity are confirmed by studies exploring Albanian and Serb community levels of identification with their ethnicity and nationality. Albanians for example identify with both their ethnicity and their nationality to the same degree. While Serbs identify with their ethnicity to the same degree as Kosovar Albanians do, they consider Kosovar nationality as a non-identity (Maloku et al 2016, 251-52).

Even though the 2013 Brussels Agreement facilitated the dismantling of Serbia's parallel administrative structures in Kosovo, attitudinal and political resistance among segments of the Serb population persists, complicating efforts toward full societal integration. A parallel education system maintained by the Kosovo Serb community continues to exist, which remains outside the official Kosovo educational framework. This dynamic is further exacerbated by the destabilising involvement of the Serbian government, which continues to exert influence over educational and administrative structures in Serb-majority areas, thereby undermining Kosovo's state-building efforts and prospects for interethnic reconciliation (Ante 2008, 216).

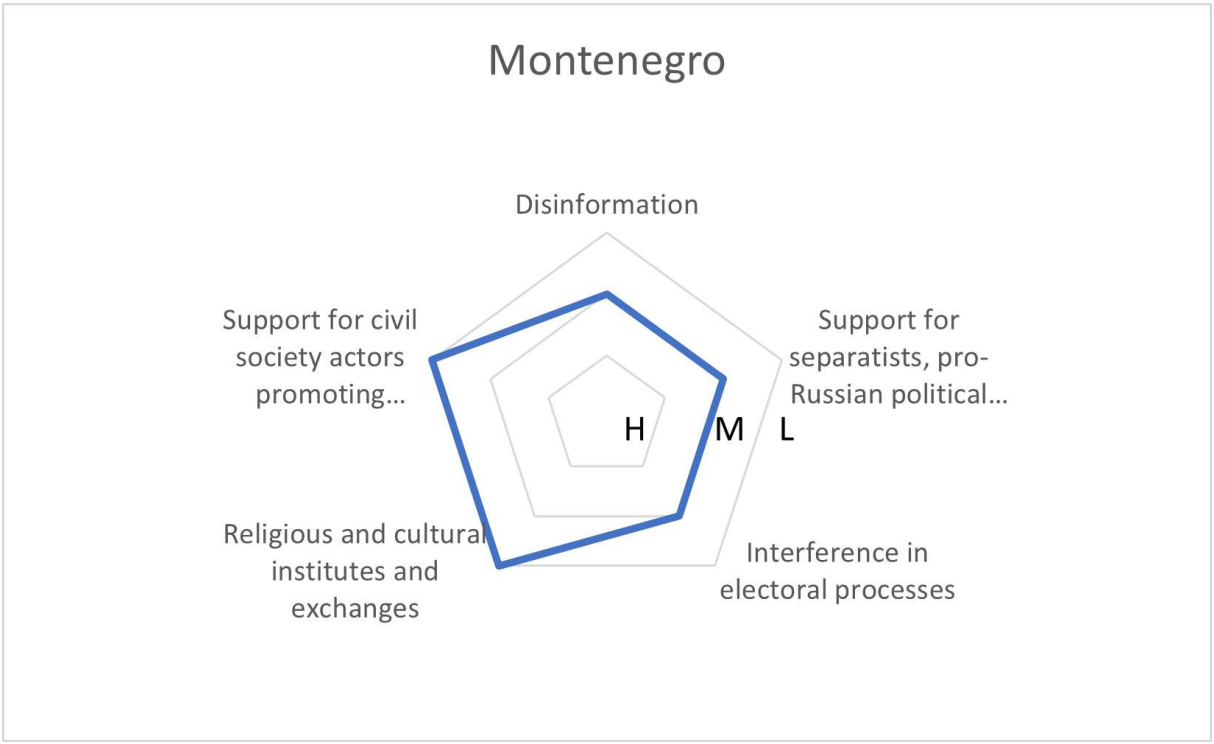
Following the Kosovo conflict and the subsequent dissolution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, social trust decreased markedly, reflecting the deep divisions and trauma resulting from the war. Since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, social trust has gradually improved, though the recovery has been slow and uneven. The family unit remains the cornerstone of social solidarity and social capital in Kosovo, where most people trust their family or friends to a greater extent than state institutions (Ante 2008, 214). This reliance on kinship bonds goes back to the period of socialist Yugoslavia, when close family and community structures were crucial for the survival of Kosovo Albanians, particularly in the face of systemic discrimination. In the 1990s, discrimination by the Serbian regime further catalysed the formation of a robust, multifaceted underground network, largely operating outside formal institutional structures.

Recent research indicates that Kosovo citizens exhibit low levels of trust in fellow citizens, with limited engagement in social organisations and a notable lack of tolerance toward minority groups (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024d). The levels of distrust between the Albanian and Serb communities in Kosovo are significant enough to hamper the resolution of even the simplest of problems at the local community level (Malazogu 2009, 16). Moreover, levels of acceptance of individuals from the other ethnic group are extremely low across most types of social relationships: only 2 % of Serbs and 5 % of Albanians would accept a person from the other ethnic group as a spouse; for neighbours, the figures are 4 % of Serbs and 9 % of Albanians; colleagues – 13 % of Serbs and 11 %; and, significantly, only 17 % of Serbs and 11 % of Albanians are ready to accept members of the other ethnic group as citizens of their country (Simić and Gogić 2024). Even though

the internationally coordinated process of interethnic reconciliation has contributed to some extent to re-building social capital within Kosovo's multiethnic society, considerable challenges persist in fostering inter-ethnic harmony and trust. According to a recent poll, 57.6 % of Serb respondents and 52.6 % of Albanian respondents believe that Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo will never be able to trust each other again.

Ethnic cleavages, and in particular the refusal of the Kosovan Serb minority to accept the legitimacy of the Kosovan state and integrate within its institutional and administrative structures, together with low inter-ethnic trust and national cohesion, raise questions about the country's potential for resilience to external malign influence from Russia. A particular threat is posed by Russia potentially exerting influence indirectly through Serbia, via the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian elites, and Serbian citizens living in Kosovo. Nonetheless, the absence of a large Orthodox community, Russia's own non-recognition of Kosovo – which prevents the establishment of religious and cultural links – and, not least, Kosovan citizens' strong pro-Western sentiments[5], endow the country with medium resilience to Russian influence operations.

2.4. Montenegro



2.4.1. Political interference

Montenegro's regulatory framework lacks a specific legal definition of "fake news", but **disinformation**-related offences are addressed under Article 398 of the Criminal Code, which criminalises "causing panic and disorder". Nonetheless, the framework has attracted criticism for a lack of clear legal definitions and for

[5] According to a 2024 poll by the Kosovo International Republican Institute (IRI), 92 % of Kosovo citizens would vote to join the EU if a referendum were held today AND 94 % would vote to join NATO.

contradicting international standards, with risks of misuse. Meanwhile, broader strategies to address disinformation remain limited. The Montenegro Media Institute proposed a Media Literacy Strategy, but the government incorporated these issues into a more comprehensive Media Strategy (2021–2025). The new Law on Media encourages internal and external self-regulatory bodies. Additionally, oversight of public service media has evolved with the appointment of an ombudsperson at the national public broadcaster RTCG, though transparency concerns persist. Overall, Montenegro's approach still relies on punitive measures, raising concerns about freedom of expression (Bogdanović, 2021). The Agency for Electronic Media (AEM), Montenegro's independent audiovisual media regulator, is responsible for overseeing the provision of broadcasting and on-demand AVM services, ensuring compliance with national legislation and alignment with international and EU standards. Montenegro's self-regulatory landscape remains fragmented and underdeveloped. While the Code of Journalists of Montenegro outlines basic principles for accuracy and prohibits incitement to hatred, there is no mention of disinformation, nor a unified enforcing self-regulatory body. Montenegro lacks a central platform for reporting disinformation and updated or strengthened self-regulatory frameworks. Amid this vacuum, civil society plays a crucial role, such as the fact-checking platform *Raskrinkavanje.me,* flagging false information. Nonetheless, the lack of institutional coordination and comprehensive self-regulation hampers Montenegro's fight against disinformation, relying heavily on individual media ethics and sporadic civil society interventions (Bogdanović, 2021).

Support for pro-Russian political parties by external actors does not appear straightforward, and efforts to combat such structures do not feature prominently on the agenda. Serbia, rather than Russia, is regarded as the most active external actor interfering in politics. Russian support seems to be sought both at the level of opposition and governing parties to serve their political or electoral purposes. In Montenegro, leaders of Serbia-leaning parties use their contacts with Russia, and other external actors, opportunistically as leverage domestically or externally with the West. The government, as well, is considered to be playing a balancing act between its EU path and appeasing stance towards pro-Serbs actors. The lines of polarisation appear to be primarily domestic and ethnic between Serbians and Montenegrins. However, these kinds of practices, together with corruption and state capture tendencies, make Montenegro less resilient to foreign manipulation (Ćalović Marković 2024).

Regarding **interference in electoral processes,** while Montenegro's most recent elections have been assessed as competitive and well-run, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the EU have repeatedly stressed that the legal framework should be comprehensively revised to address a number of gaps and inconsistencies. With the 2020 Law on Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns, Montenegro has adopted a solid framework for regulating political parties' and election campaign financing, although there are important loopholes and areas for improvement. Foreign donations to political parties are prohibited, along with anonymous donations. In addition, donations from natural persons and corporate entities are capped. However, sanctions for non-compliance are regarded as ineffective and non-dissuasive, including by the OSCE. The State Audit Institution (SAI) and the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (APC) lack resources for oversight. Importantly, while the SAI has shown no sign of bias, concerns have been raised about APC's independence and impartiality, including by the EU. Some of APC's decisions indeed allowed foreign influence, as was the case in 2020 for advertisements in media outlets registered in Serbia. In addition, Russia has meddled in Montenegro's politics, including by allegedly providing funding to the Democratic Front through offshore companies.

Montenegro therefore exhibits moderate resilience to political interference. While legal and regulatory frameworks exist and continue to evolve, they remain fragmented and incomplete. In addition to legal loopholes, the country's resilience capacities are weakened by institutional politicisation and persistent polarisation.

2.4.2. Cultural diplomacy

Montenegro is constitutionally defined as a civic state, with its national identity grounded in shared citizenship rather than ethnicity.[6] The framework for minority rights is enshrined in law, offering ethnic minorities various privileges, including reserved parliamentary seats and funding for national councils. However, ethnic and religious identities continue to have polarising effects across the social and political spectrum of the country.

A recent manifestation of the highly politicised nature of national identity in Montenegro is the controversy surrounding the country's latest census. Following the 2020 elections, several political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) called for the removal of questions related to national identity from the census. Despite this, the 2022 Population Census Law retained these questions as optional rather than mandatory, sparking alarm amongst those concerned with the decline in numbers of ethnic Montenegrins and the "Serbianisation" of Montenegro (Đorđević 2021). The results of the census confirmed these fears, showing that 41 % of Montenegro's population identifies as Montenegrin, while roughly 33 % identifies as Serb, a notable shift from the 2011 census, in which 45 % identified as Montenegrin and 29 % as Serb. Of the rest, 9.45 % are Bosniaks, 4.97 % are Albanians, 2.06 % are Russians and 1.63 % are Muslims. Some 2.88 % of the population did not want to declare an ethnicity. Montenegro is the only country in the Western Balkans and in Europe more broadly, in which the majority ethnocultural community accounts for less than 50 % of the population (Bešić 2019, 2 cited in Vuković-Ćalasan 2023, 37).

Serbia has long pursued a strategy of leveraging Serb identity within Montenegro's population as a means of maintaining influence and asserting its presence in a geopolitically fragmented Balkan region. A notable example occurred during Montenegro's 2011 census, when a prominent billboard campaign featured Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic with the slogan "Be what you are", a message widely interpreted as an appeal for Serb self-identification. Since Montenegro's 2006 independence referendum, the legitimacy of the nation-state has been periodically questioned, particularly by political factions that advocated for the preservation of the state union with Serbia. Despite these challenges, none of the major political parties has formally challenged Montenegro's status as an independent state.

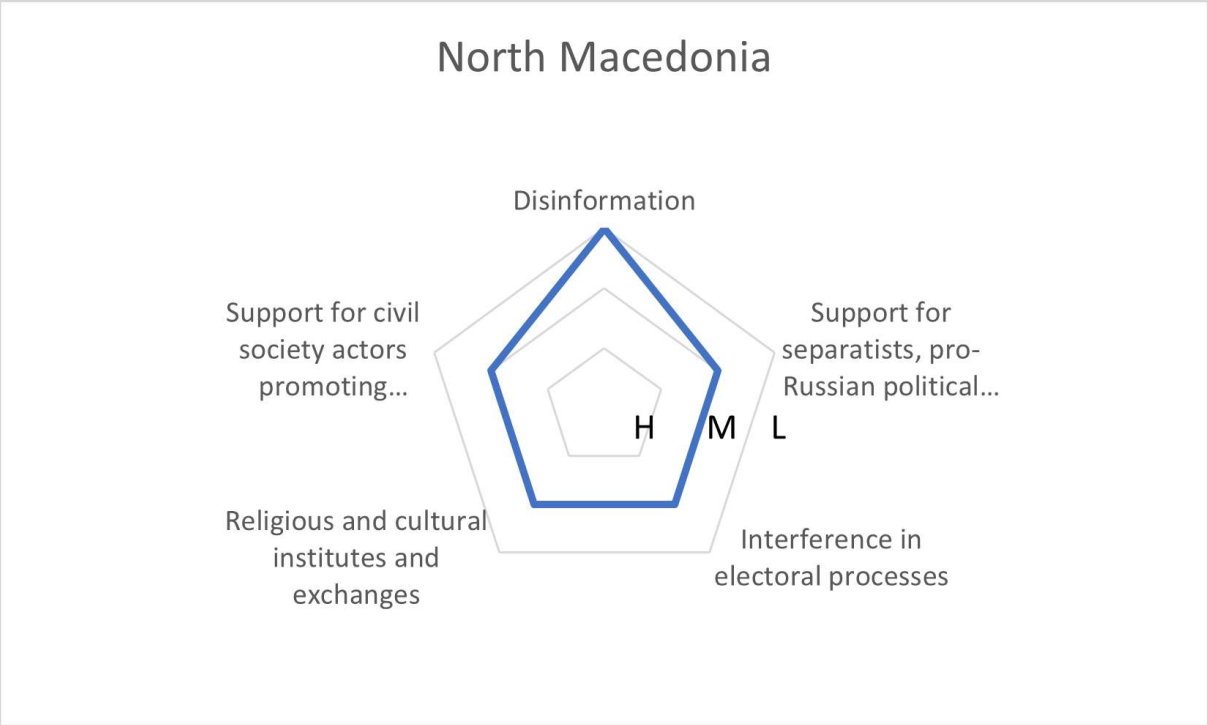
Tensions fuelled by ethnic and national identity divisions were notably reignited in 2019 when the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) introduced a draft Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities, which stipulated that all religious property for which ownership could not be demonstrably proven would be transferred to state ownership. The proposed legislation sparked widespread protests, particularly among adherents of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), and galvanised a broad-based opposition movement that included both religious and nationalist actors. The law was perceived not only as

[6] *Ustav Crne Gore* [Constitution of Montenegro]. (2007). https://www.skupstina.me/ en/the-constitution-of-montenegro

an attack on the Church but as part of a broader project of Montenegrin state-building that sought to diminish Serbian influence in the country (Maksimović 2020). The SOC wields considerable sway over both Serbs and some ethnic Montenegrins, and its close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) enable the latter to exploit ethnic divisions and destabilise Montenegrin society by amplifying church rifts (i.e. between the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the SOC) and providing political support to the SOC (Zweers et al. 2023). Thus, it is clear that Montenegro's ethnic fractures amount to low resilience to external cultural influence.

According to a December 2021 survey by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM), interpersonal trust remains relatively low, with fewer than one-fifth of citizens (19 %) believing that most people can be trusted. In contrast, more than half of respondents (53 %) hold a cautious view of others (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024e). While Montenegro's short history as an independent state does not allow for a longitudinal perspective on trends in interpersonal trust, these findings are consistent with broader regional patterns and reflect growing social polarisation within the country. As in other parts of post-socialist Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Montenegro is socially organised around closed, personal networks, typically based on kinship and long-standing friendship ties. These tightly bounded social circles are perceived as inherently trustworthy and form part of what is regarded as a domain of personal trust standing in stark contrast to the sphere of formal political authority, (Sedlenieks 2013, 178-79). The highest levels of interpersonal trust in Montenegro are reserved for the family (98 %), followed by neighbours (82 %) and acquaintances (78 %), with the least trust expressed in people whom Montenegrins meet for the first time (EVS/WVS 2022). The low levels of generalised social trust and reliance on kinship networks underline the traditional character of Montenegrin society and indicate low resilience to the conservative narratives advanced by both the ROC and the SOC.

2.5. North Macedonia



2.5.1. Political interference

In North Macedonia, **disinformation** is not addressed through formal legislation but is managed through self-regulation and policy proposals. The only official government initiative is the Proposed Plan for Resolute Action against Spreading Disinformation, which outlines non-legislative measures such as strengthening digital security protocols and developing a national media literacy strategy. Elements like government-paid media campaigns and the formation of a working group on disinformation have raised concerns about transparency and press freedom. North Macedonia's approach to disinformation thus remains limited and contentious, emphasising voluntary measures over comprehensive regulation (Nikodinoska, 2021). The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAAMS), the independent regulatory body for audio and audiovisual media, safeguards media pluralism, protects citizens' interests, and ensures transparency in the broadcasting sector. The Agency can also restrict foreign media content when necessary.

North Macedonia's self-regulation includes a structured ethical framework and civil society engagement. The Ethical Code for journalists and *Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in Online Media* address disinformation and place responsibility on media outlets to moderate harmful user comments. Self-regulation is enforced by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM), which reviews complaints and issues public adjudications. Civil society also plays a vital role in identifying and debunking false information. While self-regulation mechanisms have been activated in several prominent cases, challenges persist in ensuring consistent moderation and accountability across the media landscape (Nikodinoska, 2021). As underlined during interviews, there

are grey zones lacking regulation, such as the existence of many portals taking news from other sources – often Serbian – and only translating them into Macedonian.[7]

In North Macedonia, **pro-Russian politicians** have tended to remain on the margins of the political scene, the Left-wing populist party Levica being the most notable one openly in favour of closer relations with Russia and China instead of the West (Víchová 2020). In general, there has been no evidence of actual attempts at interfering in political processes and shaping the opinion by external non-Western actors. However, the political context seems to be changing as VMRO-DPMNE, currently ruling the country, has adopted a rather friendly discourse towards Russia during the 2020 election. Even though there is no evidence of direct financial relations between them, as the ruling party is seeking to rearticulate its ideological stance less anchored in European liberalism, this opens more room for malign interference to further feed pro-Russian discourses (Vit n.d.). Moreover, the fact that power is highly centralised and personalised makes it easier to spread such trends, fewer resources being needed to reach a wider audience, thereby diminishing resilience to this threat (Rechica 2023).

Regarding **interference in electoral processes**, whereas the 2024 presidential and early parliamentary elections were competitive and procedures were largely respected, the legal framework includes a number of gaps and inconsistencies. Campaign rules, access to the media and distribution of State funding are not adequately regulated. For instance, the system of public funding for election campaigns does not adequately respect the principle of equal opportunity. An inter-agency working group was set up by the Ministry of Justice in May 2023 to revise the Electoral Code, and the OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission also delivered recommendations. However, changes were introduced a few weeks ahead of the 2024 elections without sufficient transparency and public consultation, and they did not address some of the above recommendations.

North Macedonia has established solid legal foundations to regulate political financing, with spending limits being introduced for political parties. Foreign, anonymous and cash donations are completely banned, and donations from natural persons and corporate entities are capped. However, these provisions are circumvented. In addition, the legal framework on campaign and political funding does not allow full transparency. While political parties have financial reporting obligations, individual expenditures are not part of the requested information. The system for political finance control highlights important weaknesses. Responsibility for political finance oversight is shared between several institutions, including the State Audit Institution (SAI) and the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA). The former is politically independent and has sufficient resources to fulfil its tasks. This is not the case of the latter, though. Crucially, these institutions have limited sanctioning powers. The ACA, for instance, can only levy fines and refer cases; it cannot suspend public funding or forbid participation in future elections.

North Macedonia's resilience to foreign political interference is thus currently moderate but fragile. Although institutional safeguards exist, the country's heavy reliance on self-regulation, legal gaps, and a shifting political environment weaken its ability to effectively prevent and respond to external influence.

[7] Interview with a Macedonian stakeholder

2.5.2. Cultural diplomacy

The 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) reflects a deliberate balance between civic and group-based models of citizenship, affirming not only the individual rights of citizens but also the collective rights of ethnic communities. It was designed to ensure the inclusion of ethnic minorities through provisions such as the double majority principle, which mandates that laws impacting culture, language, education, and other areas must receive support from the majority of members of parliament representing minority communities. By elevating ethnic communities to the status of foundational pillars of the state, this political order places a dual emphasis on individual citizenship and community identity (Andonovski 2018, 32). In principle, this constitutional arrangement had the potential to foster a more inclusive and pluralistic democracy, where no single ethnicity holds exclusive claims to national identity or political legitimacy, but in practice it has resulted in the institutionalisation of ethnic divisions and the de facto exclusion of individuals not belonging to the main ethnic groups from political participation (Atanasov 2023, 33).

Interethnic relations in North Macedonia remain fragile, often exacerbated by political manipulation, and the country has yet to achieve meaningful reconciliation or post-conflict justice. The lack of accountability for war crimes, with amnesties granted for all national-level war crime cases, has left a lasting legacy of unresolved tensions. One of the most recent violent incidents was the 2015 confrontation between Macedonian Special Police and an armed group allegedly wearing the insignia of the now dismantled Kosovo Liberation Army in the northern ethnically mixed town of Kumanovo, near the Serbian-Kosovan border. While it cannot be ruled out that the violent episode was an ethnically-motivated terrorist attack, there have been suggestions that this was simply another example of the ruling elites using ethnic tensions for political gain (The Guardian, 2015). Tensions again flared briefly in 2022 after the release of the 2021 census results, which showed a narrowing difference between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians compared to the 2002 census, with Albanians accounting for almost a third of Macedonia's population in 2021, compared to a quarter in 2002. This sparked inflammatory rhetoric from far-right political figures and claims that the census had been manipulated (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b).

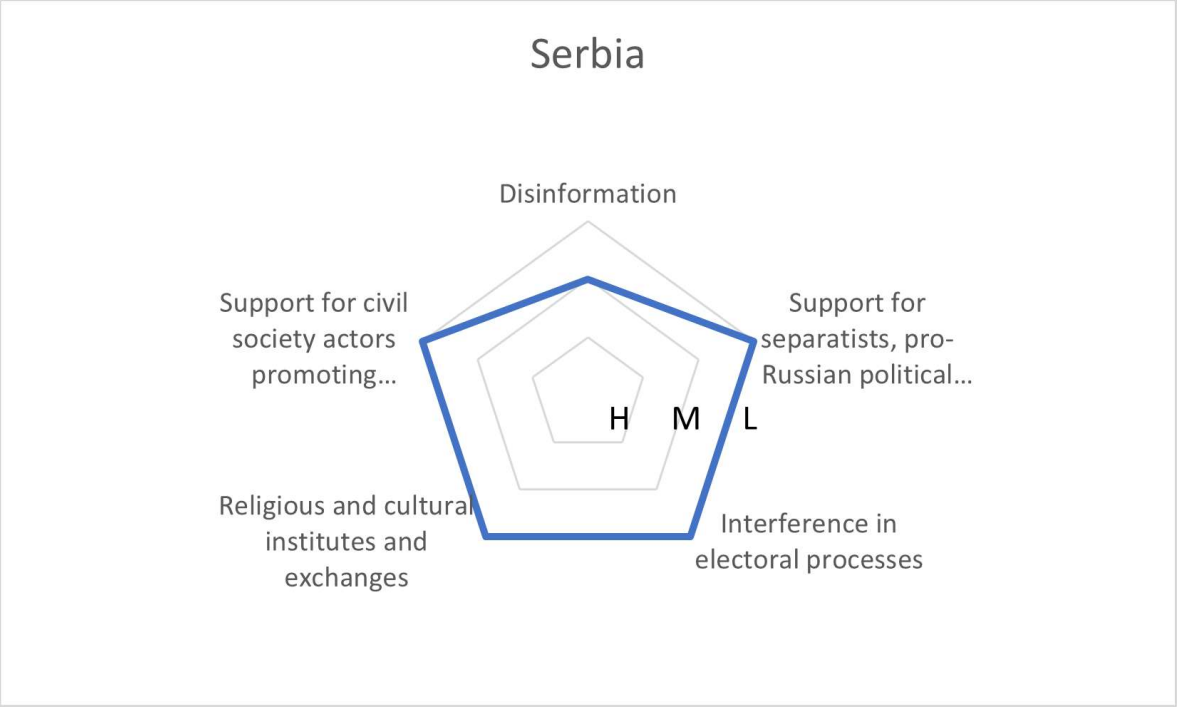
Surveys reveal divergent attitudes across ethnic groups toward foreign relations, with Serbia being considered North Macedonia's "best friend" by the ethnic-Macedonian population (55 %), the United States being viewed most favourably by the ethnic-Albanian population (41 %), and Germany by the remaining ethnic groups (18 %). More worryingly, the EU did not make it as the most preferred international partner by any of the ethnic groups, registering relatively low scores: only 4.9 % of ethnic Macedonians, 11.5 % ethnic-Albanians, and 15.2 % of other ethnicities consider the EU to be the country's biggest friend.

Levels of generalised social trust amongst North Macedonians are relatively low: 13 % of survey participants believed that most people can be trusted in 2001, with only a slight increase to 15 % by 2018-2019 (Inglehart et al 2014a; EVS/WVS 2022). Interpersonal relations, especially within family networks, serve as a primary source of social cohesion, as evidenced by 98 % of respondents to the 7th Wave of the WVS expressing trust in their family (EVS/WVS 2022). At the same time, 77 % of respondents trust their neighbours, and only 27 % say that they trust people they meet for the first time, pointing to the fact that social trust decreases with the growth of social distance. In line with broader patterns observed across post-socialist societies, civic engagement in North Macedonia tends to manifest more in informal social interactions than through formal

organisational membership. Citizens predominantly socialise in private, with limited participation in structured civic or cultural associations. Patronage-based models of social exchange and deference to hierarchical authority structures dominate social interactions, making it difficult for generalised social trust to develop and undermining social cohesion (Markovikj and Damjanovski 2015, 14).

The decline in positive attitudes towards the EU, together with Serbia's growing appeal as North Macedonia's main international and regional partner, has the potential to expose the country to increased Russian influence. Even though North Macedonia has not been exposed to notable attempts at interference through cultural diplomacy by Russia, its weak social cohesion, low social trust and the existence of ethnic and political cleavages place it in a vulnerable position. The one aspect that distinguishes it from Serbia, and which endows it with medium, as opposed to low, resilience, is the existence of the now independent Macedonian Orthodox Church which the Russian Orthodox Church has only recently recognised, and over which it did not have – so far - the type of influence it exerts over the Serbian Orthodox Church.

2.6. Serbia



2.6.1. Political interference

In Serbia, **disinformation** is addressed through constitutional guarantees, media legislation, and criminal law, although the term is not explicitly defined. The Law on Public Information and Media obliges journalists and editors to verify information prior to publication and prohibits false or misleading content that harms reputations unless overriding public interest. The Law on Electronic Media similarly mandates truthful reporting. The Criminal Code criminalises spreading false information that causes public panic or disrupts state operations. These legal frameworks reveal an attempt to balance freedom of expression with accountability,

though inconsistent interpretations and the potential for misuse in limiting media freedom raise concerns (Jovović & Valić Nedeljković, 2021). The government's involvement in spreading disinformation further undermines resilience to this threat. The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) oversees broadcasting and ensures the effective regulation of radio and television broadcasting. Although an independent body, its operations are hindered by insufficient parliamentary support, and its role has been marginalised by the Ministry of Culture and Information. Its formalistic approach with inconsistent enforcement has eroded its credibility and effectiveness as a media regulator (Irion et al., 2017). In Serbia, self-regulation plays a key role in addressing disinformation. Despite existing frameworks, such as the Journalists' Code of Ethics and the 2016 Press Council's Guidelines, practical implementation is inconsistent, though public engagement with this self-regulation is increasing. Serbia's media strategy (2020–2025) aims to strengthen self- and co-regulation by linking public funding to code compliance and oversight (Irion et al., 2017). Civil society also plays a critical role in combating disinformation, with fact-checking and monitoring platforms. These efforts, combined with increased international scrutiny, highlight both progress and persistent challenges of self-regulation in Serbia's complex media landscape (Jovović & Valić Nedeljković, 2021).

In Serbia, there is also a legal framework to combat **foreign interference** in political processes. However, given the deterioration of the rule of law, transparency is very low. The authorities rely on both widespread informal mechanisms and legal tools to maintain their grip on power, restricting the space for opposition parties by lowering the election census, for instance (Mishkova *et al*. 2024). The ruling party and state institutions are known to have within their higher ranks strong supporters of Russia, and the regime has rather welcomed than fought Russian support, especially in the context of the ongoing protests against the government (Stojanović 2025). This favourable stance towards Russia widens the door for external interference, even though it might not be used at the moment, as the government is the one undermining Serbia's overall democratic resilience. Nevertheless, the authorities maintain a sort of balancing game, keeping an acceptable stance for Russia – also as a way to leverage the West – while not rejecting outright the EU path. Credible prospects of actually joining the EU, and the desire not to be left behind Montenegro and Albania, could constitute incentives for renewed democratisation efforts[8].

Regarding **interference in electoral processes**, in recent years, Serbia has undertaken reforms to its electoral legal framework, aiming to enhance transparency and fairness in its democratic processes. Despite these efforts, significant challenges persist, particularly concerning political financing and the equitable conduct of elections. The conduct of elections requires tangible improvement. The presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2022 and 2023, respectively, were marred by numerous irregularities reported by international observers. Campaigns also reflected the blurring of boundaries between state functions and politics, as illustrated by President Vučić's active participation, despite not being a formal candidate. While Serbia's legal framework provides for public funding and regulates private donations, there are still important loopholes, especially regarding political financing. In February 2022, Serbia amended its Law on Financing Political Activities and the Law on Prevention of Corruption, addressing several recommendations from the Venice Commission and ODIHR, such as lowering donation limits. However, key recommendations remain unaddressed, such as the introduction of campaign expenditure limits and the enhancement of oversight mechanisms. The

[8] Interview with a Serb stakeholder

absence of expenditure caps allows for significant disparities in campaign financing, undermining the principle of equal opportunity among political parties. Foreign donations are only partly banned, as the ban does not apply to international political associations when they provide non-financial aid to political parties. The legal framework does not adequately address third-party spending on behalf of electoral contestants, thereby compromising transparency in campaign financing. In addition, it provides for minimal finance reporting obligations and the oversight bodies lack capacity. The lack of stringent enforcement and transparency mechanisms has led to concerns about the misuse of funds and unequal access to resources. The State Election Commission and the Constitutional Court do not always adequately address election-related complaints in a timely and transparent manner. The Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (APC), responsible for monitoring campaign financing, has been criticised for its limited effectiveness and delayed responses to potential violations.

Despite the existence of relatively extensive legal frameworks, Serbia's resilience to foreign political interference is compromised due to weakened rule of law, politicised media, and inconsistent enforcement of legal safeguards. The ruling party's openness to Russian influence, coupled with gaps in political financing oversight and electoral irregularities, further undermines the country's democratic stability and ability to withstand external interference.

2.6.2. Cultural diplomacy

National identity in Serbia is shaped by a complex interplay of historical narratives, ethnic majority status, and post-Yugoslav state-building processes. Rooted in a strong sense of ethnic Serb identity, national consciousness in Serbia has traditionally emphasised cultural continuity, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and historical memory as foundational elements of nationhood (Ristic 2007). The 2006 Constitution defines Serbia as the state of the Serbian people and all its citizens, underscoring the primacy of ethnic Serbs while simultaneously acknowledging the country's multiethnic character. While the formal legal framework includes protections for minorities and promotes inclusive citizenship, there is also a "legal asymmetry in treating members of the same political community", leading scholars to argue that "Serbia has failed to 'outgrow' the form of an ethno-privatised state" (Varga-Kocsicska 2020, 205).

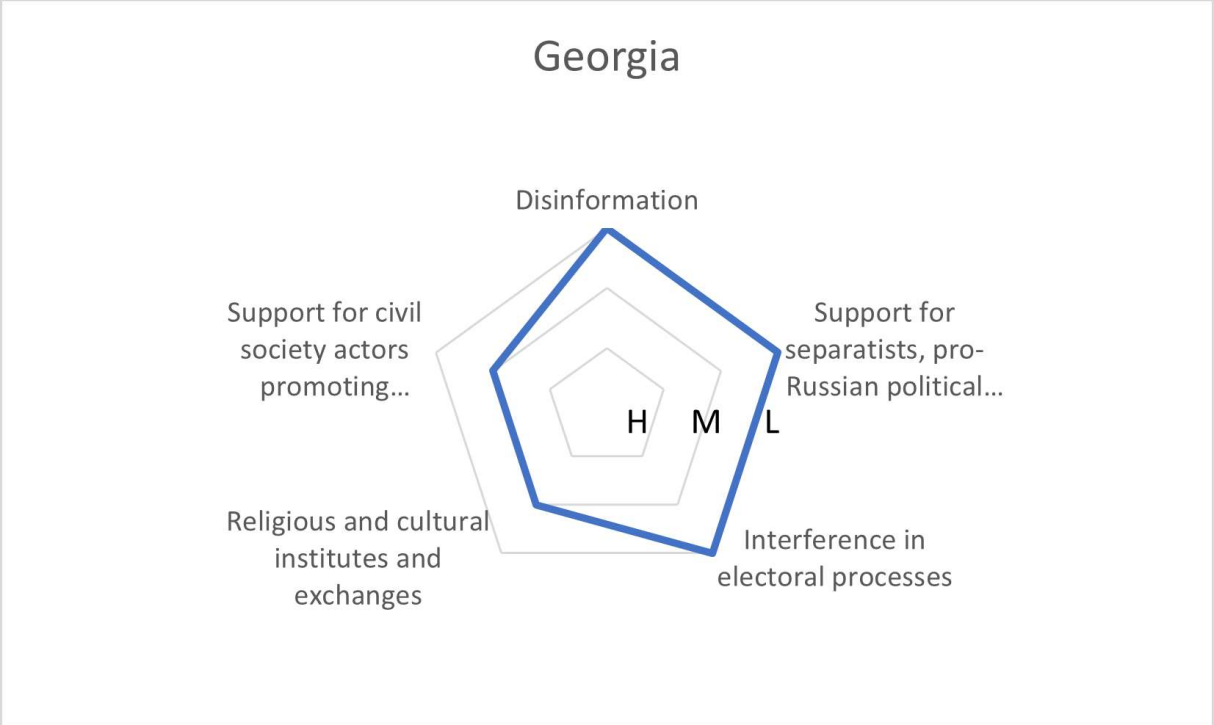
According to the 2022 census (excluding Kosovo), ethnic Serbs constitute approximately 81 % of the population, with the largest minority groups being Hungarians (3 %), Roma (2 %), Bosniaks (2 %) and Albanians (1 %). The Constitution guarantees cultural autonomy, language rights, and political participation for national minorities, and Serbia has established National Minority Councils—currently numbering 23—to represent minority interests in education, media, and cultural affairs (Bašić 2018). However, while the normative structure appears comprehensive, implementation remains uneven. Disparities persist in education, employment, and political representation – especially among Roma, Bosniaks, and Albanians.

The "East vs. West" dichotomy is part of the social and political divisions present in Serbia (Vuksanovic 2020, see country report in Annexe). Serbia's national identity is shaped by two competing ideological frameworks that reflect broader societal and geopolitical cleavages (Ristic 2007, 190). One views Serbia as a Western-oriented, liberal democracy aligned with European values, emphasising individual citizenship, secularism, and civic nationalism – predominantly supported by urban and pro-EU constituencies. The other frames Serbia as a culturally distinct, Orthodox-Slavic nation with traditionalist values, favouring collectivism, national

solidarity, and alignment with Russia. It is this latter identity emphasising ethnic nationalism and scepticism toward Western liberal norms that makes Serbia particularly vulnerable to Russia's attempts at interfering in domestic politics by leveraging the societal influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The low resilience of Serbian civil society and broader citizenry to Russian cultural narratives is reinforced by a sense of shared Slavic and Orthodox "brotherhood" with Russia, and its self-ascribed role as a defender of traditional values and counterbalance to Western liberalism and perceived moral decay.

In addition, low levels of social and political trust contribute to the low resilience of Serbian society to Russian influence. Levels of interpersonal trust in Serbia have declined since the mid-1990s, as indicated by data from Waves 3, 4, 5 and 7 of the World Values Survey. Since 1996, when 28 % of respondents said they trusted most people, the proportion of people expressing general trust in their fellow citizens has significantly decreased: in 2001 this stood at 18 %, fell even further to reach 13 % in 2006 and slightly bounced back to 16 % in 2017 (EVS/WVS 2022). This pervasive mistrust affects the very fabric of interethnic relations. Empirical studies have documented significant social distance between ethnic Serbs and national minorities, with notable discomfort reported in social interactions. While the degree of social distance varies by group, ethnic Albanians and Roma are viewed with the highest levels of distrust, the latter facing the most pronounced social exclusion (Bašić et al 2020). By contrast, and characteristic of societies recovering from conflict and undergoing democratic transitions, the family is seen as the most important element in peoples' lives, with more than 85 % putting family first when asked 'What is important in your life?' (Cvetičanin and Birešev 2012, 140). This is also reflected in the high level of trust in the family (98 %), followed by 65 % of respondents trusting neighbours, 77 % acquaintances and only 20 % people they had met for the first time (EVS/WVS 2022). Illustrative of the focus on closely-knit family bonds is the finding by the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability in 2021 that only 44 % of Serbian citizens believe that people in their local communities are concerned about the challenges facing others (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024f). The focus on family and ethnic co-nationals resonates with the traditional worldview promoted by the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches, the former of which enjoys high levels of institutional trust in Serbia (56 %), in contrast to the government (29 %), the Parliament (18 %) and political parties (12 %) (EVS/WVS 2022).

2.7. Georgia



2.7.1. Political interference

In Georgia, there is no specific legislation directly regulating **disinformation**. Civil society organisations caution that, in a context of limited judicial independence, new laws on disinformation or defamation risk being misused to suppress dissent (Transparency International Georgia, 2019). The Georgian government's response to disinformation is widely seen as ineffective and lacking political will. While some public agencies address disinformation and cybersecurity, their efforts are hampered by poor coordination, limited transparency, and politicised agendas. Georgia lacks a national strategy to counter hybrid threats, key strategic documents are outdated, parliamentary recommendations on disinformation remain unimplemented. While the Information Centre on NATO and the EU engages in strategic communication, its limited scope under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not compensate for broader institutional inaction. Ultimately, Georgia's current approach to disinformation lacks strategic coherence, transparency, and political commitment (Transparency International Georgia, 2019). The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) serves as the primary independent regulatory authority for telecommunications and broadcasting. While historically accused of politicisation and corruption, in recent years, the GNCC's leadership has worked to align its framework with EU standards, as part of Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU.

In the absence of an effective government response, self-regulation and civil society initiatives play a central role in combating disinformation. The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) monitors online disinformation, while the Media Development Foundation (MDF) runs the *Myth Detector* fact-checking platform and media literacy lab, and the Information Integrity Coalition promotes societal resilience against disinformation. International partners have supported these efforts, but the government's involvement in disinformation has undermined their effectiveness. Civil society is dedicated but fragmented, largely

dependent on external donor funding, and suffers from a lack of meaningful collaboration with state institutions (Cole, 2024).

Regarding support to **pro-Russian political parties**, Georgian Dream has pursued a so-called strategy of appeasing and normalising relations with Russia, in the hope of eventually reintegrating South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Kakachia 2024). This stance has, however, never led to any concrete strategic plans and is mostly part of the government's propagandistic narratives that portray their appeasing policy as successful in avoiding a new war and progressing on the return of the occupied territories. While the possibility of constitutional amendments to adapt Georgia's governance and territorial arrangements has been considered, there have been rumours about forming a confederation with the breakaway territories and restoring diplomatic relations with Russia (*ibid*.). GD appears to be promoting a link between the latter and the return of the occupied territories, but actual reintegration remains highly unlikely[9]. Overall, the Georgian government has rather been undermining one factor that could have represented an incentive for return: the benefits of European integration.

In a climate of authoritarianism, existing mechanisms to ensure transparency and protect against external meddling are largely not serving their purpose. Resilience is being undermined by the authorities themselves, who tend to use links to external actors for their own image and to retain power. In Georgia, the government strengthen its autocratic resilience rather than democratic buffers and welcomes foreign support from Russia (in a covert way) and China. Georgia has several legislative acts and structures to regulate and oversee political finances, though they are not always respected and lack the resources to be enforced (Khomasuridze 2022). Moreover, since we face a situation of state capture, the ruling elites can control the legislation and monitoring bodies to their advantage. They have introduced more restrictive measures for opposition parties, for instance, with regard to state funding in elections, creating obstacles to pluralism. In a country where it is the ruling party that carries "pro-Russian" narratives, this greatly undermines democratic resilience. They are also planning to ban opposition parties deemed hostile to the state (Civil Georgia 2025b). Even though there is no actual evidence, it is deemed that Georgian Dream would not have managed to cling to power without Russian support, through the transfer of know-how and abilities[10]. In this context, Georgia's resilience to the instrument of supporting pro-Russian, anti-EU parties is assessed to be low, even though the society remains strongly pro-European and anti-Russian, and keeps protesting against the illegitimate regime.

Regarding **interference in electoral processes**, the Georgian legal framework provides an adequate basis to hold democratic elections, however it has been frequently amended (20 times since 2020), thereby raising concerns about political manipulation by the authorities. While earlier amendments addressed several ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations and were adopted following public consultations, this was not the case for the most recent 2024 amendments, which failed to address key recommendations related to the impartiality of election administration, regulations to prevent misuse of administrative resources, oversight of campaign and campaign finance, media, and electoral dispute resolution. International organisations criticised the environment in which the 2024 parliamentary elections took place, which were marred

[9] Interview GE53.

[10] Interview GE43.

by violations of the secrecy of the vote, vote buying, and violence and intimidation at polling places, among other significant problems. Georgia's legal framework is broadly in line with international standards on political party financing. However, in practice, the ruling party has benefited from substantially larger donations, including from donors receiving large government public procurement contracts, with such visible signs of systemic corruption raising concerns in the 2024 parliamentary elections. The State Audit Office was responsible for overseeing political finance until September 2023. Since this date, oversight functions were transferred to the newly created Anti-Corruption Bureau, with a reported deterioration of transparency standards. Concerns have been raised regarding the Bureau's independence, as it is appointed by the Georgian Prime Minister. Crucially, like the State Audit Office, the Anti-Corruption Bureau faces important limitations in investigating political corruption as it lacks the authority to conduct criminal investigations. This creates major obstacles to the effective oversight of political finance. As noted by Transparency international, access to party declarations has worsened, and there is no information about completed or/and ongoing legal proceedings against political parties or their donors.

Georgia's resilience to foreign political interference is increasingly low due to weak institutional coordination, political inaction, politicised oversight bodies, and a ruling party that undermines democratic safeguards while leveraging external support. Despite strong pro-European public sentiment and active civil society efforts, systemic corruption, legislative manipulation, and government control over election processes significantly erode the country's capacity to resist malign influence.

2.7.2. Cultural diplomacy

Georgia is a multiethnic and multilingual state, with ethnic Georgians comprising approximately 87 % of the population and the largest minority groups including Azerbaijanis (just over 6 %) and Armenians (nearly 5 %), according to the 2014 census. The enduring legacy of Soviet ethno-linguistic policies continues to shape interethnic relations in the country, contributing to the difficulty both ethnic Georgians and minority communities face in seeing themselves as part of a cohesive, inclusive civic nation (Amirejibi & Gabunia 2021). During the Soviet era, state policies in the areas of language, education, and regional development institutionalised ethnic categories and reinforced territorialised ethno-nationalism, contributing to a persistent sense of ethnic entitlement among the Georgian majority. In politically sensitive contexts, this ethnic identification can supersede the constitutional ideal of the *demos*, understood as a collective of equal citizens regardless of ethnic background (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c).

Since Georgia regained independence, ethnic minorities—particularly Azerbaijanis and Armenians—have experienced social exclusion and political underrepresentation, a primary obstacle to minority inclusion being the language barrier. These groups tend to be fluent in their native languages and more comfortable communicating in Russian than in Georgian. Consequently, they often rely on Russian-language media, which is often a conduit for disinformation, particularly concerning European institutions and values. The limited participation of these communities in both national and local governance structures has contributed to their marginalisation and weakened their engagement with Georgia's broader Euro-Atlantic integration agenda (Safoev 2025). This also weakens their attachment to the mainstream conception of Georgia's national identity, which is strongly rooted in a sense of civilisational belonging to Europe and European integration as a political project. Recent polls show declining support for Georgia's EU membership among minority groups,

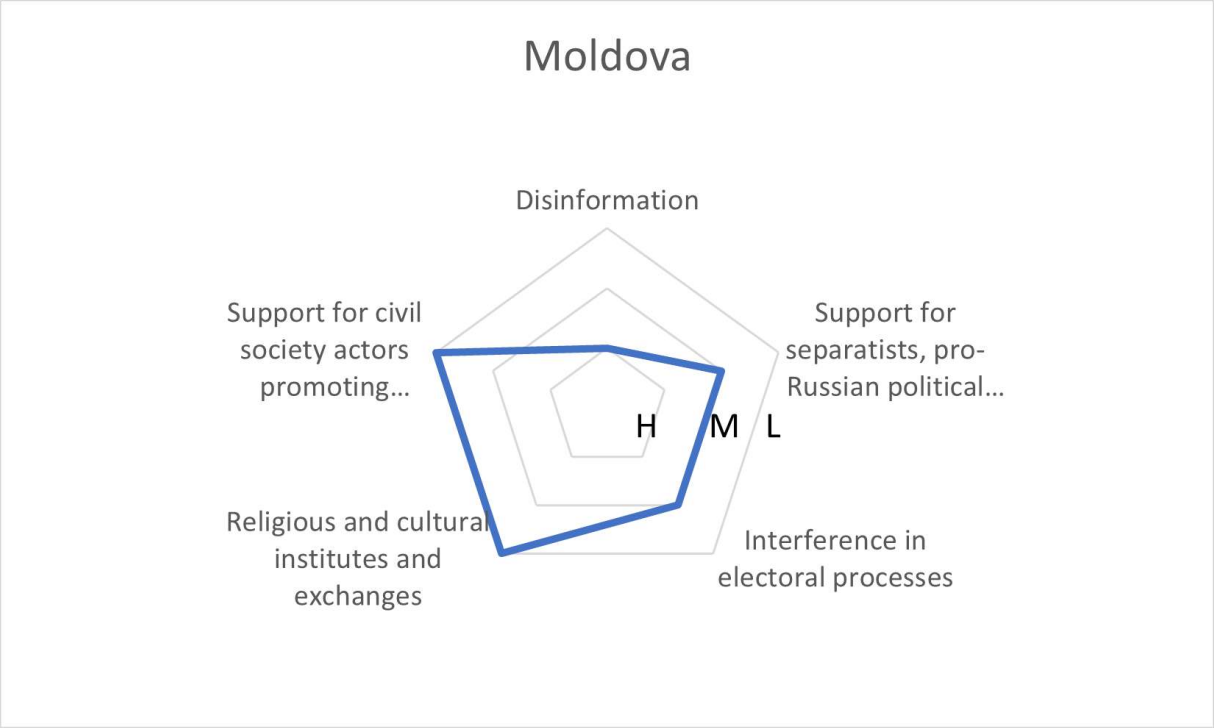
falling from 52 % in 2021 to 43 % in 2023, while at the same time the percentage of ethnic minorities opposing Georgia's accession to the EU in a potential referendum rose from 6 % to 15 %.

Another essential component of Georgian identity is Orthodox Christianity, with the Georgian Orthodox Church being the most trusted institution in the country. However, the religious and pro-European identities often come into conflict, especially over issues such as LGBTQ rights, undermining national cohesion. Moreover, political actors, including the government and external spoilers such as Russia, frequently instrumentalise these sensitive topics to mobilise public opinion against Georgia's pro-European orientation and weaken the pro-European pillar of the country's identity (see country report in annexe).

As with many post-Soviet states, Georgia exhibits a social capital structure marked by high levels of bonding capital and relatively low levels of bridging capital. Social cohesion tends to be concentrated within close-knit networks—such as family, kinship, or localised friendship groups—where interpersonal trust and mutual support are strong. However, trust and cooperative engagement across broader segments of society remain limited, hindering the development of inclusive civic solidarity and cross-group collaboration (Hough 2011, 2). Surveys such as the World Values Survey (WVS) consistently place Georgia among the lowest trust societies globally, at the same time revealing a downward trend in interpersonal trust over the past two decades: while in 1996 and again in 2009 approximately 18 % of respondents said that most people can be trusted, by the following decade the number had halved, with only 9 % agreeing with this statement in 2014 and 2018 (Inglehart et al 2014; EVS/WVS 2022). Social trust is particularly weak across ethnic lines. Intergroup relations continue to be characterized by limited interaction or integration between the Georgian majority and ethnic minorities. WVS data from 2020 shows that while 30 % of Georgians were comfortable with having ethnic minorities as neighbours (up from 22 % in 2010), only 15 % were open to the idea of having an ethnic minority member in their immediate family, suggesting that, although public tolerance may be increasing, private spheres remain resistant to inclusion and barriers to social cohesion persist (Bolkvadze et al 2024, 46).

The dominance of ethnic Georgians, at the expense of political and social exclusion of smaller minorities, and their overwhelming trust in the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), leaves Georgia vulnerable to Russian interference, through the direct influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), with whom the GOC is ideologically aligned (Burmester et al 2025, 16). While these internal divisions certainly weaken important elements of the country's resilience toolbox to Russian influence, Georgia has demonstrated strong public resistance to Russian interference, evidenced by protests and demonstrations against the foreign agent law and strong public support for the country's European integration course. On the other hand, the marginalisation of religious and ethnic minorities has created the space for regional actors such as Türkiye to bolster its cultural presence through the construction and restoration of mosques and the provision of educational programmes.

2.8. Moldova



2.8.1. Political interference

In recent years, Moldova has taken significant steps to build a robust regulatory and institutional framework to combat **disinformation** and protect national information security. These efforts include legislative reforms, institutional restructuring, and enhanced regulatory enforcement. A central development was the 2023 amendment of the Audiovisual Media Services Code, which introduced a formal definition of disinformation. It empowers the Audiovisual Council (AC) to sanction media outlets and prohibits news or political content from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television - effectively excluding Russian content. Additionally, amendments to the Criminal Code penalise incitement to discrimination and the promotion of genocide or crimes against humanity. Moldova also adopted the Law on Information Security and a revised Electoral Code in 2023, enhancing oversight and transparency and enabling restrictions on political parties engaged in illicit funding or disinformation (Cravcenco-Zaharia, 2022). Institutionally, Moldova has bolstered its capacity to counter disinformation by strengthening the Audiovisual Council's and the Security and Information Service's (SIS) authority and powers. However, bodies such as the Coordinating Council on Protecting Information Security and the new Cybersecurity Agency face operational challenges (Culeac, 2024).

A cornerstone of the state's disinformation response is the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, created in 2023. The Centre is responsible for inter-institutional coordination, public

communication, and international cooperation. It is expected to play a key role in Moldova's national security strategy, especially as Russian disinformation is now recognised as a major threat in it[11]. Supported by European partners, the Centre is developing early warning systems and strategic communication capabilities. While these reforms mark a shift toward a proactive stance against disinformation, enforcement actions, including the banning of 12 TV stations and 31 websites, have sparked concerns over transparency and proportionality (Culeac, 2024).

The Press Council of the Republic of Moldova serves as the country's main self-regulatory body for traditional and online media. Guided by the Moldovan Journalists' Code of Ethics, the Council explicitly considers disinformation and manipulative content as harmful to public interest and democratic governance, and includes standards for verifying information. As of September 2022, 145 media institutions across Moldova, including from Gagauzia and the left bank of the Dniester, have endorsed the Code, showing a broad commitment to ethical standards. However, the Press Council lacks legal status and institutional support, limiting its influence. Its decisions are non-binding, though occasionally used in court. Local stakeholders have called for a co-regulatory mechanism to better address digital disinformation (Richter, 2023). CSOs play a vital and increasingly recognised role in combating disinformation, leading fact-checking campaigns and monitoring disinformation on social media. Their advocacy also introduced media literacy as an elective subject in schools, though they argue that such education should be mandatory (Nistor & Stretea, 2025).

Since the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Moldovan government has taken a more proactive stance to reintegrate the **separatist** region of Transnistria. As the war has made Moldova the only route for Transnistria to access the outside world, the government has pushed the reintegration process forward, amending its criminal code on separatism, tightening customs checks, blocking Transnistrian exports to Russia, and removing customs privileges from Transnistrian businesses. On the incentive side, it has also eased procedures for practical reintegration, such as obtaining Moldovan driving licenses, learning Romanian and acquiring Moldovan citizenship (Ibragimova 2024). A reintegration plan was outlined by the government in January 2025, addressing the security aspect, foreseeing the removal of Russian troops and the deployment of international peacekeepers, but also the economic and social ones, by offering access to the same opportunities and benefits available to all Moldovan citizens (EU Today Correspondents 2025). Moldova has also begun considering reintegration's fiscal, social, economic, and legal implications, viewing an opening to include Transnistria in a future Ukraine-Russia peace deal[12]. When Russian gas was cut off in Transnistria, placing it in a precarious situation, Moldova sought EU help to cover energy bills for both of them, creating incentives for return in light of Russia's unreliable support (Pociumban 2025). As for Gagauzia, Chisinau has sought to establish direct dialogue and funding channels with municipal authorities to bypass the regional ones connected to the Kremlin and Ilan Shor, whose party has been declared anti-constitutional. This led to the non-recognition of the affiliated Gutsul as başkan (i.e. governor) of Gagauzia and a member of the Moldovan government. Nevertheless, a clear programme to rebuild positive relations with the autonomous region has yet to be developed[13] (Ibragimova 2024b). In sum, while the war in Ukraine increased the potential likelihood

[11] Interview MD31.

[12] Interview MD23.

[13] Interview MD23.

and impact of the separatist instrument, Moldova seems to be adapting to become more resilient, though its success remains tied to the war's outcome.

Regarding **interference in electoral processes**, Moldova's recent electoral legislation (the 2022 Electoral Code and subsequent amendments) has brought the country closer to international standards, including by strengthening campaign finance regulations and oversight. However, frequent legal changes (eight amendments since the entry into force of the Electoral Code in January 2023, including in July 2024 after the elections were called) affect legal certainty. Importantly, these changes were adopted without cross-party support and public consultation, which is at odds with international standards. Some of these changes – e.g., the possibility to impose electoral bans – were introduced in response to foreign interference and further refined with the incentive of the EU candidate status (Focșa 2023, Marandici 2025). These relate in particular to the illicit financing of the Șor Party, against which Moldovan authorities opened an investigation in 2022 on suspicion of having received undisclosed funds. The Șor Party was subsequently sanctioned for electoral interference in Moldova "on behalf of, or for the benefit of, directly or indirectly, the government of the Russian Federation" and banned in 2023. This demonstrates the enhanced resilience of law enforcement forces, though legal frameworks still evolve more slowly than malign instruments. For instance, banned parties can easily re-emerge as clones and register (Marandici 2025). Despite persistent polarisation, as illustrated by the latest elections, resilience to pro-Russian political parties is growing in Moldovan areas under central authority, but remains significantly weaker in Transnistria and in Gagauzia (Ibragimova 2024b).

Overall, Moldova has made notable progress in strengthening its legal and institutional frameworks to counter foreign interference – including new laws, empowered agencies, increased oversight – as well as in rebuilding ties with separatist regions. Despite persistent vulnerabilities and implementation challenges, the country demonstrates enhanced adaptive capacity and resilience.

2.8.2. Cultural diplomacy

Ethnic minorities—primarily Ukrainians, Russians, and Gagauz—constitute approximately 25 % of Moldova's population. While interethnic relations are generally stable and large-scale ethnic conflict is absent, mutual distrust between ethnic Moldovans and minority communities persists. Rather than manifesting as overt hostility, these tensions are predominantly ideological, rooted in divergent historical narratives and contrasting conceptions of national identity.

Over the course of Moldova's more than 30 years of independence, competing conceptualisations of the Moldovan nation have persisted across public, academic, and political discourse (Baar and Jakubek 2017, 58). Moldovan society has yet to reach a consensus on a shared civic and ethnic identity for the nation-state that resonates across all ethnic and social groups. Society as a whole—majority and minorities alike—remains divided on key issues such as historical interpretation, national symbols, core values, and even the designation of the official language. A segment of the population, particularly Russian-speaking minorities and left-leaning political parties, advocates for "Moldovenism." This perspective emphasises the distinctiveness of Moldovans from Romanians and promotes a multiethnic civic state, where the Russian language holds a special role in interethnic communication. In contrast, many ethnic Moldovans and Moldovan Romanians, along with centre-right and right-wing parties, support an ethnonational model of statehood centred on the titular nation, with Romanian language and culture occupying a dominant position (Simionov 2022,

203). These identity-based cleavages significantly shape public opinion regarding Moldova's geopolitical orientation, particularly the divide between pro-Western and pro-Eastern affiliations. Russian media, which retains substantial influence within the country, alongside political actors with pro-Russian orientations, frequently instrumentalise these divisions to advance specific political agendas. This dynamic exacerbates societal polarisation, reinforcing an East–West dichotomy in Moldovan political discourse (Deen and Zweers 2022). Furthermore, these groups often propagate narratives accusing pro-European forces of attempting to engineer unification with Romania in defiance of popular will. Such rhetoric is particularly aimed at mobilising ethnic minority communities, who generally perceive the prospect of unification with suspicion or opposition. This strategy contributes to the entrenchment of geopolitical and identity-based divisions within Moldovan society.

Moldova's post-Soviet context is marked by a deep-seated scepticism toward collective action, a byproduct of the Soviet system where civic cooperation was co-opted and politicised by the state. Trust in fellow citizens is markedly low and has been consistently declining over the past two decades: if the proportion of those who trusted others was 22 % in 1995, by 2008 it had fallen to 18 % and only 5 % in 2024 (Consiliul pentru Egalitate/Equality Council 2024). Trust is highly conditional and confined to familiar circles in Moldovan society, revealing a pronounced reliance on informal social networks in times of need, likely due to factors such as geographical proximity, accessibility, and a higher perceived reliability compared to formal institutions (Mocanu and Mocanu 2024, 95). While relatives enjoy the highest degree of trust (91 %), only 33 % of respondents express confidence in their neighbours and an overwhelming 92 % of respondents report distrusting individuals they encounter for the first time (Consiliul pentru Egalitate/Equality Council 2024). Although interpersonal trust within extended family networks is high, this kinship-based solidarity has contributed to entrenched nepotism and clientelist practices within the political elite. Political leaders frequently treat access to state resources and positions as the preserve of familial or clan-based networks, reinforcing informal power structures.

Ethnic relations additionally complicate the landscape of social integration. Moldova's major national and ethnic groups often coexist with limited interaction or mutual understanding. For example, the Gagauz minority in the south, which maintains close cultural and political ties to Russia and Türkiye, perceives itself as marginalised by the titular majority and has made minimal efforts toward broader societal integration. This mutual disengagement hinders the development of a cohesive national identity and weakens the state's integrative capacity.

Moldova's resilience to Russia's cultural influence remains relatively low due to deep historical, linguistic, and religious ties that continue to shape public opinion and identity, particularly among Russian-speaking populations. Additionally, regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria remain heavily oriented toward Russia, both culturally and politically, serving as internal anchors for pro-Russian sentiment. The persistence of Soviet-era nostalgia, divided national identity debates (e.g., Moldovan vs. Romanian identity), and socio-economic vulnerabilities have further weakened the state's ability to build cohesive resistance to Russian soft power.

2.9. Ukraine

2.9.1. Political interference

The war launched by Russia against Ukraine in 2014 marked a turning point in Ukraine's approach to information security and disinformation. Kyiv rapidly implemented legal and institutional reforms to protect its sovereignty in the information domain. Early steps included banning Russian TV channels promoting war and ethnic hatred, restricting Russian films glorifying the aggressor, and sanctioning Russian digital platforms like VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Mail.ru – significantly reducing Russia's direct influence (Helmus & Holynska, 2024). The response intensified after 2022. Laws criminalised denial or justification of Russian aggression, prohibited propaganda of Russian militarism, and targeted pro-Russian political and religious institutions, banning parties and religious organisations linked to Russia. The 2022 Law on Media, partially aligned with the EU's Digital Services Act, introduced wartime media regulations and bolstered state informational oversight. The Law on Advertising prohibits unmarked promotion of aggressor states' authorities. Parliament also condemned "russism" as a totalitarian ideology, reinforcing Ukraine's ideological defence (Maksak & Chyzhova, 2024).

Ukraine's main media regulator, the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting, is the independent constitutional body responsible for enforcing national media legislation. Since 2014, it has played a key role in banning Russian channels, and more recently, in supervising media under martial law to ensure alignment with national security objectives. Key institutions for information security include the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security and the Centre for Countering Disinformation, under the Ministry of Culture and the National Security and Defence Council, respectively. The former coordinates state and civil society campaigns targeting domestic and foreign audiences. The latter operates as a state-level

fact-checker with powers to monitor and block malign content. The Office of the President also guides messaging priorities. Parliamentary committees - particularly the Committee on Humanitarian and Information Policy - have shaped essential legal frameworks, but inter-committee coordination remains weak.

While state institutions have taken on a more assertive role in the information domain, media self-regulation and civil society remain integral to Ukraine's resilience. In 2021, Ukraine consolidated its disinformation response through new institutions while fostering cooperation with civil society to leverage its expertise. Fact-checking and media literacy have been at the forefront of civil society's response. IREX's *Learn to Discern* program reached millions through training sessions and public campaigns. NGOs like *StopFake*, the *PR Army*, and *Detector Media* lead real-time debunking, investigative journalism, and public awareness campaigns. Ukrainian civil society organisations have also creatively engaged in international advocacy. The *PR Army*, formed at the outset of the 2022 invasion, became a critical platform connecting eyewitnesses with global media outlets, with a tangible impact in shaping global narratives. Moreover, official channels have adopted bold digital communications strategies using memes, storytelling, and youth-targeted content to strengthen soft power and visibility.

Regarding **support for separatists**, the case of Ukraine is quite specific in that it is no longer about support for separatists but actual occupation by Russia of Ukrainian territories. Ukraine has been fighting in diplomatic fora and on the battlefield for their return. It defends, as part of a future peace deal, the full restoration of its borders as they stood at its independence and has also developed a strategy for their reintegration, taking into account the consequences of occupation while striving to restore full authority over them. Ukraine has proven to be quite resilient overall in its struggle against Russia, in defending the legitimacy of its rights over the occupied territories, and in ensuring national unity, though the outcome of the war appears increasingly uncertain given the changing geopolitical environment and the return of Trump as President of the US. The latter has been pushing for a quick peace settlement of the conflict, with proposals that include Russia retaining control over the occupied territories. Furthermore, beyond laws to ensure transparency and to fight against oligarchic influence in political parties and other political activities, Kyiv also banned pro-Russian groups and activities after the start of the full-scale invasion, among them the Opposition Platform (Fornusek 2023). In general, the context of the war has induced a consolidation of the political elites with limited polarisation and criticism of the leadership (Kurnyshova 2023). Nevertheless, elite corruption and pro-Russian politicians have not fully disappeared. It has been reported that some are still part of the parliament under different brands, claiming a change of heart (genuine or not) and support for the Ukrainian cause. They still however tend to echo Russian narratives and defend certain causes aligned with Russian interests (as, for instance, opposing the banning of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate) (Denisova 2024). Thus, though showing strong resilience to Russian malign interference in the context of the war, vulnerabilities might re-emerge in a post-war context.

Regarding **interference in electoral processes**, Ukraine is a specific case as no elections have been held over the past few years. This is legally impossible during a period of martial law. The last presidential election took place in March-April 2019 (followed by parliamentary elections in July) and the president's term was extended in 2024, based on broad consensus in the country. Unlike some other EN/WB countries, in Ukraine's case external interference does not take the form of pro-Russian parties, as these have been banned, but rather that of criticisms about President Zelenskyy's legitimacy and calls for organising elections before peace is reached. This kind of interference has been particularly visible from the US and President Trump –

largely echoing Moscow's narratives – and risks undermining the existing consensus in Ukraine with regard to the current impossibility of elections (Goncharova 2025). Resilience in this case is achieved through security, rather than political tools.

In sum, Ukraine has demonstrated strong resilience to Russian malign interference, through wartime legal reforms, empowered institutions, and robust civil society mobilisation. However, this resilience is largely shaped by the exceptional conditions of the ongoing war, which foster political unity and limit polarisation. While Russian vectors of interference have been largely curtailed, new forms have emerged, including external political pressure from the United States. Wartime resilience remains high, but its sustainability in a post-war setting remains uncertain.

2.9.2. Cultural diplomacy

Ukraine is a highly diverse country, both ethnically and linguistically. Although recent demographic data is not available, with the last national census having taken place in 2001, at the time roughly 78 % of Ukraine's population identified as ethnic Ukrainians. The second largest ethnic group were Russians, accounting for 17.2 % of the population. Other significantly represented nationalities include Romanians, Belarusians, Crimean Tatars, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Poles, Jews, and Armenians. The divisiveness of language politics and geopolitical orientation—European integration versus alignment with Russia—has been a salient feature of Ukraine's post-independence trajectory. These fundamental divides culminated in the 2004 Orange Revolution and again in 2013–2014 during the Euromaidan uprising, an instance of mass mobilisation that ultimately redefined the trajectory of Ukrainian statehood and identity.

Already in the early 2000s, a civic conception of national identity had begun to take shape, with individuals of Russian and other non-Ukrainian ethnic origins increasingly identifying themselves as Ukrainians. In contrast to the traditional ethnolinguistic conception of nationality, these individuals tended to perceive the Ukrainian nation as a civic community of compatriots, grounded in shared sentiments of belonging, attachment to the land, and loyalty to the state (Polese & Wylegala 2008, 798). The often-heated public debates surrounding the ethnocultural foundations of Ukrainian identity have, to some extent, obscured a growing societal consensus around its primarily civic character. This trend has only consolidated following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Opinion polls consistently demonstrate that citizens increasingly prioritise their civic national identity over regional or local affiliations (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024g). Notably, even predominantly Russian-speaking regions in the southeast exhibited high levels of patriotic engagement, defying long-standing narratives about regional ambivalence toward Ukrainian sovereignty. Evidence of an emerging civic national identity is particularly compelling. A December 2022 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, in collaboration with Volodymyr Kulyk, found that 95 % of respondents identified as Ukrainian—a significant increase from 88 % in 2017. This identification rate now exceeds the percentage of individuals who speak Ukrainian in everyday life, indicating a decoupling of civic identity from linguistic affiliation. Such findings suggest that civic patriotism, rather than ethnolinguistic nationalism, has become the dominant mode of identification across the country.

The full-scale invasion in 2022 has played a critical role in reconfiguring Ukraine's internal cleavages. The long-standing divide concerning attitudes toward Russia has dramatically narrowed. According to polling by the Rating Group, public perception of Russia shifted rapidly: those viewing Russia as a "friendly" or "rather

friendly" country dropped from 12 % in December 2021 to 0 % in 2022, while those perceiving Russia as an enemy surged to 97 %. Similarly, support for EU and NATO membership has consolidated above 80 %, reflecting a strong societal consensus on Ukraine's geopolitical orientation.

In a long-term perspective, despite momentary fluctuations, the levels of social trust in Ukraine have stayed relatively constant and have been on average higher than those of its eastern neighbourhood peers, Moldova and Georgia: in 1996, 29 % of respondents to the World Values Survey believed that most people can be trusted, a proportion which went down by 2006 (24 %) and 2011 (23 %), only to rebound to 28 % by 2020 (Inglehart et al 2014; EVS/WVS 2022). While generalised trust remains moderate, very high trust is reserved for immediate family and close kin, a pattern deeply rooted in traditional Ukrainian social structures. In 2020, 96 % of respondents said that they trusted their family (EVS/WVS 2022). In contrast, considerable distrust persists toward strangers, ethnic outgroups, and individuals with opposing political views, reflecting the resilience of identity-based divisions in the post-Soviet context (Bolkvadze 2024, 50-51).

The ongoing war with Russia has exacerbated existing social divides and generated new fault lines, particularly between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities. The displacement crisis has created socioeconomic tensions, with IDPs often struggling to integrate into new regions, underscoring the uneven development of social capital across regions. Despite these challenges, the wartime period has also generated a civic resurgence characterised by volunteerism, grassroots mobilisation, and high trust in charitable foundations and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Ukraine has demonstrated remarkably high resilience to Russia's cultural influence, particularly in the years following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Despite centuries of Russian political and cultural domination—ranging from imperial Russification policies to Soviet-era suppression of the Ukrainian language—Ukraine has steadily reclaimed and reinforced its national identity. The ongoing conflict has only deepened this resolve, with many Ukrainians embracing their language, history, and traditions more fervently than ever. From renaming streets and removing Soviet monuments to promoting Ukrainian in schools and media, the country is actively resisting cultural assimilation and asserting its sovereignty. While Russian language and culture remain present, especially in parts of the east and south, public support for alignment with Russia has diminished drastically, reflecting a broader societal shift toward European values and national self-assertion.

3. KEY FINDINGS

The WB6 and EN3 display various levels of resilience to the political threats posed by external countries. While some of them have adopted legislation and developed tools to combat disinformation and ensure transparency, they appear uneven in their implementation, resources, and efficiency. There are also frequent concerns that these tools may be used as tools to restrict democratic freedoms rather than protect them. The CCs confronted with secessionist hurdles also demonstrate different capacities to withstand the threat and adapt to the evolving situation, particularly in the EN since the onset of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine. Domestic resilience is highly connected to the EU's contribution and conditionality, particularly with regard to disinformation and interference in electoral processes. Many laws related to transparency have been adopted on the recommendation of the Council of Europe and in response to EU conditionality. Additionally, the EU has engaged with secessionist challenges, as with its mission on the Georgian de facto borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or by bringing support to Transnistria in exchange for the fulfilment of some conditions.

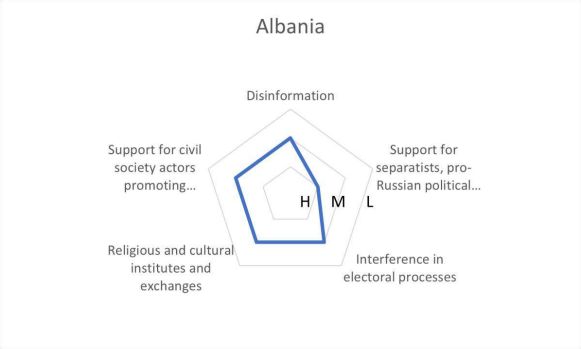
Candidate countries have also endeavoured to align with EU legislation and developed cooperation mechanisms in order to enhance their resilience capacities against those threats. In this regard, it is noticeable that Moldova has become highly resilient to disinformation, which poses a significant threat to the country (Burmester et al. 2025). In recent years, Moldova has recognised Russian disinformation as a major threat and responded by strengthening its regulatory and institutional frameworks. These reforms reflect a proactive shift, aimed at enhancing national information security and building lasting resilience.

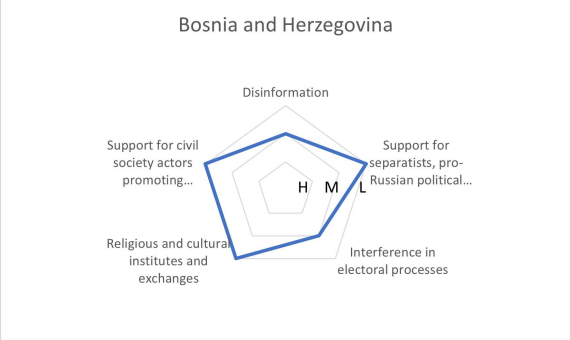
While significant efforts are thus visible in Moldova, the situation remains problematic in several other CCs. Serbia has also formally developed high capacities to face the acute threat of disinformation. Though it has a well-developed legislative framework to combat this threat, which would normally lead to an assessment of highly resilience, deterioration of the rule of law, in which the government itself uses disinformation and reproduces narratives coming from external actors (*ibid*.), undermines the overall resilience of Serbia. This also impacts the country's resilience to Russia's cultural diplomacy, which stands quite low considering the ideological similarities of their Churches around ultra-conservative values and the existing societal and geopolitical cleavages. Additionally, Serbia is also highly exposed to electoral interference and support for pro-Russian, anti-EU parties, against which it has very low resilience. The ruling party itself benefits from the support of external actors and undermines the transparency of political processes to maintain its grip on power.

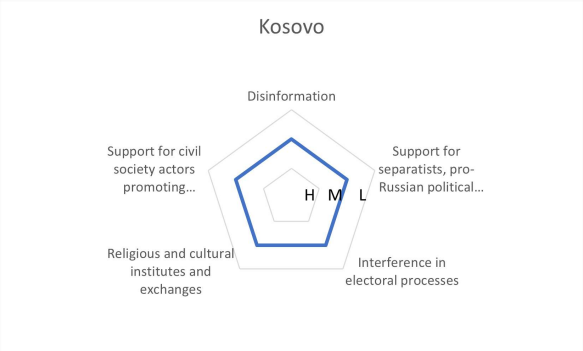
In a similar vein, Georgia demonstrates very limited capacities to cope with political interference, primarily due to the current context of state capture. Highly exposed to all three instruments – disinformation, support to separatists and political parties, and electoral interference – it has developed legislation and mechanisms that are primarily used as tools in the hands of the ruling party to constrain and silence the opposition, civil society, and the media. The ruling party also spreads disinformation that ideologically converges with external actors such as Russia and China. Georgia's current bandwagoning with Russia also prevents the development of a solid strategy to eventually reintegrate breakaway territories adapted to the evolving context in the region. The authorities have instead opted for a strategy of waiting and possibly betting on potential rewards from Russia. However, despite the strong ideological alignment of the ruling party with these external actors, Georgian society has proven to be rather resilient to cultural interferences.

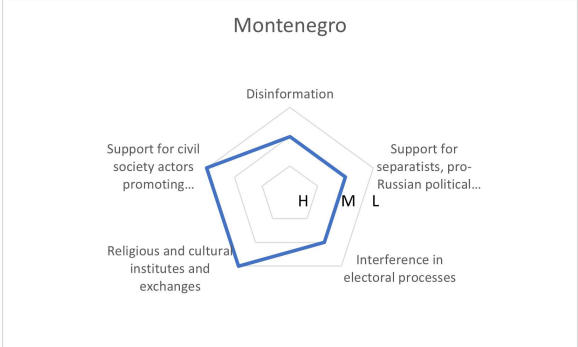
In the WB6, another critical case would be Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country is highly exposed to the threat of disinformation and support for secessionism but only demonstrates mitigated to low capacities to cope with these challenges. The situation in Republika Srpska has been escalating recently, and the mechanisms in place to maintain control appear to be ineffective now that secessionist authorities have taken further steps to implement their agenda. Regarding disinformation, Bosnia and Herzegovina is equipped with an inadequate legal and institutional framework, which neither effectively counters disinformation nor protects against its misuse. Existing laws are often underused or applied in ways that restrict free expression, while the lack of reform and independent oversight further weakens the country's capacity to respond.

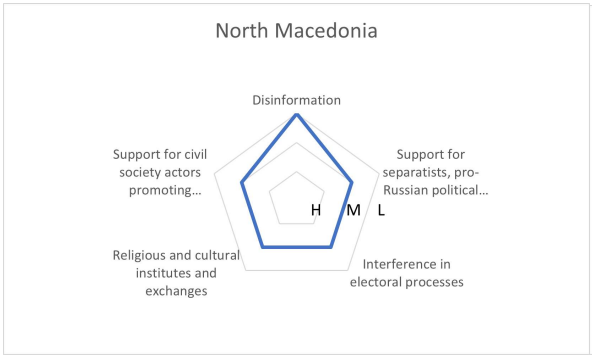
Finally, the case of Ukraine needs to be highlighted given the war context, which creates specific conditions for the development and assessment of the country's resilience. Russian aggression has prompted intensive efforts to reduce Russia's malign influence since 2014, which have expanded since 2022. Ukraine now demonstrates high resilience to disinformation and to the support for pro-Russian political parties. Russian aggression has made the country highly resilient to Russia's cultural diplomacy as well, prompting the assertion of a strong societal consensus around Ukraine's civic national identity and geopolitical orientation. However, being currently under martial law, some usual democratic political processes such as elections have been suspended, and thus Ukraine's resilience in this regard remains unclear. Moreover, the country's strong cohesion and success in reducing malign interference can be influenced by the war, which has fostered unity in the country. The end of the war and return to a "normal" state of affairs might impact the resilience capacities of the country and allow the return of external political interference, as well as internal divisions and distrust.







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Interference in electoral processes
Religious and cultural institutes and exchanges
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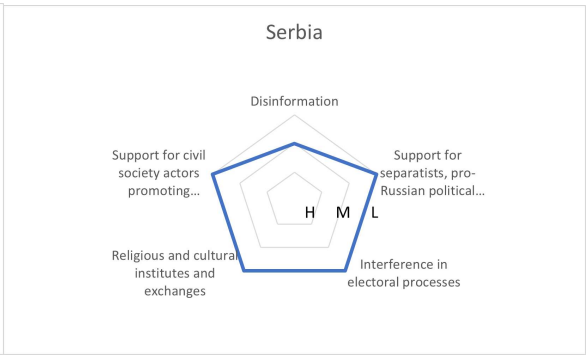
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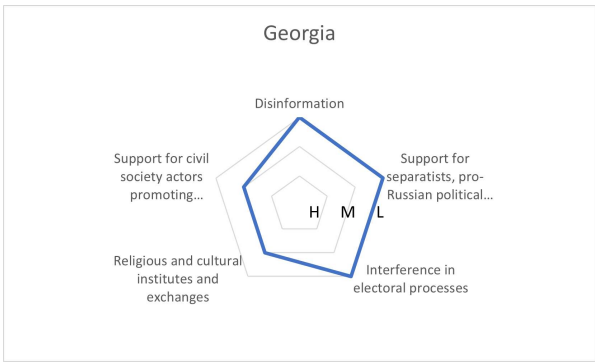
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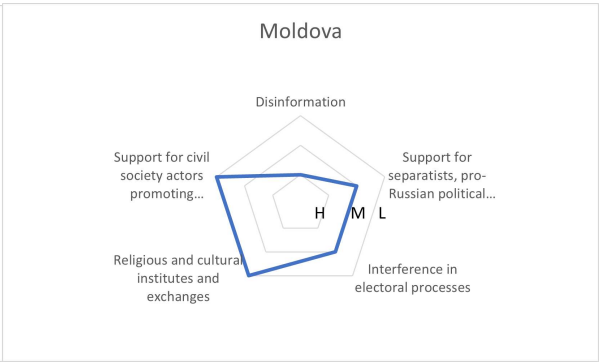
Moldova
Disinformation
Support for separatists, pro-Russian political...
Interference in electoral processes
Religious and cultural institutes and exchanges
Support for civil society actors promoting...
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Ukraine
Disinformation
Support for separatists, pro-Russian political parties, anti-EU...
Religious and cultural institutes and exchanges
Support for civil society actors promoting traditional values
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4. EU CONTRIBUTION

"Democracy must be defended not only at the ballot box but in every domain where its values are challenged—on airwaves, in cyberspace, and through the institutions that shape public trust." (European Commission, 2023)

As geopolitical tensions escalate and authoritarian regimes seek to expand their influence, foreign interference in democratic processes is a growing threat to the EU's enlargement policy (REUNIR D5.1). In light of this, the EU has significantly expanded its democracy-support toolbox. Alongside traditional support mechanisms in the pre-accession sphere, it now employs a range of institutional, financial, legal, and diplomatic tools aimed specifically at strengthening democratic resilience against foreign interference. This section of the report provides a comprehensive overview of these tools, examining their structure, implementation, and rationale. It does not assess their impact, but rather catalogues the evolving EU approach to protecting democracy in its candidate countries, where the stakes have never been higher.

4.1. Traditional Approaches

4.1.1. Conditionality Mechanisms

At the core of the EU's democratic toolbox is the **conditionality** principle enshrined in the 'political' criterion for membership, established in 1993 at Copenhagen, and refined subsequently in European Council conclusions and Commission practice. The basic criterion requires that any country seeking membership must demonstrate the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. Regional cooperation through political dialogue was added for the Western Balkans (cf. 1999 Stability Pact), as well as country-specific conditions arising out of post-conflict peace agreements (cf. Dayton, Ohrid and Belgrade Agreements, UNSCR 1244), e.g., constitutional and institutional reform in Bosnia andHerzegovina, and the full and unequivocal cooperation by, inter alia, Serbia with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

The 'Copenhagen Criteria' operate as both a gateway and a roadmap, compelling candidate countries to enact democratic reforms as prerequisites for further integration. Under the accession process, the EU's *acquis* is divided into 35 chapters. Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) are of particular relevance to democratic resilience. Opening and closing these chapters are contingent upon progress in core democratic areas, such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and freedom of expression. These chapters provide a structured and systematic framework through which the EU monitors, evaluates, and encourages reforms. By tying democratic reforms to concrete steps in the accession process, these chapters serve as levers of change. A central feature of the conditionality framework is the use of benchmarks. These are specific, measurable criteria that candidate countries must meet to proceed in the accession process. In annual reports, the European Commission assesses levels of alignment and highlights areas of concern. These reports are supposed to serve as both a diagnostic and

a motivational tool, providing governments and civil society with an authoritative assessment of democratic standards (Emerson and Blockmans, 2025).

4.1.2. Rule of Law Reports and Peer Review Missions

Although originally designed for Member States, the EU's annual Rule of Law Report is increasingly relevant for CCs. The extension of its methodology to accession states represents a deepening of the EU's monitoring apparatus over democratic standards. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU has utilised such reports to assess the independence of the judiciary and the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures, providing recommendations for reforms necessary for EU integration.

The EU also engages in ad hoc missions and expert evaluations, which produce thematic reports on issues such as electoral integrity, judicial independence, and anti-corruption mechanisms. These reports provide the empirical basis for policy recommendations and funding decisions. EU-led peer review missions offer a collegial but critical form of oversight (cf. 2015 'Priebe report' for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). In these missions, officials from Member States assess democratic institutions and policies in CCs. Their findings contribute to shaping EU recommendations and refining accession strategies.

4.1.3. Technical Assistance and Capacity Building

Twinning is an EU mechanism for institutional cooperation between public administrations in Member States and those in CCs. These programmes facilitate the transfer of know-how in key democratic areas such as public administration reform, anti-corruption strategies, and judicial processes. Through peer-to-peer exchanges and embedded experts, twinning projects enhance the institutional capacity of key democratic organs, including parliaments, ombudsmen, and electoral commissions. As such, the EU contributes to sustainable reform by building internal expertise and administrative professionalism. TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) is a rapid-response tool used to deliver short-term technical assistance in areas like legislative alignment, public policy development, and democratic governance. It operates through workshops, expert missions, and study visits. TAIEX's flexibility and responsiveness make it an essential component of the EU's toolbox, especially in volatile political environments.

4.1.4. Diplomatic Instruments and Socialisation

Regular high-level political dialogue is another cornerstone of the EU's democratic toolbox. This includes (Stabilisation and) Association Councils, structured dialogues, and inter-parliamentary meetings, which serve as fora for discussing democratic reforms and rule-of-law concerns. These dialogues allow the EU to exert normative pressure and provide guidance, often resulting in joint action plans and reform agendas tailored to each candidate country's needs. As such, the EU can also push for CC alignment with CFSP positions (e.g. in Albania and North Macedonia, the EU dialogue has encouraged distancing from Chinese digital infrastructure providers like Huawei). In the case of Georgia, the EU has engaged in political dialogue to address concerns over the "foreign influence" law, which has been criticised for undermining civil society and democratic principles, leading to a freeze on Georgia's EU accession process.

In situations where democracy is under acute threat—due to political crises, state capture, or authoritarian backsliding—the EU can mobilise rapid-response tools. These include:

- **Targeted sanctions** against individuals and entities involved in interference and/or obstructing normal political and democratic processes (e.g. EU restrictive measures adopted against media propagandists and oligarchs for interference in Moldova).
- **Targeted diplomatic missions** to de-escalate tensions (e.g. European Council President Michel's mediation efforts in Georgia).
- **Rule of law missions** (as seen in Kosovo with EULEX).
- **Suspension or recalibration of financial assistance** to signal disapproval or encourage compliance.

These crisis tools are designed not just to manage short-term risks, but to re-establish the foundations of resilient democratic governance. In its long-term approach to reinforcing CC democratic resilience, the EU prioritises anti-corruption frameworks and independent judiciaries to counter elite capture and reduce external actors' leverage over institutions. In Ukraine, the EU supported the establishment of the High Anti-Corruption Court and asset declaration systems, targeting vulnerabilities exploited by Russian oligarchs. In Moldova, the EU co-funded vetting processes for prosecutors and judges under pressure from Russian-aligned political forces. Before the suspension of aid to the government, Georgia's judicial strategy received EU assistance, addressing influence campaigns linked to both Russia and Türkiye. Montenegro's judiciary reform plan was co-designed with EU experts to shield the justice system from political capture, especially from Russia and China.

The EU also promotes the creation and empowerment of independent oversight bodies and whistle-blower protection. Moldova's National Integrity Authority and Ukraine's National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) were built with EU support to prevent foreign-linked elite capture, primarily from Russia. In Albania, the EU helped draft whistle-blower protection laws and supported the role and functioning of SPAK, the special prosecutor's office fighting high-level crime and corruption. Beyond formal mechanisms, the EU also relies on the soft power of Europeanisation, the process by which CCs internalise European norms and values through exposure, interaction, and mutual learning. EU delegations, educational programmes, scholarships (e.g., Erasmus+), and cultural exchanges all contribute to the normative diffusion of democratic principles. Socialisation fosters a pro-EU consensus within political elites and civil society, creating constituencies that are invested in democratic reform not merely as a technical obligation, but as a normative aspiration.

4.2. Innovations in Strategic Communication and Combating FIMI

The EU has increasingly recognised the importance of public perception and strategic communication in reinforcing democratic resilience. Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), populism, and authoritarian narratives pose significant threats to reform trajectories in CCs. In response, the EU employs a range of strategic communication tools:

- Public outreach campaigns to explain the benefits of democratic reforms and EU membership.
- Support for independent media, including grants, training, and infrastructure investment.

- Digital diplomacy and social media engagement to counter disinformation and promote democratic discourse.

These tools help anchor democratic values in public consciousness and empower citizens to become active participants in democratic governance. FIMI, a threat that undermines public trust, distorts electoral processes, and weakens the democratic fabric (REUNIR D5.1). The EU has progressively developed a range of instruments specifically aimed at addressing these challenges in CCs, recognising that resilience to disinformation and malign influence is essential for sustaining democratic reform.

4.2.1. Strategic Documents and EEAS Mandate

In recent years, the EU has expanded its strategic focus on FIMI through initiatives like the *EU Action Plan against Disinformation (*2018), the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (2022), and the *European Democracy Action Plan* (EDAP). While these frameworks initially focused on internal EU vulnerabilities, they have gradually extended to cover the pre-accession regions through dedicated chapters and action points. EDAP, in particular, underscores the need to bolster resilience in countries aspiring to join the EU, including through enhanced support for independent media, digital literacy, and election security. EU Delegations in CCs play a frontline role in identifying and countering FIMI campaigns. They monitor local information ecosystems, work with national governments, local journalists, and civil society to track emerging threats and respond to coordinated disinformation campaigns, often originating from third countries aiming to destabilise democratic processes or discredit EU accession. The delegations are backed-up by StratCom Task Forces, through which the EEAS in Brussels analyses narratives and disinformation trends, shares intelligence, issues public rebuttals, and provides technical assistance on counter-disinformation strategies. The EEAS has created dedicated units for the two regions under investigation: the Western Balkans Task Force and the East StratCom Task Force (covering the countries of the Eastern Partnership) monitor disinformation originating from Russia, China, and other actors. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, EEAS monitoring flagged Russian narratives ahead of the 2022 elections, leading to EU-sponsored counter-campaigns. In Kosovo, Turkish and Gulf state-sponsored outlets have been monitored for promoting anti-secular discourse. In Moldova, the EU coordinated attribution of pro-Kremlin influence campaigns during the 2023 elections. In Georgia, it has supported counter-narrative campaigns via local media and civil society partners to challenge Russian disinformation and growing Chinese media investments. Ukraine remains a primary beneficiary of FIMI monitoring and counteraction efforts via EUAM Ukraine and East StratCom.

4.2.2. Capacity Building and Technical Assistance

Crucially, the EU recognises that a resilient information space depends on strong institutions, an empowered civil society and a vibrant, independent media environment. Via IPA and CSF funding, the EU supports:

- **Regulatory body reform**, promoting standards of transparency in media ownership and digital campaigning (e.g. training for the AVMS tackled the issue of Russian and Turkish media ownership opacity in North Macedonia. In Serbia, the EU has provided technical assistance to media regulators and developed trainings on content attribution and detection in partnership with CSOs, targeting narratives pushed by Russian and Chinese channels).

- **Pluralism in the media landscape** and sustainability of independent outlets (e.g. by establishing a local language editorial independence at RTV FBiH to counter Turkish and Gulf narratives in minority communities).
- **Fact-checking networks** and investigative journalism projects (e.g. the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN). The EU funds civil society watchdogs that monitor foreign interference and advocate for transparency. Through the Civil Society Facility and European Endowment for Democracy (EED), it empowers local actors to document elite capture, media ownership structures, and opaque lobbying.
- **Public awareness and training programmes in media literacy** (e.g. EUvsDisinfo) that empower citizens, civil society actors, journalists, and public officials to recognise manipulation (cf. "Think Before You Share" initiative in North Macedonia, targeting Russian and Turkish disinformation) and counter disinformation.
- **Youth engagement and digital literacy** programmes in schools and universities (e.g. in Moldova, the EU's "Confidence-Building Measures" support youth dialogue platforms across the Dniester River, helping mitigate Russian-backed separatist narratives. Georgia's EU4Youth initiatives strengthen civic engagement in rural areas often targeted by Kremlin propaganda).
- Grassroots groups, women's associations, and minority organisations. This enhances civic participation and creates bottom-up resistance to foreign influence (e.g. Ukraine's civil society hubs promote interethnic dialogue to counter Russian disinformation).
- **Research institutions and think tanks** that analyse malign influence and promote democratic narratives.

By doing so, the EU fosters a 'whole-of-society' approach to resilience, one that equips citizens, journalists, and policymakers alike to defend the democratic sphere against FIMI. In 2023, the EU formalised its "FIMI Toolbox," a coordinated set of instruments to detect, attribute, and respond to foreign manipulation of information. This includes diplomacy, sanctions, public attribution, capacity building, and coordination with NATO.

4.2.3. Cybersecurity and Electoral Infrastructure

The EU also facilitates dialogue between national authorities, civil society, and digital platforms (such as Meta, Google, and –until suspended—with X, formerly Twitter) in CCs to encourage the voluntary adoption of best practices outlined in the EU's Code of Conduct on Disinformation. While enforcement outside EU territory is limited, the EU uses its convening power to encourage alignment with European standards on content moderation, transparency, and platform accountability.

Elections are particularly vulnerable to FIMI, and the EU has responded by incorporating counter-disinformation measures into its electoral support efforts. Through electoral observation missions (often in collaboration with the OSCE), as well as technical assistance to election commissions, the EU helps CCs secure the information space around democratic events. This includes:

- Monitoring online platforms for manipulation and coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

- Advising on the legal frameworks for digital campaigning and political advertising transparency.
- Supporting public awareness campaigns that prepare voters to identify and resist manipulative narratives.

In Montenegro, EU-funded cybersecurity exercises have focused on Russian-origin cyberattack scenarios targeting electoral commissions. In Serbia, EU observers reported on social media manipulation linked to Chinese and Russian actors during parliamentary elections. In Kosovo, the EU supports BIRN Kosovo and the Kosovo Law Institute to monitor political finance and judicial independence, areas vulnerable to Turkish and Gulf state influence. In Ukraine, organisations like CHESNO and OPORA receive EU support for election monitoring and political transparency campaigns, targeting Russian-linked interference. Moldova's Watch-Dog.md investigates political donations and propaganda networks associated with Russia. Georgia's Transparency International chapter documents foreign lobbying and business influence, with a focus on Russian and Chinese-linked economic actors.

4.2.4. Political Party Financing Oversight

Legal Reforms and Monitoring: The EU promotes party financing reform to deter covert donations. For instance, in Kosovo amendments to party finance laws supported by the EU addressed loopholes previously exploited by Turkish-linked entities.

Support is also given to audit and oversight bodies. Georgia's State Audit Office used to receive EU funding to track irregular political financing tied to Russian and Turkish actors. In Serbia, the State Audit Institution receives EU technical assistance to trace Russian and Chinese-linked political donations.

4.2.5. Synergies with International and Regional Actors

The EU often coordinates with other international organisations such as the Council of Europe, OSCE, and UNDP to promote democratic resilience in a coherent and comprehensive manner. For example:

- **Venice Commission opinions** are frequently used to guide legal reforms.
- **OSCE election observation missions** complement EU efforts in promoting electoral integrity.
- **Joint initiatives** on media freedom, anti-corruption, and digital governance enhance the EU's capacity to effect change.

These partnerships allow for burden-sharing, the harmonisation of standards, and the creation of multilateral support networks for democratic governance.

The EU promotes cross-border coordination through regional resilience platforms and foresight mechanisms. This helps anticipate evolving tactics by hostile actors. The EU works closely with regional actors like the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence to promote an aligned, cross-border approach to FIMI, especially in the Western Balkans where regional vulnerabilities (ethnic, linguistic, or historical tensions) can be exploited by foreign actors.

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum hosts an annual disinformation forum with EU backing, focusing on Russian and Chinese information operations. In the Western Balkans, the EU-Western Balkans Media Days

platform facilitates strategy-sharing among journalists, regulators, and civil society, addressing Turkish and Gulf state influence in the media sector. Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo participated in a joint EU-sponsored simulation exercise on FIMI resilience in 2023, coordinated by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, with a focus on hybrid threats from Russia, Türkiye, and the Gulf.

5. CONCLUSION

This Working Paper has outlined the existing tools and capacities for resilience to threats posed by external state actors to the democratisation and EU integration processes in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans. By examining the legislative frameworks, political strategies and other institutional mechanisms, we have highlighted the coping and adaptive capacities of the candidate countries to the instruments of disinformation, support to secessionist and pro-Russian, anti-EU political parties. To assess the resilience to instruments related to cultural diplomacy, such as cultural and religious institutes and exchanges and the support for civil society actors promoting traditional values – which evolve more in the realm of the uncertain – we mostly focused on social trust, national identity cohesion, the legitimacy of governance actors and the effective design of governance institutions.

The analysis reveals some key themes, notably that whereas some CCs have legislative frameworks and tools to combat disinformation and ensure transparency, these often contain many loopholes and are insufficiently developed and adapted to the quickly evolving environment for malign interference. With the help of the EU, some countries have nevertheless visibly adapted to the threatening context in recent years, particularly against the backdrop of Russia's aggression, most notably Ukraine and Moldova, which now demonstrate stronger resilience capacities to political interference. In most CCs, resilience to political interference is also impacted by a lack of openness and transparency in the media space, overconcentration of ownership, as well as limited media literacy, public distrust in the institutions and political polarisation. In contrast, Ukraine has made notable progress in overcoming these vulnerabilities, setting it apart from most other CCs. Widespread lack of social trust beyond the familial circle and acute ethnic divisions in most candidate countries, with the exceptions of Albania and again Ukraine, together with strong reliance on informal and clientelist networks, make them also more vulnerable to cultural diplomacy instruments from external actors – though such influence appears less significant in the WB6. Whereas most struggle to assert a cohesive civic identity, Ukraine stands as an exception, as Russian aggression has visibly allowed the country to unify. Growing trends of centralisation of power in the WB6 and in Georgia tend to reinforce vulnerabilities to external actors and open more space for their interference, as they tend to be rather instrumentalised than combated. The most severe cases of state capture, Serbia and Georgia, both demonstrate low levels of resilience in most respects. However, a more positive development is the increasing engagement of civil society in these matters, with the development of resilience capacities at the grassroots level.

In this context, the EU has at its disposal many tools to assist and support CCs in developing their resilience capacities and is committed to enhancing democratic resilience for itself and its neighbours. However, the EU's contribution also needs to adapt to the quickly evolving contexts, both inside and outside the CCs, to be able to address the emerging and reinforcing challenges in the WB6 and EN3. Further research will propose options for new and revised instruments for the EU aimed at enhancing democratic resilience in the CCs.

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Interviews

Interview GE43, December 2024

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Interview MD31, February 2025

ANNEXE: COUNTRY VULNERABILITY PROFILES

Albania

Albania has not been significantly affected by foreign disinformation campaigns in the traditional sense. However, internal political narratives, especially those driven by the ruling party, present a vulnerability. Strategic lawsuits against journalists, and smear campaigns against civil society create an environment conducive to disinformation and distrust.

Media freedom in Albania is constrained. Journalists frequently face SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), limiting investigative reporting. Political actors, including the Prime Minister, exert pressure on media outlets, and critical voices are often marginalised. The media environment lacks safeguards that would ensure open and pluralistic debate. The government tried to ban TikTok and pass a controversial media law in advance of elections, which shows attempts to interfere with the public media space.

Media ownership remains opaque, with several outlets tied to political and business interests. This lack of transparency undermines editorial independence and weakens the media's role in holding power to account. In the focus group discussion with experts, one of the participants highlighted that there are many businesses including media portals whose ownership is not known[14]. Portals are especially problematic because they do not function under the same level of transparency and regulation as traditional media channels.

Moreover, as in most countries of the Western Balkans, Albania has low levels of media and digital literacy - the country was ranked 38th out of 41 European countries assessed in the European Media Literacy index. This makes citizens vulnerable and susceptible to disinformation and fake news.

Public trust in institutions in Albania is not high as the governing political party, the Socialist Party, exerts high amounts of influence on public institutions at both the local (53 out of 61 municipalities have SP mayors) and central levels. Although the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecution (SPAK) has recently pursued high-profile cases – including the arrest of Tirana Mayor Erion Veliaj, considered a close ally of Prime Minster Edi Rama – protests against SPAK soon followed. These protests, organised in support of Veliaj and backed by the Prime Minister, signalled direct pressure from the executive to the judiciary branch. Thus, political interference – including public support for indicted officials – often undermines the credibility of these processes. Executive overreach, including the Prime Minister stepping into the public debate surrounding an arrested mayor, highlights ongoing institutional fragility.

While Albania is less ethnically polarised than its neighbours, the political landscape is highly centralised. A weak opposition and growing executive power have created structural imbalances. The fact that the main political parties support Euro-Atlantic integration mitigates vulnerability to external actors. However, a strong executive also means that if there were to be external influences, there is not a lot of space for political contention from political parties.

There is thus generally a very strong pro-EU sentiment and consensus in Albania among political parties. While the topic of a Greater Albania is still politically present, it is only used to instrumentalise voters around

[14] Focus group discussion with experts, Tirana, March 2025.

nationalist ideologies and has never been pursued seriously. For instance, the Red and Black alliance, which was a politically nationalist party, never made it to parliament and ceased to exist as a party in 2013, showing that the idea does not hold much political salience in Albania. Nevertheless, Albania's political centralisation and the absence of a credible opposition risk potentially enabling foreign actors to exploit institutional weaknesses.

There is no overt evidence of foreign electoral interference. However, the political dominance of the ruling party, control over the media space, and the use of state resources for political campaigning raise internal concerns about the integrity of electoral processes (Hasa & Gjatolli 2025). The 2025 Albanian parliamentary elections highlighted significant issues in campaign financing transparency. The campaign period was marred by the proliferation of anonymous online profiles and third-party actors disseminating political content without clear attribution. This lack of transparency raised concerns about potential foreign influence and the ethical use of artificial intelligence in political campaigning. Despite existing legal frameworks, enforcement of campaign finance regulations remained weak, allowing for the misuse of public resources and institutional power by the ruling party. International observers noted that these practices undermined the integrity of the electoral process and emphasised the need for comprehensive electoral reform to ensure a level playing field for all political actors (Likmeta 2025).

Public trust in Albania's democratic institutions is weakening as Prime Minister Edi Rama consolidates power. The dominance of the Socialist Party, declining voter turnout – particularly among youth – and a fragmented opposition have fostered public apathy and scepticism. While high support for the Socialist Party in the May 2025 elections suggests electoral strength, reports of voter cajoling and irregularities have cast doubt on the legitimacy of the outcome. Meanwhile, civil society faces increasing resistance, and public discourse is growing more polarised amid the centralisation of power. Limited media independence has further eroded confidence in political accountability, although the recent active role of SPAK has offered some hope for a more accountable political environment (Akers 2025).

On the cultural side, Albania is religiously tolerant and open. After the fall of communism and the reinstatement of religion in the public space, all religious groups have enjoyed freedom to operate. Due to the influence of communism on religion (Albania was constitutionally an atheist country), tolerance between religions has also generally translated into more harmonious coexistence, with very low influence on polarising national identity. However, Albania has had a number of foreign fighters going to fight for Daesh, which shows a vulnerability of the Albanian Muslim community towards external influences. Albania, like other countries of the region, developed a robust anti-terrorism legislation as a result. Moreover, Albania's national identity is relatively cohesive, and no significant identitarian divisions have been exploited by foreign actors. However, economic disparities and youth emigration remain long-term vulnerabilities and are one of the main concerns among interlocutors. There is no overt or systematic support from foreign actors for traditionalist civil society actors. However, Türkiye's religious outreach and UAE-backed business ventures may reinforce conservative social norms in specific communities. In addition, one of the main political parties, the Democratic Party, adopted anti-LGBTQ+ narratives from the US political debates in the run-up to the elections of 11 May 2025. This has made activists worry about increases in hate speech and the rise of anti-gender movements as seen elsewhere in the region (Janowska & Pulchaska 2024). However, no ideological convergence with non-Western powers has been observed at the state level. Albania's foreign policy remains strongly pro-Western, although economic ties with actors like the UAE may create long-term dependencies.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by considerable vulnerabilities due to its highly polarised and fragile political framework and the legacy of the war, which still looms over Bosnian politics. The polarisation of the country divides it along ethnonational lines. As a result, external actors find different partners in Bosnia, but often due to the same vulnerabilities that impact that country overall.

There is no shared space for political competition or media information in the country. This results in multiple political spaces that appeal largely to one ethnonational group and draw on different external actors for support or provide points of access for different actors.

Disinformation is significant in Bosnia and has a long history in the country, dating back to the wars of the 1990s to justify war crimes, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. The international presence at the end of the war sought to reduce disinformation, and to support a variety of media reforms. These were often short-term and disregarded local sources of resilience. The international media protectorate never fully tackled the prevalence of distinct ethnonationalist media spaces that created vulnerabilities for disinformation and media-based polarisation. Today, there are few independent media in Bosnia and most media outlets cater to one ethnonationalist community. Furthermore, media outlets and political parties are closely linked, and parties wield considerable influence over the content of most public and private media. In particular, in the Serb-dominated entity Republika Srpska (RS), the influence of the ruling Party of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and the external influence of Serbia are particularly strong. Serbian-owned and produced media are predominant in RS and promote anti-Western positions and are of low quality. They support the governments of RS and Serbia itself, giving little space to political pluralism and promoting hate speech, historical revisionism, and denial. Some disinformation originates from Russia, especially through Sputnik, which is disseminated through local media. RT and Russia24 are available in the RS, but their influence due to their English language programming is less significant than pro-Russian narratives promoted by local media, which follow the pro-Russian line of the RS government.

In the Federation, Croatian media are often linked and influenced by Croatia, whereas media predominantly targeting the Bosniak population lack such a clear external actor. Al Jazeera Balkans is an important news channel in Bosnia. It mostly reports professionally, even if it has blind spots and biases due to its ownership structure with the government of Qatar. Overall, media literacy is low, and 62 % of Bosnian citizens do not trust or tend not to trust the media, according to the 2024 Balkan Barometer. Bosnia has the highest rate of citizens believing that the media are not free of political influences (76 %). High political polarisation, both along ethnonationalist lines and along party lines, contributes to disinformation and distrust.

Political polarisation and ethnonationalist mobilisation have led to entrenched ethnonationalist and secessionist political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina. SNSD and its president, Milorad Dodik, have dominated the RS for 20 years. Dodik has held a variety of positions and remains the strongman of the entity. He and his party advocate separatism and the independence of the RS. They are also the primary advocates of pro-Russian positions, and Dodik is a regular visitor to Moscow. He and his party have also promoted anti-Western narratives and regularly and systematically deny Serbian war crimes and promote historical revisionism, including the denial of the genocide in Srebrenica. Through control of the entity's institutions and media, the party holds strong authoritarian control. Other political parties can operate and have had some successes, such as controlling the main city, Banja Luka. While these parties engage in less open pro-Russian rhetoric

and do not advocate outright secession, they hold mostly similar nationalist and anti-Western positions. The main party among Croats in Bosnia, the HDZBiH, is closely linked to its sister party in Croatia, where it is the dominant party in government. It also holds pro-Russian positions. These pro-Russian positions are less motivated by ideological affinity or appeals to cultural or religious ties, but rather because they cooperate with the SNSD, intending to weaken state institutions and create greater Croat institutional representation. Both SNSD and HDZBiH have at times sabotaged measures against Russia taken after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Political polarisation and public contestation of the electoral process have also challenged the outcome of the election and mean that court rulings related to the election process have not been implemented. There is interference in the election process, in particular through pressuring public officials to vote for the ruling party in the RS. Overall, the state election body is often undermined at the entity or local level. There have been contestations over elections, including several rulings by the European Court of Human Rights that have not been implemented.

As a consequence of the weak state structure and political polarisation along ethnic lines, external actors have often found partners among the Bosnian political elite, allowing for external interference. These have reinforced vulnerabilities. Serbia and Croatia have been strongly involved in Bosnian political debates and supported the country's dominant Serb and Croat parties. Both have mobilised their respective citizens in Bosnia to vote in national elections, thus blurring the lines between political domestic and external political engagement. Croatia has often sought to mobilise EU support for its positions, whereas Serbia and the RS have relied on Russian backing. Erdoğan has at times presented himself and Türkiye as the external actors representing the interests of Bosniaks. Türkiye has also been the country most active in promoting cultural and religious ties. These have taken form through several institutions. The Turkish institution for religious affairs, Diyanet, has been active in Bosnia, in particular in fostering close ties to the Islamic Community (IZ) in the country. While the IZ has welcomed support for the renovation of mosques and other religious institutions, the more heavy-handed approach of Diyanet has triggered some resistance, as the IZ has a long tradition of institutional autonomy. Other Muslim-majority countries, including Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, have supported the (re-)construction of mosques and Islamic schools, through which they have been seeking to promote their Islamic traditions. These often diverge from more liberal Bosnian Islamic traditions. While the IZ has been able to maintain overall control over mainstream Muslim life, these external actors have made some inroads in supporting different interpretations of Islam. Religious institutions in Bosnia are closely linked to the three dominant ethnonational groups and are thus not just markers of religious, but also national differences. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) links Serbs in Bosnia with Serbs in other countries, including Serbia. The SOC holds strong anti-Western, conservative, and nationalist views, even if there is considerable variation within the church. It has also fostered good ties to the Russian Orthodox Church and several far-right ultra-nationalist groups in Serbia and Bosnia that coalesce around the SOC, supporting close alignment with Russia and advocating historical revisionism. The Catholic Church is an important marker of Croat national identity in Bosnia, and the Church in Herzegovina, in particular, has often been promoting radical nationalist and ultra-conservative positions. The religious communities have cooperated only when it comes to promoting conservative world views, such as anti-LGBTQI positions, thus reinforcing vulnerabilities in society.

Civil society in Bosnia has been struggling in the post-war context, where much of it relied on foreign support linked to post-war reconstruction. Since international engagement decreased, civil society has become weaker, further undermined by substantial emigration of young professionals due to political instability and state capture. In recent years, however, strong grassroots, civil society organisations have emerged in multiple localities, mainly focusing on environmental issues, such as small hydroelectric power plants that have often been built illegally. These movements have often been cooperating across ethnonationalist lines, suggesting a reduced vulnerability at the grassroots level.

Kosovo

Disinformation in Kosovo is often tied to regional tensions, particularly involving Serbia and, indirectly, Russia. Pro-Serbian and anti-Kosovo and anti-Western, particularly anti-NATO, narratives are present in the Serbian-language media targeting Kosovo's northern municipalities. These narratives are amplified during crises and often involve historical revisionism and the delegitimisation of Kosovo's institutions.

The media environment is polarised. During the 2025 elections, the governing party boycotted mainstream media, choosing instead to communicate through pre-recorded content and direct face-to-face campaigns (Emini & Pollozhani 2025). This unusual approach limited public debate and highlighted mistrust between political elites and media institutions. Additionally, there is limited transparency around media ownership in Kosovo. Business interests play a major role in shaping editorial policy, contributing to public scepticism about impartiality and further reducing media freedom. The governing party's rhetoric towards the media and their business ties have further muddied the waters and fuelled distrust towards the media generally. This is a vulnerability, because the media can also be an instrument to keep the government accountable. On the other hand, the lack of transparency of media ownership, in particular portals, does blur the media space and the agendas that it serves. Moreover, media and information literacy are lacking in Kosovo, as it was assessed to be the 40th out of 41 countries assessed. Vulnerable communities, particularly in the north of Kosovo, are exposed to ethnically targeted and politically charged narratives, while there have been very few attempts to increase media and digital literacy, particularly in the north.

While Kosovo's democracy has been steadily consolidating, the 2025 national elections highlighted deepening political polarisation. Divides between Albanian and Serb communities, as well as among Kosovo's political parties, continue to hamper consensus-building and institutional stability. Within the Serb community, there are signs of change: in a break from the Belgrade-backed monopoly of Srpska Lista, one of the 10 reserved parliamentary seats was won by Nenad Rašić of the Party of Freedom (Stojanovic 2025). However, the political vacuum in Serb-majority municipalities following the 2023 boycotts and unrest has intensified ethnic tensions, with continued institutional exclusion risking further radicalisation and external influence from Belgrade and Moscow. The Albanian mayors elected in the boycotted local elections in the north lack legitimacy in the eyes of the Serb community, fuelling discontent – initially through violent clashes with NATO forces, and now through ongoing grievances. The 2025 elections were also marked by an aggressive campaign from the governing party, which strongly criticised the opposition and their voters. The protracted post-election process – marked by 21 failed government formation attempts at the time of writing – has further exposed Kosovo's institutional fragility, especially as unresolved issues with Serbia persist and EU sanctions remain in place – though the EU has begun to lift them.

Whereas Kosovo enjoyed relatively high institutional trust under Prime Minister Kurti and President Osmani, the post-election political deadlock, combined with tensions over the Serb majority northern municipalities, has begun to erode public confidence and institutional trust. The judiciary's independence has also been put into question by the (at the time of writing) outgoing Prime Minister Kurti, who has refused to appear before the Prosecutor's office as a witness after several attempts (DW 2025). However, the greatest vulnerability remains in the north and the integration of the Serb community against the backdrop of perceived failure to ensure equal political representation, contributing to disillusionment and a legitimacy gap.

Although there is no confirmed case of direct foreign electoral interference, Serbia's political engagement with Kosovo Serbs and support for boycotts and parallel structures in the north serve as a form of indirect interference that weakens Kosovo's sovereignty and puts pressure on both citizens and institutions in Kosovo. Concerns also exist over the influence of business interests and external funding in electoral campaigns. The outgoing Prime Minister particularly criticised the influence of business moguls in the opposition parties.

Therefore, while Kosovo has no active pro-Russian parties, Serbia's political influence and its ties to Russia present an indirect vulnerability. The Serbian Orthodox Church and political actors in northern Kosovo may serve as conduits for anti-Kosovo and anti-Western narratives. No significant anti-EU government positions exist within Kosovo's mainstream politics. Srpska Lista, the majority party of the Kosovo Serb community, is directly influenced by Vucic; thus, it presents a clear vulnerability and threat from external actors, in this case Serbia. In addition, Kosovo has faced significant challenges related to foreign fighters, representing both a threat and a vulnerability. It recorded the highest number of foreign fighters per capita in Europe who joined Daesh in Syria, reflecting the susceptibility of certain religious communities to radical ideologies (Bieber & Pollozhani 2021). In response, Kosovo developed a robust counter-terrorism framework, including legislation that targets not only the fighters themselves but also returnees and their families, helping to mitigate this vulnerability.

However, a parallel concern has received less institutional attention: Kosovo Serbs in the north joining Russian forces in the Donbas. This dimension remains largely unaddressed, resulting in both a vulnerability and a potential threat. Pro-Russian support was visibly present during the violent protests against Albanian mayors in northern Kosovo, where the Russian "Z" symbol appeared on vehicles, clothing, and public spaces.

Regarding vulnerabilities to cultural diplomacy, Kosovo's national identity is fractured along ethnic lines. In Serb-majority areas, loyalty to Kosovo institutions is low, and alternative political and cultural structures dominate. This lack of cohesion is a long-term vulnerability that may be exploited by hostile external actors. Unlike in Albania, there is more heightened tension between religion and state identity in Kosovo or even national identity. The issue of foreign fighters and mosques operating outside the jurisdiction of the Islamic Community shows a tension between the wide consensus on religion in Kosovo, which is more secular, and marginal positions advocating for a more conservative or even radical Islam.

Kosovo's constitution and institutions allow for religious tolerance, as there is religious diversity. The Serbian Orthodox Church enjoys extra-constitutional rights due to the spiritual significance it has to the Serb community but also due to the international community's and Kosovo's attempts to create safeguards for its existence (Di Dontantonio 2021). However, the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as the influence of more radical and conservative imams, present a vulnerability in Kosovo, due to the polarising

position that they hold and the polarisation that they cause in society. The Serbian Orthodox Church, which acts as a key cultural and political actor in the north, maintains close ties with Serbia.

Social and political trust is unevenly distributed across communities. Trust in central institutions is fragile, especially in the north, where parallel systems and ethnic grievances undermine integration. The lack of the proper accommodation and integration of the Serb community in Kosovo presents a continuous challenge and a vulnerability. The government does not have enough programmes to support and integrate the Serb community, which leaves them vulnerable to external influences from Serbia, Russia and elsewhere. Nevertheless, no substantial foreign backing for conservative civil society actors has been observed. However, religious institutions in the north often promote socially conservative narratives aligned with Serbian and Russian ideological currents. Additionally, in the 2025 elections, the conservative "Coalition for the Family" ran for the first time and won 20 000 votes, not passing the threshold required to enter parliament. However, it was effective in spreading hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community, opposing abortion rights, and supporting more religiously traditional views on family.

Overall, Kosovo's political leadership remains firmly pro-Western, with no observable convergence toward non-Western ideologies. However, Serb-majority areas demonstrate ideological alignment with Belgrade and Moscow, contributing to political fragmentation.

Montenegro

Russia has historically been a popular ally in Montenegro. While pro-Russian content and disinformation are present in the public domain, the country remains on the EU path. Still, some outlets spread Russian content. These are primarily portal IN4S, founded by Gojko Raičević, whose key associates are Igor Damjanović, IN4S correspondent and contributor to various Serbian and Russian outlets; Vladimir Božović, rector of the University of Montenegro; and Dražen Živković, founder of the Borba portal. The Borba portal is another portal that spreads pro-Russian content, which, similar to IRNS, revolves around themes concerning NATO and the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro, Kosovo's independence, the Srebrenica genocide, and the delicate balance between Montenegrin and Serbian identity in the country (Support4Partnership 2024). Still, just like in the case of Serbia, there should be caution in attributing everything to Russia since, frequently, neighbouring Serbia has a greater influence in Montenegro. In Montenegro, 32 % of respondents perceived Serbia as the country's most important ally (Kraja 2024).

With regards to China, pro-Chinese narratives and disinformation are spread through Serbian media as well as by the IN4S and Borba portals. Sympathetic coverage of China has resulted in Chinese approval ratings of 68 %, but China remains a less pronounced disinformation power compared to Russia (Pizzolo 2024). There are no indications that other external powers are engaged in these same activities.

Freedom House qualified Montenegro as partly free, putting it in the category of a transitional or hybrid regime (Freedom House 2025). In 2024, Reporters Without Borders in its "World Press Freedom Index" ranked Montenegro as 98 out of 180 countries. While this is a better score than in neighbouring Serbia, there are still problems. Press freedom continues to be negatively affected by political interference, unpunished attacks on journalists, and economic pressure (Reporters Without Borders 2024). In such an environment, there are still openings for narratives and disinformation favouring external powers to flourish.

Media ownership is a source of potential vulnerability. This is primarily because it is in the hands of eight companies with 89.5 % of the market share, with three out of four national broadcasters owned by Serbian owners closely affiliated with the SNS regime in Serbia and its president Aleksandar Vučić (Mirković 2024). There is constant concern that editorial policies are shaped in ways that favour local politicians or potentially foreign governments, most frequently the Serbian government (Reporters Without Borders 2024). Via media affiliated with the Serbian government, there is a risk that narratives favouring Russia and China will be circulated by extension.

Media literacy is also a source of potential vulnerability. The perception of media illiteracy in Montenegro is high, as 62 % of citizens in 2024 believe that the media literacy of Montenegrin citizens is poor. Only 27 % of respondents said that they would analyse websites where they found information, to establish whether the website and the information it contains are credible. In that same survey, elderly citizens and younger citizens both perceived the other group as susceptible to manipulation: the former due to lack of digital skills, and the latter due to lack of life experience. After TV (74 %), 68 % of respondents use online media as a source of information (OSCE 2024).

There is a certain sense of citizen cynicism towards political parties. The 2024 survey showed that 45.3 % of respondents had trust in the president, 41.8 % in the government and 40.1 % in the parliament. However, only 23 % had a favourable view of the political parties (CEDEM 2024). In that same survey, 34.6 % of respondents believed that the country was going the right way, as opposed to 31.1 % who believed that the country was heading the wrong way and 34.3 % who did not know and could not assess. This is both due to the past 30-year dominance of Milo Đukanović's regime and the fact that after the overthrow of the old regime there is still dysfunctionality in politics, as well as bickering among political parties. This is augmented by the identitarian divide between Serbs and Montenegrins.

Political polarisation exists in the country and can be used as a vulnerability by external influences, particularly in distributing disinformation. A powerful example of different perceptions in the country is public opinion of the Ukraine war. According to 2024 public opinion polls, 36 % of the country supports an unequivocally pro-Western course as opposed to 25 % of respondents who blame the West for the war between Russia and Ukraine (Kraja 2024).

The main interlocutors for Russia in Montenegro are leaders of Serbia-leaning parties, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević. Still, these leaders, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church, are closer to Serbia than they are to Russia, China or Türkiye. These leaders remain openly opportunistic and, similar to their counterparts in Serbia, use Russia and other external powers to promote themselves domestically and to leverage and blackmail the West. In regards to actors like the UAE, their main interlocutor was Milo Đukanović's regime, with no indication that his successors have established equally robust dialogue with the UAE (Prelec 2024).

The country remains politically polarised along several lines. The first line of division is between proponents of the old regime of Đukanović and its opponents who are now in power. The second line of division is within the ruling coalition, where there is either a divide between incumbent parties over policies and the sharing of political power or between those in the ruling coalition who differ on how close the new coalition should be to neighbouring Serbia. The third divide - between Serbian and Montenegrin identities – is the most powerful and encompasses the entire society.

There has been no evidence of direct involvement of external actors in Montenegro's electoral process, except accusations that Serbia is doing so via pro-Serbian parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church (Karcic 2023). The argument can be made that Russia and China, by extension, profit from this occurrence both because of Belgrade's ties with Moscow and Beijing, though Belgrade is the prevalent actor.

Montenegro has legislation that regulates the issue of party financing. There is however always a risk of clandestine and concealed methods of financing, in which case Serbia is the most probable actor to be involved in that type of activity (MANS 2023).

The general sense of cynicism and distrust towards democratic political institutions can be a source of vulnerability used by external powers to interfere and build influence politically.

There are no striking examples of religious and cultural institutes and exchanges except what falls under the domain of regular public and cultural diplomacy executed by embassies. The Russian Cultural and Educational Centre in Herceg Novi has been operating in the town of Herceg Novi since 2015 (Digital Forensic Center 2021). The Confucius Institute at the University of Montenegro officially opened in 2017 as it was jointly established by the Confucius Institute Headquarters and the only state-owned University of Montenegro, with Changsha University of Science and Technology as its designated Chinese partner (Changsha University of Science and Technology 2017). Independent Tourism Confucius Classroom at the University of Donjia Gorica (UDG), intended to meet the needs of Montenegrins learning Chinese and jointly sponsored by UDG and Beijing Union University (BUU), was approved by the Confucius Institute Headquarters in 2019 (University of Donja Gorica 2025).

Vulnerability linked to weak national identity and cohesion only partially applies to Russia because of the issue of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This is primarily because there is a division between Serbian and Montenegrin identity, but also because even for the Montenegrin citizens who declare themselves as Montenegrins, they are the followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church by majority (Radio Free Europe 2022). However, as it has been established, both the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbia have agency that is not exclusively linked to Russia.

While the issue of the Serbian Orthodox Church has been divisive in the country's domestic politics in recent years, the lack of political trust is more the result of disappointment with political elites and frustrations with the lack of progress (CEDEM 2024) than of external actors engaging in this type of activity. In regard to social trust, the issue of the Church is part of the described identity divides. No other actor is striking in this regard.

Support for civil society actors promoting traditional values is only applicable in the case of Russia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Contact between Russia and some conservative social movements is possible, but not noticeable at this stage. No indications that other actors like China and Türkiye have consequential activity in this domain. As explained earlier, the issue of the Serbian Orthodox Church is part of internal societal and political divisions, but generally, no noticeable trends are present here. The lack of political and social trust remains but so far it has not been associated with cultural diplomacy of non-Western powers. Finally, there are no noticeable trends of ideological convergence with external actors at the state level in Montenegro. Even those figures who maintain links with powers like Russia do so out of self-interest, not because of ideological and cultural affinities promoted by Russia and non-Western powers.

North Macedonia

The peak of Russian political influence and disinformation was during the rule of VMRO and Prime Minister Nikola Grujevski (2006-2016). Since then, Russian influence efforts in the country have decreased. However, pro-Russian content and narratives are still in the public domain. Some are being shared in the public domain by the social media accounts of the Russian embassy, and the Orthodox Church of North Macedonia shares some of the ultra-conservative views of the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of these come from Serbian media networks that are viewed in North Macedonia, among other reasons, such as the popularity of Serbian pop culture and pop music. By extension, pro-Russian content is also distributed (Kolovska 2024b). North Macedonian intelligence observed the presence of Chinese disinformation propaganda during the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections (BBC 2024). Türkiye has powerful potential to spread its narrative. Turkish public broadcaster TRT launched its Balkans edition in 2022, with one of its two offices in Skopje alongside Sarajevo (TRT World 2024). Freedom House qualified North Macedonia as partly free, putting it in the category of a transitional or hybrid regime (Freedom House 2025b). In 2024, Reporters Without Borders' "World Press Freedom Index" ranked North Macedonia 36 out of 180 countries. While this is a good ranking compared to some of its neighbours, there are still problems associated with government agency transparency, and the potential for attacks on critical journalism is growing (Reporters Without Borders 2024b).

It has been estimated that there is a high risk of media ownership, audiences, readerships, and markets being overly concentrated (BIRN 2023). State funding for the media is limited and non-transparent, while independent media are funded through donors who ensure that this sector survives. However, these funds are not sufficient to ensure the emergence of a critical and vibrant media profession (BIRN 2023).

Media literacy is not considered to be at an adequate level in the country, and as such, it constitutes a source of potential vulnerability to foreign influences. While there are institutions in the country in charge of promoting media literacy, like the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, there is no government strategy specifically aimed at improving it (European Commission 2023).

Like almost every post-Yugoslav republic burdened with a painful history of economic and political transition, cynicism towards political institutions is present. The judiciary is probably the most untrusted institution (Freedom House 2025b). There is a cynicism aimed at the EU as there is an awareness that North Macedonia made painful compromises for the sake of EU membership, only to be delayed and blackmailed by individual EU members, most recently neighbouring Bulgaria, over historical disputes (Jones 2024). In case of any political instability, North Macedonia would be vulnerable to potential Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns.

There are several lines of political polarisation. The first one is between more liberal and more nativist/nationalist political options. The second one - the divide between the Slavic and Orthodox North Macedonians and the Muslim Albanians - used to be more prevalent in the last years of Grujevski's regime,. Around the 2024 elections, there has been a surge in online hate speech along both political and ethnic lines (Kolovska 2024a). These divides might act as a potential source of vulnerability to future foreign disinformation campaigns.

Russian political influence has decreased since the era of Grujevski. There are though populist political parties that may have some degree of sympathy towards Russia and China. Despite expressing support for the

EU, incumbent Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski of VMRO-DPMNE opposed the name change agreement with Greece, a stance that mirrored Russia's position. Ivan Stoilkovic, leader of the Democratic Party of Serbs in North Macedonia and the Minister for Inter-Community Relations, has expressed pro-Russian and anti-Western views. However, these stances are more shaped by a sense of the country being mistreated by the EU. Consequently, it is very difficult to find evidence of any major attempt to shape electoral and political outcomes in the country. The left-wing populist Levica is probably the only political party in the country that overtly promotes and advocates closer ties with Russia and China as an alternative to the West (BBC 2024). Türkiye is an actor capable of communicating with both the North Macedonian and ethnic Albanian parties. Still, there is no evidence that Ankara instrumentally used that communication for malicious purposes. In light of the described political divisions in the country, there is a potential possibility that foreign powers can use it as an opportunity for foreign political meddling, particularly if the state of domestic political stagnation persists and if there is no progress on the country's EU path.

Russia does not appear to have been aggressively and overtly involved in any electoral interference operations in the country (Kolovska 2024b). No overt Chinese interference has been observed in the North Macedonia process (BBC 2024). The same conclusion applies to Türkiye. North Macedonia has made major improvements with regard to transparency in party/campaign financing since Grujevski's era, and political parties have appeared to respect formal norms. However, there is still concern about clandestine channels that could be associated either with business interest groups or criminal groups (Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2024). Still, there have been no notable examples in recent periods of non-Western powers engaging in this behaviour. Nevertheless, political mistrust in political elites and institutions could be exacerbated, creating openings for malign external powers and their political influence campaigns.

There are no striking examples of religious and cultural institutes and exchanges except what falls under the domain of regular public and cultural diplomacy executed by embassies. Russia has a cultural centre in the form of the Russian Centre within the University St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje. The centre was founded in 2015 to promote the Russian language, literature, and culture (Russian Centre in Skopje 2025). The Confucius Institute also operates within the University St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, and was established in partnership with the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Chengdu, Sichuan Province (The Confucius Institute at St. Cyril and Methodius University 2025).

While North Macedonia can be a potentially polarised society, including along the identitarian line (Vuksanovic 2018), this has been less pronounced in recent years. Moreover, any lack of social and political trust does not appear to be fostered by non-Western cultural diplomacy.

Regarding the support for civil society actors promoting traditional values, while Russia and Türkiye may be among the non-Western powers most likely to establish this type of contact with civil society actors, if there has been this type of encounter, they do not amount to serious efforts by these actors in the country. Additionally, no ideological compatibility has been observed between external actors and the state. Political figures have expressed rhetorical sympathy towards non-Western powers like Russia and China (BBC 2024), but these utterances were more informed by displeasure with Western policies, especially the EU, rather than by some sense of ideological convergence fostered by the cultural diplomacy of external actors.

Serbia

Vulnerability to political interference from foreign actors in Serbia varies. In the disinformation domain, Russian and Chinese content dominates. While the viewership audience of Russian media like RT and Sputnik is not wide, the main disseminators of pro-Russian content are media and tabloids under the control of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). This campaign is being done for two reasons. First, to profit electorally from Russia's domestic popularity and second, to leverage the West and prevent it from criticising democratic backsliding in Serbia (Vuksanović, Cvijić, and Samorukov 2022). The same remark applies to Chinese influence. The glorification of China is being done through media controlled by the SNS government (Vladisavljev 2021), so that the incumbent Serbian leadership can promote itself to the public as the enabler of partnerships with global superpowers like China, and of Chinese capital influx to the country.

Freedom House qualified Serbia as a transitional or hybrid regime, using media freedom as one of several criteria (Freedom House 2025c). In 2024, the watchdog organisation Reporters Without Borders in its "World Press Freedom Index" ranked Serbia as 98 out of 180 countries (Reporters Without Borders 2024c). The media space remains dominated by the incumbent coalition, and editorial independence has been among the elements of media freedom that have been frequently targeted (Epis 2024). Since late 2024, when Serbia became engulfed in massive student-led anti-government protests, the government's pressure and suppression of independent and critical media have increased (Savage 2025). Radio Sputnik opened its Serbian bureau in 2015, but RT gave up on the same idea. In late 2022, RT opened its Serbian-language website under the name RT Balkans to compensate for the closure of RT bureaus and stations in Europe (N1 2022). RT Balkans only began its 24/7 TV channel broadcast in late 2024 (N1 2024). The media and tabloids under the control of the ruling SNS, like "Informer" and "Alo", are the main spreaders of pro-Russian narratives, as exemplified by their February 2022 reporting when these outlets had headlines stating that Ukraine attacked Russia (European Western Balkans 2022).

National TV broadcaster RTS has a nominal form of professional reporting but continues to downplay and ignore criticism of the regime. The two private media stations close to the ruling coalition are relevant in this context. The first one is TV Pink, owned by Žejko Mitrović and TV Happy. In the case of the latter, the ownership structure is obscure, as it is affiliated with Predrag Ranković, known as Peconi, a controversial businessman suspected of organised crime links (Miladinović 2018). While there are differences in broadcasting policy, with TV Pink leaning slightly westward to avoid having their owner Mitrović exposed to the US sanctions, these two stations are powerful tools of propaganda for the regime and, by extension, non-Western powers that the regime engages with.

Media literacy and access to information remain low. That is particularly true in socio-economically stagnating communities where the population tends to rely on national TV broadcasters and government media and where independent media are perceived as traitors (Epis 2024). This leaves an opening for non-Western actors and the narratives that are beneficial for them.

Three years ago, surveys pointed out that there is a growing cynicism regarding democracy and democratic institutions among citizens. Some 31 % believed there was no democracy in Serbia, with 27 % believing there is a democracy with big problems (Petrović and Hercigonja 2022). This is a trend that is almost certain to worsen. Due to the turbulent history and disappointments with the post-Milošević political transition, the population is sceptical at best regarding traditional political institutions. This mistrust has only increased with

the ongoing protests (Gomez 2025), creating a vulnerability to malign narratives, manipulation and disinformation.

The attitude towards the EU perfectly encapsulates how the Serbian public is divided politically and emotionally, and how that leaves an opening for non-Western influences. In that context, Russia is the most conspicuous actor in terms of forging opportunistic partnerships. Among the Serbs, 38 % believe that EU accession is an illusion and that the EU does not want to see Serbia as a member, while 26 % believe that the process will take some time, and that even then it is uncertain that the EU will accept Serbia as a Member State. In those same polls, 18 % believe that Serbia should terminate the EU accession process because membership will not bring it any benefit and only 9 % believe that even if the process takes a long time, Serbia has a realistic chance of joining the EU (Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung 2025). Due to the support that Russia extended to the incumbent Serbian regime in the wake of the ongoing protests in an attempt to discredit protests as coloured revolution (Stojanović 2025b), there may be some disappointment with Russia in anti-government circles. However, Russian popularity in Serbia is primarily driven by disappointment towards the West, generated by memories of the 1999 NATO bombing and Kosovo independence in 2008 (Vuksanović, Cvijić, and Samorukov 2022). In a politically, socially, and emotionally fragmented Serbian society, these are bound to have an effect.

Many Serbian political parties maintain ties with Russia for self-serving political ends. This is done in the context of Russia's support for Serbia in the Kosovo dispute and Russian popularity in Serbian public opinion. The ruling conservative populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, uses Russia to leverage the West (Vuksanović 2020). The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), a former party of Slobodan Milošević led by incumbent Minister of Interior Ivica Dačić, is even closer to Russia than the SNS in terms of political sympathies and dialogue. This includes not just Dačić but also Dušan Bajatović, the director of Serbia's state-owned natural gas provider, Srbijagas (Mitrescu and Vuksanović 2022). There are minor players and right-wing parties that maintain links with Russia, including Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin (Vreme 2025), the junior party in the ruling coalition, Serbian Party Oathkeepers and the marginal opposition Serbian Movement Dveri (Serbia Elects 2024).

In the case of China, there is a strong relationship with the SNS government. Chinese non-transparent investments and credit-line financing that impose no conditionality on governance made them appealing to the Serbian government (Vuksanović 2019). Turkish political influence on Serbian political parties is pronounced in Sanjak, a Serbian province populated by the Bosniak Muslim community, where Türkiye and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enjoy high popularity, leading local Bosniak parties to invoke Turkish popularity for electoral gains (Jojić 2021). The Sanjak Democratic Action Party (SDA Sanjak) and the Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) were the parties inclined towards Türkiye. At one point, these parties were endangered because of the rise of the younger Justice and Conciliation Party (SPP) led by former Grand Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, a leader critical of Türkiye and closer to Gulf Arab states. As Zukorlić unexpectedly passed away in 2021, the balance of power shifted in favour of Ankara and Turkish-friendly parties (Buyuk 2021). The UAE in Serbia only appears to be affiliated with the SNS, as this partnership allows for an influx of corrosive capital in construction, air transport, agriculture, and defence (Prelec 2024).

While there is no overt influence in the electoral process, local elites use powers like Russia and China for self-promotion. Russian popularity is being exploited along the lines described above. Serbian leadership

promotes itself electorally as the facilitator of partnership with China. This modus operandi was practised during the Serbian presidential elections of 2022 (Vladisavljev 2022). Even those belonging to the pro-EU spectrum have some ties with China, including the former president of Serbia, Boris Tadić, who earned executive positions in several Chinese companies. In 2021, he wrote opinion pieces praising the Chinese development model (Tadić 2021). Türkiye remains an appealing marketing symbol to invoke by Bosniak parties, but there have been instances of Türkiye assisting the ruling SNS party. When, in 2021, Italian shoe manufacturer Geox closed its factory in the city of Vranje, potentially generating a local economic crisis and loss of votes, Turkish car manufacturer Teklas quickly employed parts of Geox's workforce at the request of the SNS, for which it received government subsidiaries (Ilić 2021). In between the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the presidential elections of 2022, the Serbian regime used the UAE for electoral promotion by displaying Emirati medical aid and UAE construction projects (Vuksanović 2021).

Serbian legislation prohibits foreign financing, but given the poor state of the rule of law, lack of transparency in party/campaign financing is a potential vulnerability. Still, so far, there have been no visible indicators that external actors have used this avenue to exercise influence; the main threat to electoral integrity comes from the Serbian government.

Lack of trust in traditional political institutions, like political parties both in positions of power and opposition, is a potential vulnerability for political interference. This can be exploited by external powers who might try to encourage new political players more susceptible to non-Western narratives and power plays.

Many external actors engage in public and cultural diplomacy in Serbia. An example of Russia's actions in this domain has been financial donations for the repair of the country's main temple - the Church of St. Sava (RuskiyMir 2020). The Russian House — Russian Centre of Science and Culture acts as a Russian cultural centre. China operates three Confucius Institutes in the country: in Belgrade; Novi Sad; and Niš. Each of these is attached to faculties operating under the auspices of local universities (Xinhua 2024). Chinese universities are also present, with several cooperation protocols being implemented (The State Council of the PRC 2024). Shanghai's Jiao Tong University has a cooperation agreement with the three mentioned Serbian universities (Standish 2021). Turkish Yunus Emre Institutes also operate in Serbia. Still, as explained regarding Russia and China, cultural diplomacy is not the decisive element in boosting the soft power appeals of these countries, since the promotion of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese views is being pushed by the Serbian leadership and media under their control.

Social and political divisions exist in Serbia, and the "East vs. West" dichotomy is part of those divisions (Vuksanović 2020). Still, these divisions have local origins and amplifiers and are not the product of cultural diplomacy pursued by non-Western actors. Cultural diplomacy from non-Western actors does not appear to foster or exacerbate social and political mistrust. On the contrary, this lack of trust is much more conditioned by the local political environment, actors, and the average Serb's disappointment with political life since the reintroduction of multi-partyism in the early 1990s. The failure of the socio-economic transition has had the same effect (Vuksanović, Cvijić, and Samorukov 2022).

Chinese efforts appear to be focused on exchanges related to the business domain, academia, and media. While the UAE might have some contacts with the Serbian Muslim community, its engagement with the country appears to revolve around investments rather than soft power plays. The actors who are more likely to be focused on civil society actors, based on some notions of traditionalism, are Russia and Türkiye. The

former would focus its actions on the Serbian Orthodox Church and ultra-conservative movements (Zlatić 2025), while Türkiye would focus on the Serbian Muslim community, especially in the Serbian province of Sanjak populated by Bosniaks and Muslims (Vuksanović 2021). Nevertheless, no consequential developments have been observed recently.

There are figures in the Serbian government who express powerful sympathy towards Russia and China. Aleksandar Vulin is a strong example (Vreme 2025). In April 2025, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Porfirije met Russian President Vladimir Putin and, during those talks, described the ongoing student-led nationwide protests as a coloured revolution. The Patriarch expressed hope that Serbia, alongside Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro will be closer to the "Russian environment" and "Russian world" (Zlatić 2025). This communication needs to be understood in the context of close ties between the Church and the incumbent Serbian regime, where the Church leadership tries to use Russia to boost the regime's popularity domestically and discredit protests. Therefore, most of these figures maintain ties with powers like Russia and China primarily out of political sympathies and more importantly due to their respective selfish political self-interest, and not because of ideological convergence fostered by external powers through cultural diplomacy.

Georgia

Georgia remains highly vulnerable to democratic and political threats. The country faces significant external pressures, particularly from Russia and other illiberal global and regional actors that shape an unfavourable geopolitical environment for democratic consolidation. These threats are exacerbated by the country's internal vulnerabilities, including political polarisation, weak institutional trust, and media manipulation. Georgia has been in a state of deep political crisis since the disputed 2024 parliamentary election, which resulted in the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) claiming victory and opposition parties claiming foul play. The legitimacy crisis that followed after the elections was further exacerbated by international isolation and internal and external pressure on the government.

While Georgia does have a vibrant and critical media landscape, editorial independence is often questionable. Powerful political figures close to government, business elites, or party-affiliated groups typically own or fund these outlets (AidData 2023), limiting genuine pluralism. Moreover, partisan alignments of major media channels with specific political parties, has led to strongly biased coverage. This political partisanship limits citizens' ability to receive balanced information and fosters political polarisation. When media outlets consistently frame events from a partisan angle, citizens struggle to piece together a balanced understanding of current affairs. In short, the media scene might look "open," but its independence is another matter entirely. Moreover, although Georgia's broadcasting regulations require media ownership disclosure, enforcement is shaky. In practice, some outlets obscure their real backers through shell companies or vague funding networks. This lack of transparency erodes accountability and gives political actors an opening to influence editorial policies behind the scenes.

In 2025, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party intensified media restrictions by passing laws that ban foreign funding for media outlets and grant the Georgian National Communications Commission expanded authority to regulate content, including imposing fines and revoking licenses (IPI, 2025). Additionally, the arrest of

journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli during protests has raised significant concerns in and outside of the country about press freedom and human rights in the country (IPI, 2025).

Even if ownership were fully transparent, a wide swath of the Georgian public lacks the tools to properly evaluate and question the news they consume. This isn't unique to Georgia—many countries face similar challenges—but the consequences are particularly severe here, where a polarised political climate already complicates the search for reliable information (World Values Survey, 2022). Because critical thinking and fact-checking habits aren't widely instilled from a young age, sensational or misleading narratives spread quickly. The Georgian media sphere is rife with rumours or half-truths, sometimes fanned by anonymous Facebook pages or partisan TV talk shows (Myth Detector, 2023). One survey by MDF found out that only 30 % of the population verifies the information and fact checks regularly (Media Development Foundation, 2022, p.8). While these issues persist throughout the entire country, regional and rural areas are particularly affected. The rural population is more vulnerable, as they are less covered by civil society or international media literacy programmes and more exposed to political propaganda. Although civil society organisations have tried to introduce media literacy and fact-checking programmes (Myth Detector, 2023), the reach of these efforts remains limited. Schools also lack the resources or trained staff to integrate comprehensive media literacy modules into the standard curriculum (Media Development Foundation, 2022). In many cases, educators themselves could benefit from more guidance on modern information warfare and how to recognise manipulative content.

Overall, this low level of media literacy can make people vulnerable to propaganda, whether this is coming from domestic political actors or external forces like the Kremlin. Coupled with partisan coverage and obscure media ownership, these factors form a perfect storm that undermines informed citizenship and weakens Georgia's democratic resilience.

Georgia is also characterised by deep societal and political (elite) polarisation, which significantly weakens democratic resilience. The country's political system is marked by political radicalisation, driven by party-led antagonism that distorts political competition. Both the ruling Georgian Dream party and opposition parties function as media-political conglomerates, controlling major media outlets and intellectual circles. This results in an alienated electorate, with up to 60 % of voters consistently undecided. For instance, in the July 2024 CRRC study, approximately 34 % of voters were undecided about their party support, and an additional 22 % declined to answer, totalling 56 % of respondents not specifying a party preference (CRRC 2024).

The ruling GD party has leveraged polarisation to consolidate power, marginalising opposition groups and alienating civil society and independent media actors. This has contributed to a further decline in political and social trust. According to the CRRC and other surveys, trust in public institutions in Georgia is among the lowest in the region. Similarly, social trust (measured as generalised trust in people) is the lowest in the region, at just 9 % (World Values Survey, Wave 8 2017–2022). This lack of trust creates a fragmented and manipulable society, further increasing Georgia's vulnerability to both domestic and malign foreign influence.

Despite legislative frameworks ensuring some transparency in party financing, political parties in Georgia remain structurally weak and undemocratic (Transparency International Georgia, 2023). Most parties operate under highly centralised leadership with little grassroots engagement. Membership fees constitute only a fraction of party financing, limiting public accountability. The lack of transparency in campaign financing

and electoral interference further weakens democratic processes. Moreover, as Georgia remains in a dominant party system, overall election campaign financing remains significantly skewed in favour of the ruling party (Civil Georgia 2023).

Electoral legitimacy has been an ongoing issue, particularly following the controversial 2024 parliamentary elections, which deepened societal divisions. Election monitoring organisations, including the OSCE, have reported irregularities, including vote-buying and intimidation tactics. These practices exacerbate public distrust in the electoral process and increase Georgia's susceptibility to external influence.

Another important aspect of the country's political vulnerability is the use of disinformation practices by local political actors to achieve political objectives. It is primarily implemented by the Georgian Dream government but also practiced by the opposition, even though the political impact of the latter is much less relevant since they do not hold political and decision-making power. The GD narratives have often aligned with anti-EU discourses promoted by right-wing actors, such as Viktor Orbán and Fidesz. Since the launch of Russia's war of choice in Ukraine, GD's main narrative has revolved around the presence of a so-called "Global War Party" that dominates the Western political establishment and is allegedly attempting to drag Georgia into the war against Russia by opening a second front in Georgia. Later on, and especially after the US elections, GD adopted the "Deep State" narrative, arguing that the Deep State was fighting Georgia, and that the Georgian government and the Trump administration had the same adversaries.

In sum, GD's Russia-accommodating foreign policy, which has strengthened since the launch of the Russia-Ukraine war, has been legitimised by the ruling party by blaming the West for attempting to drag Georgia into the conflict. On the one hand, as GD ideological convergence (Kakachia and Kakabadze, 2025) with Moscow strengthened, it also clearly represents a major vulnerability as it has resulted in a major crisis in relations with Georgia's strategic partners in the West and has compromised Georgia's EU accession process. It is noteworthy that, alongside increasing authoritarianism, the abrupt Eurosceptic turn in the ruling Georgian Dream party's foreign policy has been the major trigger of the current political crisis in the country.

On the other hand, the Georgian government believes it has acted as a shield against potential Russian punitive measures during a geopolitically fragile period; Georgia lacks any security guarantees and is exposed to Russian threats. In this sense, GD's policy has both undermined and strengthened Georgia's resilience in times of war.

Overall, Georgia's vulnerabilities stem from a combination of internal factors such as political polarisation, weak institutional trust, and media manipulation creating a fragmented society susceptible to disinformation. Electoral and party financing weaknesses undermine democratic legitimacy, while Georgia's precarious geopolitical position heightens its exposure to Russian influence. The ruling party's attempts to consolidate authoritarian rule and its strategic alignment with illiberal narratives have further complicated Georgia's democratic trajectory, jeopardising its Euro-Atlantic future while simultaneously acting as a temporary buffer against immediate Russian retaliation.

Despite the strong societal support for EU integration in Georgia, other external actors are also actively working to strengthen their soft power in the country, particularly through cultural and religious channels. Russia focuses primarily on emphasising religious ties via the Orthodox Church and the Georgian diaspora residing in Russia. In contrast, China promotes its influence mainly through cultural means, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes, student mobility programmes, and scientific exchanges. Both actors seek to exploit

existing tensions between elements of Georgia's pro-European identity – such as the promotion of LGBTQ rights – and the country's religiously conservative identity.

Faced with those cultural diplomacy instruments, Georgia's national identity is strongly rooted in a set of common denominators, with European integration standing out as a key pillar. Another essential component is Orthodox Christianity. This plays a central role in Georgian identity, with the Georgian Orthodox Church being the most trusted institution in the country. However, the religious and pro-European identity structures often come into conflict, especially over issues such as LGBTQ rights, undermining national cohesion. Moreover, political actors, including the government, frequently instrumentalise these sensitive topics to mobilise public opinion against Georgia's pro-European orientation and weaken the pro-European pillar of the country's identity.

In Georgia, several civil society actors actively promote traditional values, often at the expense of the country's pro-European identity and aspirations. Notable among them are organisations such as the Union of Orthodox Parents and Georgian March. These groups are typically closely affiliated with the Georgian Orthodox Church, which, in turn, maintains strong connections with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Moldova

The Republic of Moldova remains highly susceptible to external threats that undermine its democratic stability and institutional resilience. The primary actor influencing these vulnerabilities is the Russian Federation, which employs a range of tools to manipulate public perception, destabilise governance, and interfere in electoral processes. The three key areas of vulnerability are disinformation, political interference, and electoral interference.

Moldova's media landscape is highly fragmented, with widespread foreign ownership and largely unregulated online platforms. Low levels of media and information literacy make the population especially susceptible to manipulation. According to the Public Opinion Barometer, only 3.1 % of people rely on experts for information, while more than 36 % depend on online and social media platforms – many of which are vulnerable to manipulation.

Disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova exploit the country's open media environment, low levels of media literacy, and deep-seated political divisions. The fragmented media landscape facilitates the spread of pro-Kremlin narratives. Russian-funded media outlets consistently promote content that undermines Moldova's European integration and portrays Western institutions as ineffective. Social media platforms, in particular, remain largely unmonitored, enabling the rapid dissemination of false or manipulative content without accountability.

A significant vulnerability arises from the population's limited media and information literacy, which increases susceptibility to disinformation. While civil society organisations have initiated fact-checking and educational programs, these efforts face financial and institutional constraints. Meanwhile, Russia-backed actors continuously refine their methods, deepfakes, and coordinated troll networks to amplify misleading narratives.

Moreover, continuous attacks on public institutions through coordinated narratives and using the lack of capacity in public authorities, have contributed to a growing distrust in state authorities. According to the

Public Opinion Barometer the level of high trust in the Government was at the level of 77 % in November 2022 and it decreased to 3.3 % in October 2024. By portraying the Moldovan government as corrupt, ineffective, or under Western control, these campaigns weaken public confidence in democratic governance and the rule of law. This strategy has proven particularly effective in rural areas and among the Russian-speaking population, where trust in state institutions is already low. Political polarisation is further exacerbated by divisive narratives that exploit ideological and geopolitical fault lines, deepening social fragmentation and reducing the state's capacity for consensus-building. According to a study developed by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, the pro-European parties in Moldova enjoy only minimal support (2 %-6 %) from Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauzians or Bulgarian ethnic groups. On the other hand, support for pro-Russian parties among these ethnic groups ranges from 54 % to 74 %. This results in a political competition based on these divisions rather than policies that would best develop the country and rebuild trust with Moldovan citizens after years of unfulfilled promises.

Russia's political influence in the Republic of Moldova is primarily exercised through financial and strategic support for pro-Russian political parties and actors. Direct and indirect funding mechanisms, including opaque financial transfers and sponsorship of media outlets, allow pro-Kremlin political forces to maintain a significant presence in Moldova's political landscape. The lack of transparency and effective oversight in party financing, as well as disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing voter behaviour, leave the electoral system highly vulnerable to foreign manipulation and interference. The lack of effective oversight over campaign financing allows illicit financial flows from abroad to shape election outcomes and policymaking. This includes direct funding of candidates, illicit campaign financing schemes, and the use of intermediaries to conceal the origins of financial contributions. For example, according to a Free Europe article, Moldovan authorities reported that nearly USD 40 million was transferred from Russia via the sanctioned Promsvyazbank in the months preceding the 2024 referendum and presidential elections. These funds reportedly reached over 138 000 individuals, often through distribution networks designed to conceal their origin and intent.

Furthermore, Russia has leveraged its influence over certain vulnerable groups, including pensioners and rural communities, to create electoral pressure in favour of pro-Russian parties. The use of humanitarian aid and money as political tools has been a recurring strategy in influencing voter behaviour. In the absence of robust electoral integrity mechanisms, these vulnerabilities continue to pose a risk to Moldova's democratic processes, by bribing voters.

Religious institutions, particularly the Moldovan Orthodox Church subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, play a central role in Russia's cultural diplomacy efforts in Moldova. These institutions serve as conduits for Kremlin-aligned narratives that oppose European integration and promote traditionalist, anti-Western values. Their influence is amplified by the high level of public trust they enjoy, especially in rural and Russian-speaking communities.

An investigation by Free Europe revealed that nearly 500 priests and parishioners from the Republic of Moldova participated in pilgrimages to Moscow in 2024 before the EU integration referendum and presidential elections. The trips were fully funded by the Russian Orthodox Church. These events are part of a broader effort to reinforce spiritual and ideological alignment with Russia. While framed as religious exchanges, such

initiatives deepen Moldova's societal polarisation and weaken national cohesion by promoting narratives of "spiritual unity" with Russia.

Ukraine

Russian aggression against Ukraine, which started as a hybrid war in 2014 and transformed into a full-scale invasion in 2022, dramatically changed the political sphere in Ukraine. The soft power instruments traditionally used by Russia, a main external actor posing threats to Ukraine, and the vulnerabilities they exploited were replaced by hard power. Though some existing vulnerabilities still matter, new ones caused by the war and primarily aimed at disrupting social cohesion have appeared. Moreover, some structural and legal changes (from anti-corruption and public administration reforms to amendments in media law) as well as the gradual suspension of political, economic, and cultural relations with Russia have also contributed to the transformation of the political landscape.

As one of the major instruments of political interference employed by external actors, disinformation exploits two vulnerabilities that could be assessed as medium. The first one is an openness of media space and low tolerance for any kind of censorship, particularly within new media and social media. The second one is a sensitivity of Ukrainian public discourses and public opinion towards a number of issues that potentially could be hyped and used to breed social tensions. Among such issues are the question of corruption, (dis)trust in particular politicians and political parties, mobilisation, and policies concerning IDPs. It should be noted that even under martial law, the media sphere in Ukraine is open and operates under few restrictions. Thus, disinformation abuses the right to free speech and freedom of speech and information. Also, while there is always space to enhance media literacy, its level overall could be assessed as medium to high, with over 70 % being sensitive and aware of distorted content. Thus, the level of media literacy presents less vulnerability.

In discussion of vulnerabilities exploited by the other two instruments - the support of pro-Russian/anti-EU parties and politicians, and interferences in the electoral process - it should be noted that the usage of these instruments by themselves is very limited in the context of Ukraine. For example, after the full-scale invasion in February 2022, there are no pro-Russian and/or separatist parties or politicians in Ukraine and no party of movement displaying any significant anti-EU rhetoric. While there might be some occasional anti-EU statements, they are usually coming from marginalised figures not directly involved in politics. The main reason for that is the shift in perceptions and attitudes of the majority of Ukrainians regarding Ukraine's geopolitical orientation and alliances towards the EU and Russia. Such a shift began in 2014 and intensified in 2022 (for example see this and previous survey waves). This, together with public opinion data regarding assessment of the current situation in Ukraine and its developments and attitudes towards political and military leadership,[15] demonstrates low political polarisation and consequently low vulnerability to these two instruments.

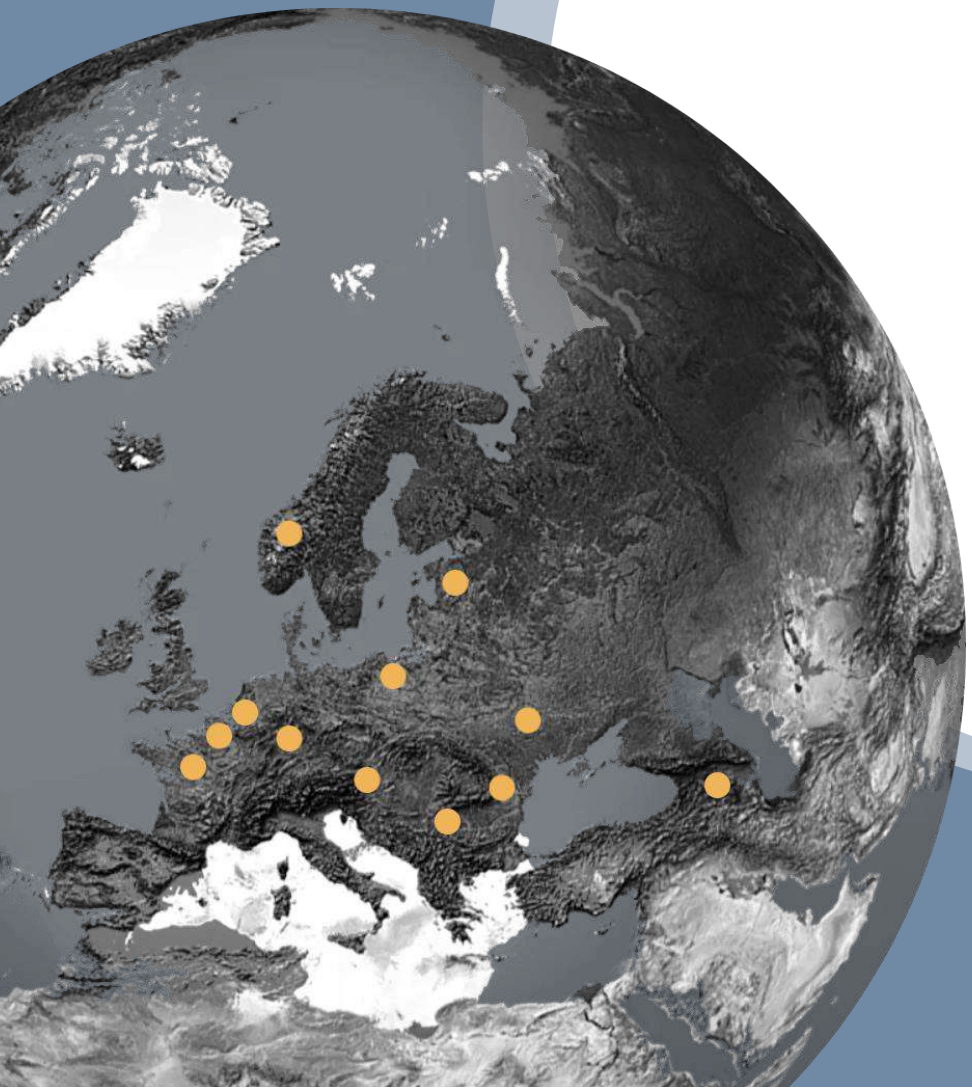
[15] Please see, for example: https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-ukraine-sept-oct-2024/ ; https://rating-group.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ukraine_periodical_survey_11-12.2024.pdf

Under martial law, no elections could be held in Ukraine; the electoral process has been virtually put on pause. Still, the topic of elections and the need or desire to hold them in Ukraine as soon as possible postulated by certain external actors (primarily from the US) is an instrument of political interference in itself (Banco & Landay 2025, Goncharova 2025). There is a wide socio-political consensus in Ukraine regarding the impossibility and recklessness of having elections before peace is achieved. Still, the constant undermining and questioning of the legitimacy of Ukrainian politicians and officials by external actors might disrupt social cohesion and breed distrust in political institutions and politicians.

Regarding vulnerabilities pertaining to cultural diplomacy instruments, we would concentrate on those used by religious and cultural institutes and exchanges and by civil society actors (and their support) promoting traditional values.

One of the vulnerabilities in the cultural domain lies in the exploitation of religious freedom by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP). Similar to the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia, this Church, as the one affiliated with it, often acts as a proxy for the Russian state and its interests. This religious organisation (UOC MP) has for years preached ideas about the divine unity of the three peoples (Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian) as well as the uniqueness of Russian-style Orthodoxy and its exclusive canonicity. As a result, a large number of MP priests and even bishops have been accused or convicted of high treason and of justifying Russian aggression. All such cases are discursively presented by Russian propaganda internationally as "persecutions of Orthodoxy in Ukraine", thus exploiting the religious freedom rhetoric. Even if the activity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is banned (which still seems unlikely in the short- and medium-term run) as prescribed by the law adopted in August 2024, political attitudes of the laymen cultivated by this Church's leadership may cause societal polarisation, though only 6 % of Ukrainians identify themselves with the UOC MP. Overall, this vulnerability could be assessed as low.

As is for Eastern Neighbourhood countries, some organisations in Ukraine promote traditional values. However, they are of two kinds: (covertly) pro-Russian (usually associated with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP)) and right-wing. While both have marginal influence as the overwhelming majority of citizens support European integration and share European values, the former abuses freedom of association and uses corruption within the judicial system to promote pro-Russian ideas and erode trust in public institutions. At the same time, right-wing traditionalist organisations, while opposing specific European values, particularly LGBTQ+ rights, do not object to European integration and the EU's primary principles. Still, due to the marginal position of these organisations and overwhelming support of European integration within all strata and groups of society, this vulnerability could be assessed as low.



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