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Vulnerability to Foreign Influence in Bulgaria

Factors, techniques
and recommendations

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Introduction

The weakening of the EU's gravitational pull and the growing democratic and governance backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have left a power vacuum in Bulgaria, thereby providing opportunities for the expansion of foreign malign influence. Most successful at implementing this strategy so far has been Russia, which has leveraged the country's economic dependence and pro-Russian oligarchic networks to achieve disproportionate political influence and acquire strategic assets and companies¹. One of the most effective mechanisms for amplifying Russian influence in Bulgaria has been the deployment of sharp power instruments such as media capture, social media disinformation, cultural and religious ties, and the sponsorship of civil society activities². The Kremlin's influence has been further enhanced by increasing popular discontent with the deficits of the liberal democratic system, with such influence applied in Bulgaria through openly spreading disinformation and anti-Western propaganda.³ Furthermore, the country's general public has long been vulnerable to malign Kremlin influence due to deep-seated historical and cultural ties,⁴ and the growing distrust of Euro-Atlantic integration.

China has also increased its information presence in Bulgaria, but remains less visible in public perceptions.⁵ Bulgarian authorities also largely ignore Chinese activities in the country, while Russia has been put onto law enforcement radar screens following pressure from NATO partners.⁶

→ Areas of foreign malign influence

1

Political parties

Against this background, a pro-Kremlin agenda has been widely present in the Bulgarian political discourse, and the Kremlin seeks to influence parties across the country's entire political spectrum.⁷ Domestic political support for Russia is enabled by Russian and Bulgarian state capture networks which hold sway over key institutions such as ministries, regulators and state-owned companies.⁸ At the same time, most Bulgarian parties cater to society's pro-Russian sentiment by generally promoting better ties or at least a balanced relationship with Russia. However, Russian influence is most visible among radical political parties. Though these groups typically play a fringe role in domestic politics, they serve to augment existing social ideological and value-oriented tensions in Bulgarian society.⁹

2

Media and civil society

The deterioration of media freedom, and the lack of clear regulations regarding the transparency of corporate ownership and financing of the media, allow for the easy

penetration of foreign malign influence in Bulgaria. Russia's media capture tactics in the country have been part of its overall state capture power toolbox. Opaque and corrupt local business-political networks have opened the door to Kremlin influence in the media sector, and Russia has leveraged its ties to oligarchic networks in Bulgaria that include media outlets which spread disinformation to influence key domestic policies.¹⁰ In terms of a direct corporate footprint, companies with Russian ownership do not have any significant presence in the Bulgarian media sector. Yet the Kremlin's indirect footprint can be traced through the editorial content of a number of Bulgarian media, whose owners have developed strong political and economic links with Russia. Moreover, Bulgarian government support for large-scale Russian projects, such as the Belene nuclear power plant and the South Stream and TurkStream gas pipelines has also pressured mainstream Bulgarian media into taking a pro-Russian stance. Russian cable TV channels are also popular with the Bulgarian public.

Russia has been particularly effective in spreading disinformation narratives on social media, criticizing the liberal democratic system of governance through the utilization of intermediaries, including¹¹:

- Civil society organizations (CSOs) that receive direct official or hidden financing from Russian foundations or local Russia-proxy funders, including banks
- Protest and pressure groups, mobilized on an ad-hoc basis to sow confusion and pushback against specific government decisions, such as the government anti-COVID measures
- Internet trolls, bloggers, talk-show hosts, and creators of obscure news websites that amplify certain Kremlin-backed disinformation narratives

Declining media freedom and disinformation narratives by local and foreign (mainly pro-Kremlin) groups, largely against liberal social values, have been utilized to undermine Western narratives and values (as seen in the fight against LGBT rights and the Istanbul convention).¹²

In the dominant anti-liberal rhetoric, Russia is often presented to the public as bearing the flag of traditional **Orthodox values** and as the clear alternative to the Western worldview. The Kremlin has been effective in using the shared religious and cultural identity with Bulgaria to exert soft power,¹³ as such the Russian Orthodox Church has been one of the most effective Russian propaganda tools in Bulgaria.¹⁴ In addition, Rossotrudnichestvo,¹⁵ with the support of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria, have been linked to sponsoring civil society and political activities with clear pro-Kremlin agendas.

→ Capture-proofing Bulgaria to foreign malign influence

Addressing foreign malign influence vulnerabilities in the governance of critical sectors of the economy, media and civil society in Bulgaria requires targeted policy action¹⁶:

1 For the West

→ **The US and the EU** need to provide a robust coordinated response to Russia's (and increasingly China's) media influence across the CEE region.

Such approach should be anchored in the EU integration and democratization process, and focus on: (i) increased economic engagement; (ii) strong anti-corruption and rule of law conditionalities; (iii) comprehensive security support; and (iv) robust strategic communication action¹⁷.

→ The US and the EU should expand their strategic communication concerning their economic and social development activities in Bulgaria. As evidenced during the coronavirus pandemic, Russia and China have proven effective at garnering public sympathy through publicity campaigns (e.g. Moscow's and Beijing's efforts to promote their provision of medical aid and anti-pandemic measures as more effective than Western countries).

→ The US and the EU need to maintain a razor-sharp focus on countering malign influence from authoritarian states by facilitating the entry of constructive foreign capital¹⁸, supporting the implementation of key reforms to domestic governance systems, and developing communication strategies that aim to reverse the decline in popular support for the West.

→ The US Agency for International Development should reinstate instruments and platforms for supporting good governance and media freedom initiatives in Bulgaria.

→ Civil society must be supported both by the national government and the EU through the development of competitive funding envelopes for independent media groups and/or NGO networks. These key civil society actors must coordinate their work to align strategic priorities and communication strategies.

For state authorities

→ The benefits of cooperation with the EU, US and NATO should be promoted by the government and Western-oriented civil society organizations. National distribution mechanisms for EU funds need to be transparent and ensure equal access - this will increase positive perceptions and trust in EU institutions and projects.

→ Implement regular state capture assessment diagnostics¹⁹ that would measure the level of capture (risks) in strategic economic sectors, and identify key governance deficits that allow for an excessive concentration of resources in the hands of a small number of private interests with large decision-making influence.

→ **Given the detrimental impact of online disinformation on societal attitudes and important public discussions, Bulgaria needs to undertake strategic action that targets becoming better integrated in the EU's digital democracy initiatives:**

→ Guaranteeing the independence of the three most popular television channels (bTV, Nova, and the BNT1 public broadcaster) in the country by implementing higher journalistic standards and ensuring that relevant issues are reported accurately and objectively.

→ Given the popularity of Facebook in Bulgaria and its extensive use by political figures to communicate their messages, the media regulatory committee should increase its cooperation with the social media giant

and provide local expertise to improve monitoring and ensure the removal of disinformation from the Bulgarian digital space. Bulgarian institutions and civil society actors should be involved in ongoing discussions regarding the proposed Digital Services Act (DSA) and the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP).

→ The Bulgarian independent media regulator should ensure a systematic and predictable approach to media law compliance and enforcement, with a focus on ownership transparency and media content monitoring. The improvement of journalistic standards will also reinforce public trust in the media and its regulatory institutions. To this end, stronger support needs to be provided to civil society initiatives dedicated to press freedom and the countering of disinformation and propaganda narratives.

→ Bulgaria needs to make compulsory the provision of information on the ownership structure of media outlets in a publicly available registry, and consistently monitor and enforce sanctions in cases of non-compliance. Moreover, specific provisions on the screening of foreign media ownership should be incorporated.

→ **Introduce and strengthen new public and private media-financing models, which would help reduce the need for advertising and minimize the concentration of media power, including²⁰:**

→ Introducing and promoting alternative/non-profit funding models that promote a diversity of ownership stakes as well as different sources of financing;

→ Developing specific state-owned media-financing transparency measures that should make public all state funding to the media, including direct budget subsidies, advertising budgets (including by state-owned enterprises), media advertising budgets within public procurement contracts, etc.

→ Political commitment is necessary to develop counter- or alternative-narratives that foster tolerance, social acceptance of otherness, and the upholding of civil liberties and human rights.²¹

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