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# RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans (WB) have come into the international spotlight as an arena for big power competition. In their foreign policy orientation, the region’s six countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—all share Euro-Atlantic affiliations, although the degree of affiliation varies. Internally, functional and structural weaknesses—whether Albania’s legacy of an isolationist communist dictatorship or the consequence of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the other countries—open doors for hostile foreign actors to project their influence.

The environment is rife with ethnic tension, border disputes, and neighbourly disagreements. All of these countries are developing democracies that have yet to fully

recover from the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars. Their Euro-Atlantic orientation is currently a matter of tense debate. While Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia have become NATO members, Serbia oscillates between East and West, its EU candidate status notwithstanding. Although EU membership is still uncertain for the Western Balkan countries, all six have expressed their willingness to join the Union but are advancing down this path at different speeds.

Efforts to promote rule of law and media freedoms in WB have generally resulted in weak outcomes, and corruption and crime rates remain high; WB economies remain dependent on foreign investments and civil society is easily targeted by information operations, especially in



the current climate where there is a lack of trust between the governments and the people. All of these factors have contributed to the creation of an environment that is vulnerable to hostile foreign influence. The essential first step in effectively countering such actions and preventing regional stability from being further undermined is a methodical assessment of the Western Balkans' permeability to hostile influence.

This report is based on a year-long study undertaken by the Global Focus Center and published in full as *Propaganda Made-to-Measure: Dimensions of Risk and Resilience in the Western Balkans*,<sup>1</sup> which identifies the vulnerabilities hostile actors can exploit to gain influence over the region. The report provides an innovative and practical instrument available to all stakeholders, especially policymakers, that can be easily replicated and used proactively to build resilience into social, economic, political, and security systems.

Instead of furthering the generally reactive approach to acts of aggression that have already taken place, this study explores the environment which facilitates malign interference. Given that foreign interference uses internal structural vulnerabilities and seeks to amplify existing fractures within society, this study provides knowledge of the inroads that can be used by hostile actors and aims to pre-empt or reduce opportunities for attacks.

The study is based on the assumption that 'below-the-threshold' aggression does not take place in a void, but within the larger context of geopolitical competition, currently marked by growing revisionism directed against a Western-dominated global order. Consequently, much of the subversive activity in the Western Balkans is aimed at undermining the Western agenda in the region. In light of this theoretical framework, we consider certain features of the WB, such as high economic dependence on non-Western powers, strategic alignment with the political agendas of non-Euro-Atlantic powers, and limited integration with the West in general, as vulnerabilities. However, in themselves these features derive from a state's free exercise of its sovereignty and are in no way inherently wrong.

While the method of analysis used here was designed to identify vulnerabilities exploitable by any and all hostile actors (internal or external, state or non-state), this article focuses in particular on the vulnerabilities that Russia may try to weaponise, as Moscow has already demonstrated both the willingness and the ability to interfere in the region. Justifying its actions by proclaiming itself the 'protector of Slavhood and traditional values and branding itself as the counterbalance to the West's 'aggressive'<sup>2</sup> policies of exerting control over the region, Russia's engagement with the Western Balkan countries depends to a large extent on the 'opportunities' for interference provided by each of these states. Whether such



engagement is purely opportunistic or part of a carefully planned strategy must be the subject of 'supply-side' analysis, focused on the perpetrator; our present study takes a 'demand-side' approach, but notes that many of the resilience gaps that the Western Balkans exhibit happen to coincide with Russia's favourite directions of attack.

**Vulnerability.** This report understands structural vulnerabilities as a set of recurring enabling conditions within a target environment that allow hostile actors to exploit, manipulate, and leverage those conditions to advance their own goals, thus introducing a security risk for the country in question. Such structural vulnerabilities can, for example, lead to social strife, economic standstill, state capture, deep domestic divisions over the strategic agenda, or other outcomes that disrupt social order or paralyse a state's capacity to fulfil its functions. Against this background, antagonistic internal or external actors find it easier to manoeuvre and achieve their own objectives.

**Hostile influence.** Hostile influence is used to describe a set of actions against a target state or society that exploit vulnerabilities and project interests that run counter to the well-being of the target country. As intent is often difficult to identify, hostile influence is understood as the potential result/end state generated by recurrent and consistent harmful activities of a foreign actor.<sup>3</sup> Not every vulnerability is exploited by a foreign actor and not every domestic failure is

caused by external hostile influence. While it is important for governments to make this distinction and not avoid blame for their own wrongdoings, existing vulnerabilities must be addressed to reduce the potential for opportunistic exploitation.<sup>4</sup>

Malign influence in the Western Balkans undermines the governance of these countries, the rule of law, their Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and in extreme cases may even lead to (*de facto* or *de jure*) loss of sovereignty. The impact of malign influence can range from harming the legitimacy of state institutions in the minds of citizens they serve to preventing the ability of governments to make full use of their powers in creating effective mechanisms of resilience.

**Outline.** The article begins with a description of the methodological framework used to create a Permeability Index that identifies areas in which the Western Balkan counties may be vulnerable to hostile influence. This is followed by a brief overview of the Total Permeability Index score for each country, and then a more detailed analysis of areas of vulnerability per domain and per country as indicated by their sub-domain index scores. A summary of the key findings and policy recommendations concludes the report.

**Permeability Index:** *instrument for assessing a country's vulnerability to hostile influence.*



# METHODOLOGY

Global Focus Center first tested the methodology for analysing a country's permeability to hostile influence in the Black Sea Region (Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, and Romania were the test cases) and then replicated the process in the Western Balkans. The methodological framework investigates existing structural vulnerabilities, focusing on the resilience gaps that offer pathways for subversion, destabilisation, and hostile influence. Its purpose is to identify possible inroads into the 'immune systems' of the six Western Balkan countries and offer policy solutions to decision makers and other stakeholders to improve resilience and preparedness for attack. The study undertakes a critical examination of the threats faced by each of the six Western Balkan countries individually; the level of awareness and understanding of these threats by each country's political elites, governments, and other stakeholders (such as civil society, the general public, the private sector, etc.); the capabilities for counteracting such threats and the institutional frameworks already in place, as well as the actions taken so far in terms of preparedness and response measures.

The methodological framework is an innovative and practical instrument that can be applied to different environments to assess the permeability of a country to

hostile influence; it combines qualitative and quantitative analysis in a mixed-methods approach. The initial hypothesis was that vulnerabilities can be of various types and thus will potentially affect multiple spheres of civilian life. For the purposes of the present study, we have defined four main areas that lend themselves to hostile influence: **Society, Economy, Politics, and Foreign Policy and Security.**

The qualitative analysis for this study was carried out by country experts, who were asked to conduct an in-depth review of the main weaknesses in each of the four identified areas of potential vulnerability. This analysis was complemented by a series of workshops organised in all six Western Balkan capitals in the first half of 2019. In parallel, quantitative research was conducted in which local experts (government representatives, journalists, NGO experts, academics, etc.) from the six countries were asked to respond to domain-specific questionnaires.<sup>5</sup> A minimum of 30 experts were questioned per each domain in each country. They were asked to provide a numerical value for each statement on the assigned questionnaire using a modified Likert scale (Figure 1). A theoretical value of 1.5 was set to describe a recognised vulnerability perceived as not immediately alarming and possible to mitigate through a long-term strategy. The



resulting Permeability Index<sup>6</sup>—calculated by averaging these scores—makes it possible to evaluate vulnerabilities on a country-by-country basis and monitor them over time; it can also be used to facilitate an impact assessment of the policies designed to redress these vulnerabilities.

Thus, if a country's Permeability Index score in a given domain is less than

1.5, then that vulnerability is not easily exploitable by hostile actors. Countries with a score above of 2 should immediate put countermeasures into place. A score of 2.25 indicates systemic weaknesses of major concern. A notable advantage of the Permeability Index is that it also enables us to identify vulnerable sub-domains within a larger domain that may not be particularly permeable overall.

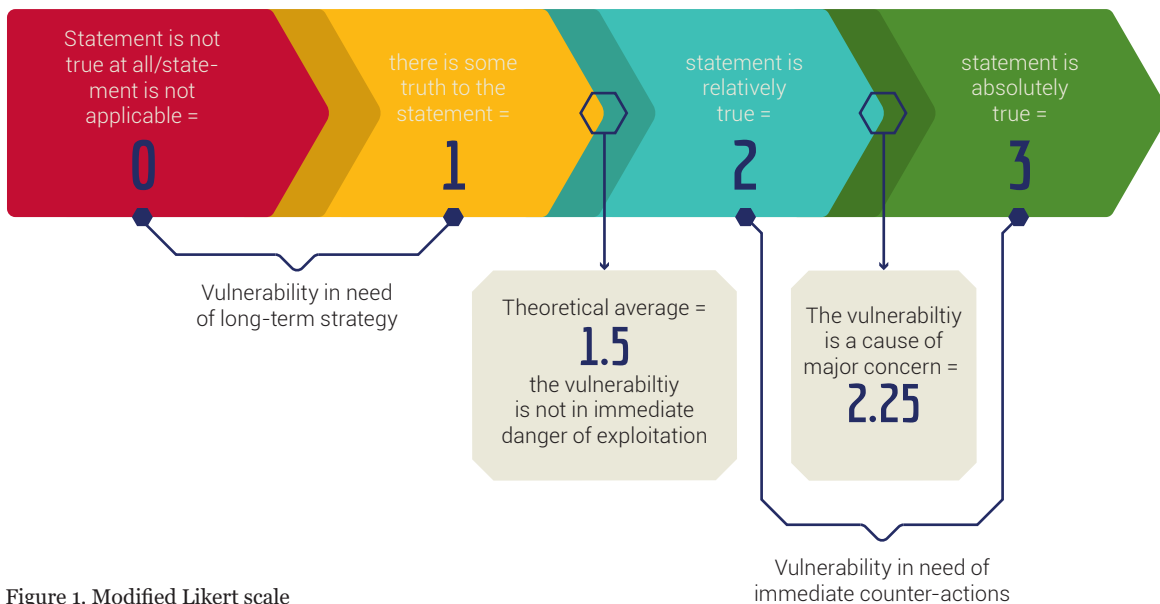


Figure 1. Modified Likert scale





# PERMEABILITY INDEX OF THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

## Total Permeability Index

The index facilitates a cross-country comparison of the vulnerabilities that can be exploited by a hostile actor to influence a target audience. The six countries in the Western Balkan region exhibit a variety of challenges, from social circumstances, such as pro-Russian cultural sympathies, to foreign and security policy differences, i.e. their differing degrees of Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Consequently, mapping and comparing these differences in vulnerabilities can yield a number of lessons that can be used to design a more successful and context-specific strategy to counter hostile influence in each country.

The countries closest to the theoretical neutral score of 1.5, and thus the least vulnerable to external threats, are North Macedonia and Albania (scoring 1.51 and 1.52 respectively).

Overall, **North Macedonia** scored lowest on the Total Permeability Index. Nevertheless, some worrying vulnerabilities have been identified. These are power concentration and weak institutions, coupled with low public trust and political favouritism.

**Albania** had the second lowest score on the Total Permeability Index, most likely due to the country's cohesive society. Still, matters of concern include social inequality, low trust in institutions, a corrupt and captured state, clientelism and political favouritism, concentrated power, and cartelisation.

Scoring slightly higher on the Total Permeability Index are **Montenegro** (1.62) and **Kosovo** (1.65). The relatively healthy score of these two states is largely due to their relatively stable foreign policies: Kosovo is perceived as having clearly formulated regional foreign policy goals (which at least provides unity of purpose around the issue of recognition and normalisation of relations with Serbia, though this may otherwise hold it captive to a single-issue agenda) and Western orientation; roughly the same is true of Montenegro, which has recently joined NATO.

**Montenegro's** weaknesses are perceived as being generated by political misdemeanours indicative of a corrupt and captured state, dependent institutions, political favouritism, and irregular elections, as well as cartelisation, non-transparent business ownership, and lack of public trust in









institutions and in politicians and journalists with pro-Western affiliations.-

**Kosovo** is vulnerable in the political domain because of uncertainty about a future conflict due to Kosovo’s status (unrecognised statehood), lack of trust in institutions and political parties, political favouritism and inefficiency of the political system.

**Serbia’s** Total Permeability Index score is moderately high (1.73). The greatest vulnerability is perceived to be generated by politicians acting to increase their control over the state (potentially leading to a captured state situation). The lack of transparency in political decisions and the fact that power is held by an impermeable political elite (with the virtual impossibility of outsiders gaining access to power), negatively influences opinions regarding the sincerity and sustainability of political efforts such as those required to accede to the EU. Trust in the Serbian media and in Serbian politicians is eroding, and the gap is

being filled by the widespread perception of political favouritism, cartelisation, election irregularities, and a dysfunctional system that generates social inequality.

By comparison, **Bosnia and Herzegovina** fared worst on the Total Permeability Index, with an exceptionally high score of 2.05, revealing it as the region’s most vulnerable country. This alarming situation is a materialisation of its complicated political, social, and economic environment. The deep divisions between Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the two constituent entities) is evident in the lack of clarity over the country’s strategic orientation. Furthermore, the population is polarised over its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, with Bosnian Serbs mainly opposing NATO membership. Trust in the political system and in the media is low. Political favouritism and influence, concentration of wealth and power, and ethnicity- and religion-based economic inequalities are all matters of very high concern.

Country	Total Country Permeability Index				
	Total	Per domain			
		Society	Economy	Politics	Foreign Policy & Security
 Albania	1.52	1.23	1.51	1.86	1.48
 BiH	2.05	2.03	1.87	2.37	1.94
 Kosovo	1.65	1.55	1.51	2	1.53
 Montenegro	1.62	1.6	1.57	1.91	1.41
 N. Macedonia	1.51	1.4	1.41	1.79	1.42
 Serbia	1.73	1.84	1.34	1.91	1.85



## The potential for Russian influence in the Western Balkans

As already outlined above, the Western Balkans show significant weaknesses in the four areas identified for analysis, some of which have already been exploited by hostile actors, including Russia.<sup>7</sup>

**Society:** The appeal of 'Slavhood' in the countries with predominantly Slavic populations (such as Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska in BiH, or Northern Kosovo—home of the Kosovar Serbs) provides potential for Russia to exert soft power, in areas such as education, culture, and religion. Russia also exploits the limited access of a significant percentage of the population to educational resources. In Serbia, Russia awards scholarships for engineering studies in Moscow and extends the promise of future employment at the Gazprom-owned Serbian gas company NIS. Russia also operates a dynamic cultural centre in Banja Luka University in BiH through the state-sponsored Russkiy Mir Foundation.

The Russian Church has adopted the notion of a 'Russkiy Mir' ['Russian World'] promoted by the Russian government, a cultural sphere that embraces Russian and Russian-speaking communities around the world and establishes cooperative relations with other Orthodox Slavic communities. Religious divisions in the Western Balkans create a vulnerability into which the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church can tap. The Russian Church has close relations with, and strong influence over the Serbian Orthodox Church. This influence is particularly visible in Montenegro and in the Kosovo Serb community. However, as Russian Patriarch Kirill's first visit to Albania in 2018 has shown, non-Slavic Orthodox communities have also established relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.

**Economy:** Although the region is small in size, Russia's participation in the economic sphere of the Western Balkans is of strategic importance thanks to Moscow's targeting of critical sectors such as energy (in BiH

and Serbia) and tourism/hospitality (in Montenegro). Such investments are not necessarily profitable for Russia but provide an opportunity to influence the internal affairs of these countries.

**Politics:** Russia is looking to exploit internal tensions within WB countries to disrupt stability or to hinder a pro-Western orientation. On two occasions, there have been reports of attempts by Russian agents to infiltrate the Albanian administration.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Russia has been connected to meddling in North Macedonia's internal politics prior to the start of the country's NATO accession process, by supporting former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and engaging with anti-government protests and calls for a boycott of the name change referendum.<sup>9</sup> In Montenegro, Russia has exploited internal polarisation regarding the country's foreign policy orientation,<sup>10</sup> and has taken advantage of its cyber weaknesses.<sup>11</sup>

**Foreign Policy and Security:** The Kremlin is an active participant in the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, due to position on the UN Security Council. Russia has been a major opponent of Kosovo's independence and has actively backed Serbia's political manoeuvring against Kosovo's bids to join UNESCO and INTERPOL.

Unresolved regional disputes give foreign actors significant leverage over the Western Balkans. At the same time, military dependence on Russia is a worrying weakness, especially in the case of Serbia. It relies on aging equipment from former Yugoslavia that needs refurbishment and renewal, and it is cheaper to seek deals with Russia and other former Soviet countries, including Belarus, than to turn to the West.

# Society Permeability Index







<i>Sub-domain</i>	<i>Index test statement</i>
The Divisions Within	There is a movement or tendency towards regional secession within our current borders.
	Significant ethnic minorities are excluded from political, economic, or social representation.
	Significant religious or confessional minorities are excluded from political, economic, or social representation.
	There is an ongoing conflict between religious believers and secularists regarding how society should work.
	A significant part of the population believes my country is losing its sovereignty and independence to make its own political decisions.
The State and the Fair Society	Violent behaviour often occurs towards individuals based on their ethnicity, clan, or religious beliefs.
	Many people believe public institutions or public service providers are not there to help them or do not do enough for them.
	Many people believe election results and proceedings are false or manipulated.
	There are regions of the country or sections of society that are much poorer than others.
	A significant part of the population believes people can succeed only if they have political support or patronage.
	A significant part of the population would prefer a strong and authoritative leader rather than the more deliberative institutions of democracy.
The Pace of Change	Social or development aid organisations based in non-Western countries have a strong presence in my society.
	There is an intensifying or strong line of thinking that glorifies the country's identity in historical, pre-modern, and/or non-Western terms.
	There is a strong feeling of nostalgia for how things used to be in the country before democracy/capitalism.
	Many people believe that social or economic modernisation in the country is taking place too quickly.
	The dominant religious institution or institutions is/are strongly opposing some of the modernising changes that are happening in society.





<i>Sub-domain</i>	<i>Index test statement</i>
The Outside World	Many people believe that Western businesses/capital are taking over or crowding out national businesses/capital.
	Many people have a superficial representation of the West because they have limited direct exposure to Western countries, cinema, media, or languages.
	There is a significant part of the mainstream media discourse in the country that is critical of NATO or the EU.
	Many people have negative personal opinions about NATO or the EU.
	Many of the political leaders engaging in pro-Western public discourse are considered corrupt or insincere.
	Some nationalist or anti-Western public figures, artists, or groups are widely popular.
The Media and Civil Society	Fake or misleading political or news stories often garner more visibility than their rebuttals or clarifications.
	A significant part of the media, NGOs, and informal groups in my country are openly arguing against modernisation or liberal democracy.
	Journalists and/or civil society activists are often labelled foreign spies, mercenaries, or servants of foreign powers that aim to destabilise the country.
	Media and civil society fail to properly warn or prepare the wider public to resist media manipulation.
	Nationalist or anti-Western views from new or little-known sources often go viral on social media.
	The activities of the media and civil society rarely focus on foreign policy or defence risks and vulnerabilities in a professional and unbiased manner.
	Some regions of the country or sections of society are significantly more likely to be manipulated by fake or misleading media.



Country	Society Sub-domains					Total Society Permeability Index
	The Divisions Within	The State and the Fair Society	The Pace of Change	The Outside World	Media and Civil Society	
 Albania	0.66	2.19	0.97	0.7	1.62	1.23
 BiH	2.04	2.32	1.77	1.77	2.27	2.03
 Kosovo	1.70	2.05	1.11	1.21	1.68	1.55
 Montenegro	0.87	2.30	1.54	1.45	1.83	1.60
 N. Macedonia	0.97	1.98	1.48	0.97	1.61	1.40
 Serbia	1.34	2.32	1.59	1.86	2.08	1.84

The working theory at the beginning of this study was that the social domain would likely present the highest number of vulnerabilities in all six countries due, among other threats, to disinformation campaigns and governments' inability to tackle such campaigns. However, the results paint a different picture: in four of the six countries, the Social Permeability Index score is below the 1.5 average (Albania – 1.23, North Macedonia – 1.40) or only slightly above it (Kosovo – 1.55, Montenegro – 1.60).

Even so, growing divisions in Western Balkan countries (prominently weaponised by both external and internal disruptors in Kosovo and BiH) are affecting all fields of life. Ethnic nationalism is also present in varying degrees of manifestation across the board. Divisive and self-victimising narratives are funnelled through sensationalist media, an opportunity widely exploited by Russia.<sup>12</sup>

Media remain the most direct route to malign influence over societies, and this is exactly where all countries have a score of around 2 or greater. Such high scores for vulnerabilities in the media space pave the way for hostile actors to influence the region through manipulated information. The media and civil society fail to properly warn the general public or help prepare it to resist manipulation. Continued attempts by the government and allied press outlets to undermine independent journalists through legal harassment and smear campaigns (especially in Serbia) have left societies without an important watchdog and defender against propaganda.

### Albania

Albania has the lowest Society Permeability Index score (1.23) and demonstrates a high degree of resilience deriving first and foremost from its internal cohesion,



strong identity, and strategic Euro-Atlantic orientation. The society's homogeneity in its Western orientation makes Albania's population a difficult target for external influence, especially for those promoting anti-Western messages.

On the other hand, seemingly positive circumstances can mask surprising soft spots: although the country enjoys religious freedom, this also creates a vulnerability as foreign actors are increasing their investments in religious buildings. Other areas within the Society domain are also cause for major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index):

- social inequality
- low trust in public institutions
- political favouritism
- some regions/societal groups are especially likely to be targeted by manipulated information
- higher visibility for manipulated news/false information than for later rebuttals
- irregularities during election proceedings

### **North Macedonia**

North Macedonia's relatively low score on the Society Permeability Index (1.4) may have a slightly different explanation. The study was conducted in the context of then-recent political developments, notably the signing of the Prespa Agreement, which unlocked North Macedonia's NATO

integration and was regarded as having a decisive role in opening the door for negotiations with the EU. Although not at the same level as in Albania, North Macedonia enjoys internal cohesion when it comes to the country's Western orientation; this makes the society resilient to anti-Western agendas and narratives. However, the oftentimes corrupt media still provide a channel for such narratives. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) include:

- political favouritism
- social inequality
- low trust in public institutions

### **Kosovo**

Kosovar's Society Permeability Index score remains close to the theoretical average (1.55), although social divisions, the state of the media, and the poor access of civil society to institutional dialogue are worrying. These vulnerabilities overlap with the fault lines created by ethnic tensions between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, as well as worries that some ethnic groups are better represented politically than others. Kosovar society is also thought to be susceptible to manipulated information, especially as the weak media, subservient to political interests, do not function properly as a watchdog protecting the public from hostile influence. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- social inequality
- political favouritism
- low trust in public institutions



## Montenegro

Overall, Montenegro (1.6) also scored close to the average in the Society domain. With the exception of enjoying the privilege of a cohesive society, however, all other sub-domains in this section present vulnerabilities that are exploitable from abroad—from challenges to its pro-Western orientation to concerns over the speed of modernisation, and from the state of the media and civic activism to the general fairness of society. Furthermore, politicians and journalists (especially those with pro-Western affiliations) are considered corrupt and unreliable, and sometimes even portrayed as foreign agents. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- political favouritism
- irregularities during election proceedings
- social inequality
- low trust in public institutions
- journalists and civil society are labelled as working for the West to destabilise the country
- pro-Western politicians considered corrupt

## Serbia

Serbia scored significantly higher on the Social Permeability Index (1.84), with only the social cohesion score remaining below the theoretical average. The society's Western orientation is marred by low trust in pro-Western politicians and abundant

exposure of the public to non-Western culture. The state of the media and of civil society is especially worrying but, just as in all of the other WB countries, the most serious overall concern is the lack of a sense of fairness in Serbian society. Other areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) include:

- social inequality
- political favouritism
- journalists and civil society are labelled as working for the West to destabilise the country
- higher visibility for manipulated news/false information than for later rebuttals
- some regions/societal groups are especially likely targets of manipulated information
- low trust in public institutions
- negative attitudes towards the EU and NATO

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

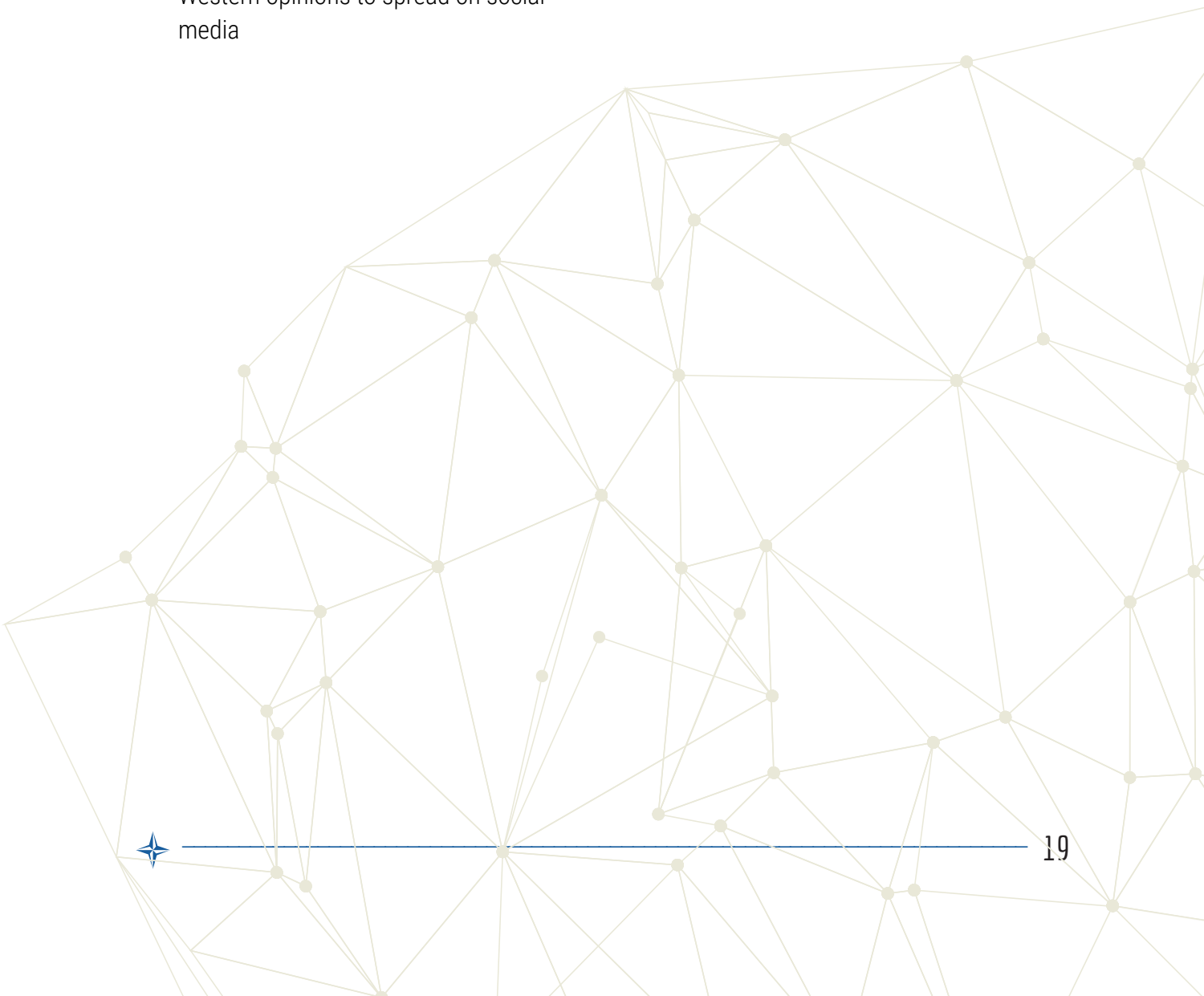
BiH had the worst results in the Social Permeability Index, with an overall score of 2.03. Much like in Serbia, media and civil society and the lack of a sense of fairness of BiH society are the two areas at highest risk of exploitation. Areas of high concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) vary across the sub-domains and include:

- higher visibility for manipulated news/false information than for later rebuttals
- low trust in public institutions
- political favouritism





- residual affinities and romanticised feelings for the 'good old days' (of Yugoslavia)
- widespread social inequality
- journalists and civil society are labelled as working for the West to destabilise the country
- lack of safeguards (strong media and civil society) against information manipulation
- some regions/societal groups are especially likely targets of manipulated information
- underrepresentation of minorities
- irregularities during election proceedings
- opportunities for nationalist or anti-Western opinions to spread on social media



# Economic Permeability Index

<i>Sub-domain</i>	<i>Index test statement</i>
Sustainability of National Debt and Deficit	The combined status of the country's national debt and its budgetary deficit is generating anxiety for investors.
	The country has an unsuccessful working relationship with international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.
	The country is generally unable to borrow from the free market (domestic or international) at low or reasonable rates.
Competitiveness and Transparency	The government's macro-economic governance or oversight institutions are incompetent, weak, or highly politicised.
	Weak data collection and lack of transparency policies have made cartelisation possible.
	The level of economic competitiveness is low, which makes it easier for a small number of wealthy individuals to control strategic sectors of the economy.
	The country's State-Owned Enterprise sector is large and rife with corruption and political cronyism.
	Most local magnates have made their fortunes through political favouritism.
	The country's growth model and political situation are likely to increase economic inequality for some regions or groups.
Control Over Local Business	The share of undeclared or illegal labour in the country's total labour force is significant.
	A significant percentage of local businesses belongs to non-Western countries directly or through clear intermediaries.
	Key economic sectors and state infrastructure are owned or controlled by non-Western entities.
	The current flow of investment is limited, and economic growth is slower than expected.
	A significant share of the banking market is owned by non-Western entities.
Locals Working Abroad	A large part of the population working abroad is employed in non-Western countries.
	A sharp decrease in the level of remittances to the home country would create chaos.
Energy Self-sufficiency	The country relies heavily on imports from a single major supplier.
	Key energy-intensive industries have a significant influence over the country's political decisions.
	The country's key infrastructure is technologically dependent on non-Western countries or entities.
	The country's energy dependency is used by another country to influence internal politics.



Sub-domain	Index test statement
Trade and Tourism	A significant share of the country's trade (in general or by strategic sector) is with non-Western countries.
	Important trade routes or energy connections go through the territory of non-Western countries.
	A significant part of the country's tourism comes from or through non-Western countries.
Media Business Model	National media in the country are guided by illegitimate political or economic interests, rather than profit-making.
	A significant share of the national media market is owned or controlled by non-Western entities.

Country	Economy Sub-domains							Total Economic Permeability Index
	Sustainability of National Debt and Deficit	Competitiveness and Transparency	Control Over Local Business	Locals Working Abroad	Energy Self-sufficiency	Trade and Tourism	Media Business Models	
Albania	1.5	2.47	1.63	1.07	0.9	1.13	1.87	1.51
BiH	2.18	2.71	1.65	1.57	1.47	1.44	2.03	1.87
Kosovo	1.69	2.44	1.27	1.38	1.27	1.06	1.50	1.51
Montenegro	1.82	2.29	1.37	1.27	1.15	1.59	1.50	1.57
N. Macedonia	1.38	2.14	1.23	1.13	1.14	1.21	1.63	1.41
Serbia	1.00	2.32	1.30	0.82	1.45	0.76	1.73	1.34

Apart from BiH, which again scores highest in the region (1.87), all other countries remained close to the theoretical average in the economic domain—Albania (1.51), Kosovo (1.51), Montenegro (1.57)—and even below it: North Macedonia (1.41) and Serbia (1.34). However, these results need to be contextualised. Much of the hostile influence over WB countries' economies is actually exercised indirectly using political/foreign policy instruments and is therefore factored

under those respective domains. To be clear, for the purposes of this report, these data are not intended to be an instrument for assessing the state and performance of the economies in the region; we only aim to identify those vulnerabilities that expose these economies to hostile influence.

From this perspective, economic hardship feeds social dissatisfaction and undermines the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Western



Balkans by generating anti-establishment sentiment. Endemic corruption, weak economic policies, and poor planning, as well as the manifestation of nationalistic sentiments in economic policy (such as Prishtina's political decision to raise tariffs on Serbian and Bosnian goods in 2018) are common vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans states. Organised crime and high-level corruption (measured under the umbrella term 'cartelisation') are very serious vulnerabilities in all analysed countries.

The energy sector in the region is in need of revamping—replacing aging equipment and diversifying sources. This has created opportunities for Russia and other foreign actors to collaborate with local governments. While the EU is still the most important economic partner, energy dependency and non-transparent public procurement procedures are of concern.

### **Serbia**

Serbia scored below the theoretical average on the Economic Permeability Index, with an overall result of 1.34. Corruption, clientelism, state capture, and high unemployment are Serbia's most severe vulnerabilities. Macro-economic governance is poor, and limited investments lead to a stagnating economy. Energy dependency also raises some concerns, as this is one of the most commonly used tools by external actors to influence internal politics. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- the media sector is influenced by political and economic interests
- high levels of illegal labour
- corruption and political cronyism<sup>13</sup> across state-owned enterprises
- cartelisation

### **North Macedonia**

For most of the sub-domains, North Macedonia scored below the theoretical average of 1.5, which results in a total score on the Economic Permeability Index of 1.41. Still, macro-economic policies are perceived as inefficient, and the media business model as unsustainable, hence leading to corrupt media/biased reporting. Lack of competitiveness and transparency add to North Macedonia's resilience gaps. Political favouritism, cartelisation, and political cronyism, as well as concentrated wealth in strategic sectors have also been mentioned by respondents. Of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) is the use of political favouritism to accumulate wealth.

### **Kosovo**

Kosovo scored close to the theoretical average (1.51). No immediate action is necessarily needed, but long-term resilience-building is required. No major weaknesses have been ascertained in economic sectors such as trade, tourism, energy, or business ownership. Still, possible stagnation of economic growth or foreseeable chaos if remittances drop sharply can be important vulnerabilities, especially when coupled



with corruption, political cronyism, and favouritism. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- corruption and political cronyism across state-owned enterprises
- the use of political favouritism to accumulate wealth
- control of strategic sectors by a small wealthy group
- high levels of illegal labour
- ineffective growth model to decrease inequality
- cartelisation
- poor macroeconomic governance

### **Albania**

Although overall Albania is not very vulnerable in the economic domain (1.51), some sub-domains are at a very high risk of being exploited. The main vulnerability generators are political favouritism, concentration of wealth, widespread corruption, and political cronyism in the public sector. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) mainly regard business ownership:

- the media sector is influenced by political and economic interests
- the use of political favouritism to accumulate wealth
- control of strategic sectors by a small wealthy group
- corruption and political cronyism across state-owned enterprises
- ineffective growth model to decrease inequality
- high levels of illegal labour

- limited investment and slow economic growth
- cartelisation

### **Montenegro**

In the economic domain, Montenegro presents an overall score of 1.57, slightly over the theoretical average. The energy sector and remittances from the Montenegrin diaspora are the least susceptible to hostile influence. The country also enjoys a relatively stable model of business ownership. Whilst the media business model is not thought to be an immediate problem, use of media outlets for political reasons has raised concerns. The tourism sector has been assessed as relatively vulnerable due to increased tourism from non-Western countries.

The main weaknesses lie in the steady growth of national debt and deficit, and in the fact that many businesses lack transparent ownership. Political favouritism is again seen as a major weakness, coupled with cartelisation, wealth concentration, widespread corruption, and political cronyism. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- poor macroeconomic governance
- the use of political favouritism to accumulate wealth
- cartelisation
- control of strategic sectors by a small wealthy group
- corruption and political cronyism across state-owned enterprises



## Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH's permeability index in this field exceeds the 2.0 threshold, showing it to be particularly vulnerable. The results within this domain, however, are varied, and whilst sectors such as trade, tourism, and energy do not present major weaknesses, other areas are at very high risk of hostile influence. The causes vary widely, ranging from the high numbers of BiH citizens employed in non-Western countries, to limited investment and slow economic growth. The sustainability of the media business models creates one important problem; the state of the national debt and deficit, another. Lack of competitiveness and transparency across the entire business sector is another major issue.

Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- corruption and political cronyism across state-owned enterprises
- the use of political favouritism to accumulate wealth
- control of strategic sectors by a small wealthy group
- cartelisation
- high levels of illegal labour
- ineffective growth model to decrease inequality
- the media sector is influenced by political and economic interests
- limited investment and slow economic growth
- poor macroeconomic governance
- sharp decrease in remittances would cause chaos









# Political Permeability Index

<i>Sub-domain</i>	<i>Index test statement</i>
Constitutional and Electoral System	The legal and institutional layout of the separation of powers is unclear or unpredictable.
	The system of democratic checks and balances is dysfunctional or unpredictable.
	The distribution of constitutional powers overwhelmingly favours the political actors who resort to populism during electoral campaigns.
	The legislation or practice of raising funds for political parties is not overseen by independent institutions in practice.
Political Parties	The country's institutions are ineffective in stopping illegitimate influence on elections.
	Political parties have a hard time forming sustainable governing coalitions after elections.
	Generally, political parties in opposition are inactive and unable to properly criticise or take action against contentious government decisions.
	Generally, the government's legislative agenda is unpredictable and can change overnight.
	Political power within parties is generally concentrated in the hands of one person or a certain cohesive group of interests.
Representation	The institutional layout of the country makes creating a new political party extremely difficult.
	Generally, the priorities of political parties are significantly different from the priorities of the general population.
	The priorities of ethnic minorities are not well represented by the country's elective and administrative institutions.
	There are significant and cohesive social groups, tied by religion, sexual orientation, wealth, or other binding principles, that feel they are being strategically unrepresented by any relevant political actor.
	Independent civil society organisations have a disproportionately limited influence over political parties or government.
	Political elites are easily influenced by the views of official religious institutions.
The main allegiance of a significant number of people is not towards the country, but towards their clan, informal interest group, or another country.	



Sub-domain	Index test statement
Public Administration and the Rationality of the State	Some political elites openly believe that liberal democracy is not the best political system.
	Policymaking is more influenced by ideology or political interests than by evidence and science.
	Anti-establishment or anti-system parties or ideas have thrived in recent elections.
	A significant number of the country's political elites are mimicking democratic behaviour solely to ease its EU/NATO accession.
	Key civil servants in public administration are controlled by political interest groups, although they are nominally independent.
	The public administration is generally inefficient in implementing public policy.
Rule of Law	The justice system in general tends to be significantly influenced by political or business interests.
	Important political elites tend to be above the law and do not necessarily comply with laws or judicial decisions.
	The non-elective institutions that frame the democratic system (Constitutional Court, Electoral Authority) are highly politicised or irrelevant.
	There is significant public discourse accusing institutions (judiciary, police, military) of force, distorting the country's democratic order.

Country	Political Sub-domains					Total Political Permeability Index
	Constitutional and Electoral System	Political Parties	Representation	Public Administration and Rationality	Rule of Law	
 Albania	2.06	2	1.48	1.77	2	1.86
 BiH	2.53	2.25	2.24	2.29	2.55	2.37
 Kosovo	2.02	2.07	1.71	1.97	2.20	2.00
 Montenegro	1.98	1.46	1.76	1.91	2.42	1.91
 N. Macedonia	1.99	1.81	1.46	1.78	1.92	1.79
 Serbia	2.05	1.75	1.47	2.17	2.13	1.91





The Western Balkan region is especially vulnerable in the political domain, where all countries score near or over a theoretical value of 2 on the Political Permeability Index (corresponding to a state of high permeability by hostile interference). While BiH's score is exceptionally high (2.36), the other countries perform only relatively better—North Macedonia 1.79, Albania 1.86, Serbia and Montenegro both 1.91, and Kosovo 2.00.

While high levels of corruption, state capture, and organised crime mean that it would not be surprising for politicians and political parties to find themselves the subjects of legitimate media investigations, they may just as well become easy targets of politically motivated campaigns originating abroad. The nexus between politics and crime, and the difference between political parties' priorities and those of the general population have also contributed to a high sense of disillusionment with the political class. Democracy is thus undermined, exacerbating the sense that large parts of society are politically under-represented. This approach to politics has perpetuated state weakness and delegitimised institutions, while the lack of internal democracy within political parties has also reduced public trust in them. In some of the analysed countries, the inability to negotiate a consensus leads to stalemate, even when such failure clearly hinders the achievement of strategic national interests such as EU integration<sup>14</sup> or accession to NATO.<sup>15</sup>

Another vulnerability that links all Western Balkan countries is generated by the clientelist, transactional, and zero-sum political competition. The party in power is able to control and distribute the limited public resources in the economy, while the opposition seeks to rally the part of the population left outside this discretionary mechanism of distributing access to those resources, or even look to foreign political organisations for support.<sup>16</sup> Where they are democratic and progressive, the formal political opposition forces are weak and incapable of coagulating constituencies—as witnessed in the wave of civic protests in Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018–19.

The concentration of power also makes political dialogue more difficult at a time when even normalisation processes are being politically instrumentalised; this exacerbates ethnic nationalist sentiments and creates ample space for disruptors, both internal and external, to manoeuvre.

### **North Macedonia**

North Macedonia scored lowest (1.79) but not so low that its problems should not be promptly addressed, including those of state capture, rule of law, and nationalism—all of which erode the legitimacy of the political system and thus create a fragile environment, susceptible to hostile influence. Generally, the country enjoys relatively satisfactory political representation, but weaknesses remain



in the state of the public administration. Policymaking is believed to be based on group and personal interests and ideology, and civil servants are not considered independent. Further, power within political parties is concentrated in the hands of one person or a small group of people. The independence of democratic institutions presents the biggest challenge, as the justice system is generally seen to be reliant on outside factors, other than the rule of law. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- concentrated power within political parties
- a justice system captive to political and business interests

### **Albania**

Albania's total Permeability Index score (1.86) for the Political domain is above the theoretical average of 1.5, signalling the existence vulnerabilities. Although sometimes political parties' priorities differ from those of the public, the society is generally seen as well represented politically. On the other hand, the administration is thought to be politicised and inefficient in implementing policies. While holders of public office are above the law, rule of law is unsatisfactory, and the judicial system is not independent. Power is concentrated and new players find it very difficult to access. The government's policy agenda is unpredictable and easily changed. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- concentrated power within political parties
- a justice system captive to political and business interests
- political dependence of civil servants
- impunity of political elites
- unpredictable legislative agenda

### **Montenegro**

Montenegro (1.91) scored close to the 2.0 threshold for concern in the political domain, indicative of a vulnerable state. The lack of internal democracy within political parties has reduced public trust in them, leading to the perception that state is corrupt and captured, its institutions are not independent, political favouritism is common, and elections are considered a target for manipulation. The inability of political parties to negotiate a consensus regarding issues of national interest has reduced this trust further still. The fragmented opposition, composed of small parties, and the centralised power of the governing party highlight possible political corruption. The use of local political parties to make decisions favourable to Russia is an inexpensive, but effective, way of influencing the country.

Neither political institutions, nor policy-making processes enjoy the trust of the Montenegrin citizens. The system of checks and balances on the constitutional and electoral system is dysfunctional, resulting in election irregularities and a lack of transparency in political party funding.



The country's mixed record concerning the rule of law is another big challenge. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) include:

- political dependence of civil servants
- concentrated power within political parties
- a justice system captive to political and business interests
- politicised and/or irrelevant democratic institutions
- impunity of political elites
- policymaking influenced by personal and group ideology and political interests
- inefficient implementation of public policies

### Serbia

Like Montenegro, Serbia scored just below the 2.0 threshold (1.91), indicating that some aspects of its political conduct make it prone to hostile influence. Despite increasing public dissatisfaction with its autocratic government, the concentration of political power at the top is making political dialogue impossible and democratic and progressive opposition forces are weak and incapable of coagulating constituencies. Serbia's score in the political domain reveals vulnerabilities connected with the sustainability of democracy in the country and the independence of its institutions. If these are thwarted by widespread political influence it could lead to state capture. Poor adherence to rule of law indicates yet another democratic pillar at risk of

exploitation. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- concentrated power within political parties
- political dependence of civil servants
- impunity of political elites
- policymaking influenced by group interests
- dysfunctional system of democratic checks and balances
- mimicking of democratic behaviour to serve EU/NATO interests ('façade democracy')
- inefficient implementation of public policies
- ineffective legislation to protect elections
- a justice system captive to political and business interests
- the distribution of constitutional powers favours the populists

### Kosovo

Kosovo's score (2.0) in the political permeability index reveals a weak state. There are many areas of concern, including the influence some religious leaders exercise over government and politicians, the lack of an independent civil service, and self-serving policies driven by group interests. The non-transparent funding of parties, especially during elections, coupled with a concentration of power create space for interference. These results paint a picture of a captured state, where the judicial system and the other institutions that should function as pillars of democracy



are politicised, and where political appointments are distributed in exchange for political favours. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) include:

- concentrated power within political parties
- political dependence of civil servants
- unpredictable legislative agenda
- non-transparent funding of political parties
- a justice system captive to political and business interests
- democratic institutions are politicised and/or irrelevant
- impunity of political elites
- inefficient implementation of public policies
- policymaking influenced by group interests
- difficulties forming coalition governments
- ineffective legislation to protect elections

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The political domain score (2.37) in BiH indicates severe vulnerabilities within all researched sub-domains with nearly all scores above the 2.25 line, meaning these weaknesses are of high risk of exploitation by hostile actors. The results indicate a captured state in which there is little trust in

institutions and their democratic legitimacy, and political elites are seen as the enablers of under-representation and concentration of power. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) include:







- impunity of political elites
- political dependence of civil servants
- populism helps politicians to gain political power
- differences in the priorities of political parties and the public
- inefficient implementation of public policies
- a justice system captive to political and business interests
- policymaking influenced by group interests
- concentrated power within political parties
- ineffective legislation to protect elections
- dysfunctional system of democratic checks and balances
- non-transparent funding of political parties
- difficulties forming coalition governments
- unpredictable legislative agenda
- institutions of force distort the democratic order
- democratic institutions are politicised and/or irrelevant
- non-representation for marginal groups



# Foreign Policy and Security Permeability Index

<i>Sub-domain</i>	<i>Index test statement</i>
Foreign Policy Orientation	Non-Euro-Atlantic countries have a direct significant influence on the government's foreign policy process.
	Foreign policy decision-makers in the country are polarised between Atlanticism and counter-Atlanticism.
	The general feeling in the country favours lifting economic sanctions against Russia, even if Russia doesn't implement the Ceasefire Agreement "Minsk II".
	The country's general solidarity for the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy agenda is in question.
National Resilience	There is a lack of general consensus regarding the country's strategic orientation at the level of political elites.
	The country would suffer significant damage in case of sabotage or a non-military attack on its critical infrastructure (including cyber).
	The country's resilience to hybrid warfare (including cyberwarfare, propaganda, election interference, and paramilitary structures) is underdeveloped in comparison to the threat.
	In case of a crisis or natural catastrophe, the country's intergovernmental agency coordination would be dysfunctional.
National Security	Important representatives of national security institutions are susceptible to political influence or cronyism.
	The country's national strategy does not go far enough in acknowledging the danger of information warfare and the need to develop resilience and response.
	Tensions between the country and one or more of its neighbours may degenerate into conflict.
	The country is located in a region that has a high potential for military conflict.
	The country's defence and foreign policy strategic framework and/or outlook is unsuited to existing regional security challenges.
	It is unlikely that the country would receive immediate support from allies and partners in case of an aggression.
Political and Strategic Narratives	Although there are pluses and minuses, NATO's regional presence is seen overall as detrimental to the security of the country.
	There is an articulated regional discourse of revisionism regarding international norms and treaties that would affect the country.
	There is an articulated narrative in some media or groups portraying the country's internal and/or external actions as fomenting regional instability.
Military (in) dependence	Threats or risks considered relevant by policymakers tend to be significantly different from the threats and risks identified by media and civil society.
	The country's military relies significantly on armaments made in non-Western countries.
	The country's current defence procurement priorities are unclear or unsuited to potential threats.
	National budgetary allocations for defence investment are inadequate or unpredictable.
	The country's level of military interoperability and multinational cooperation is insufficient.



Country	Foreign Policy and Security (FP&S) Sub-domains					Total FP&S Permeability Index
	Foreign Policy Orientation	National Resilience	Regional Security	Political and Strategic Narratives	Military Independence	
 Albania	0.93	2.09	1.27	1.43	1.7	1.48
 BiH	2.01	2.3	1.7	1.74	1.95	1.94
 Kosovo	0.94	2.00	1.68	1.56	1.46	1.53
 Montenegro	1.10	2.01	1.20	1.38	1.36	1.41
 N. Macedonia	0.91	2.24	1.23	1.44	1.30	1.42
 Serbia	1.91	2.02	1.61	2.05	1.65	1.85

Although not as vulnerable as the political domain, the foreign policy and security (FP&S) domain in the Western Balkans can be susceptible to foreign hostile influence; the link between a country's ability to formulate its foreign and security policies and the opportunities for foreign influence operations to target countries with weaknesses in domain must be considered. Countries that have managed to clearly define their foreign policy orientation are less vulnerable. A number of Western Balkan countries have failed to outline a clear foreign policy direction, especially Serbia and BiH, which scored just below the 2.00 threshold. However, the remaining WB countries scored around the 1.5 theoretical average—Albania (1.48), North Macedonia (1.42), Montenegro (1.41) and Kosovo (1.53).

The complicated relationships among these countries, and the unresolved disputes enduring after the fragmentation of Yugoslavia have created auspicious

conditions for exploiting holes in their foreign policy and security strategies. The top-down decision-making and decision implementation processes, typical of governments in this region, as well as the absence of mechanisms for consulting stakeholders in shaping a coherent foreign policy strategy, have often damaged fledgling efforts to settle disputes between neighbours. Moreover, these flaws in defining strategies and allocating resources to implement them are making Western Balkan states vulnerable to hostile actors' disruptive efforts. Foreign actors (Russia, China, and some Gulf States) seek to influence foreign policy in this region, but some neighbouring countries also seek to exert power over the internal politics, for example, in BiH.<sup>17</sup> Under pressure from Republika Srpska, BiH refuses to recognise Kosovo's independence—the only country in former Yugoslavia apart from Serbia to do so.



## Montenegro

Montenegro appears to be the least vulnerable of the six countries in the FP&S domain, with a score below the theoretical average—1.41. However, its national resilience is still not fully developed, indicating vulnerabilities to hybrid threats and hostile information campaigns. The only area of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) is that its national security institutions are subject to political influence and cronyism.

## North Macedonia

Similarly, North Macedonia (1.42) does not present significant vulnerabilities in the FP&S domain. Overall, the country has a firm Euro-Atlantic orientation, preparing for NATO accession and investing political effort in unblocking its path to joining the EU. Still, national resilience is not fully developed, and its weaknesses indicate the presence of hybrid threats coupled with underdeveloped societal resilience. Despite overall low vulnerability, North Macedonia's foreign policy and security agenda still needs to prioritise resilience-building and the development of a long-term strategy. Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- the country's resilience to hybrid warfare is particularly underdeveloped in comparison to the threat<sup>18</sup>
- important representatives of national security institutions are susceptible to political influence or cronyism

- significant infrastructural damage in case of a non-military attack

## Albania

Albania's score (1.48) is close to the theoretical average of 1.5, which means that although not a vulnerable state, the country is still weak in some security areas. Due to the country's clear Euro-Atlantic ambitions—it is the oldest NATO member in the region and the most pro-American—the country enjoys a firm and resilient foreign policy orientation. However, frustrations over having its negotiations for EU membership blocked have generated feelings of victimisation and increase the likelihood of Albania seeking alternative arrangements with other foreign actors. The only area of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) is that national security institutions are subject to political influence and cronyism.

## Kosovo

Kosovo (1.53) scored close to the theoretical average. Although there are no major concerns with its foreign policy orientation, there are serious issues connected to its role in maintaining regional stability. Considering the heated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade and the complicated status of Kosovo, the probability of conflict creates opportunities for hostile actors. Kosovo is assessed as not being resilient enough to face hybrid threats, and some civil service personnel are considered to



be under political influence and subject to cronyism. There are concerns that Kosovo will suffer significant damage in case of a non-military attack on key infrastructure. The only area of major concern (above 2.25 on the permeability index) is potential of conflict with a neighbour.

### Serbia

Serbia's scored above the theoretical average (1.85), which signals vulnerabilities that ought to be addressed immediately. While the country enjoys relative military independence and is not very concerned about regional security, its problems stem primarily from unclear or inadequate defence policy priorities. The country's foreign policy orientation raises some concerns, especially on the question of Serbia's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy agenda.

The country also lacks resilience to hybrid threats, including the ability to counter hostile narratives—such as the actively disseminated story that Serbia is fomenting regional instability. A particular area of concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) is that national security institutions are subject to political influence and cronyism.

### Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH scored highest (1.94) in the FP&S domain as well, with all the sub-domains scores above the theoretical average and close to or above the value of 2. The country's insufficient level of interoperability and international cooperation is an obstacle to genuine military independence. Just as some of its neighbours, BiH lacks a clear foreign policy orientation since its three-member presidency has led to political impasse on the issue. In terms of national resilience, BiH is ill-prepared to face both internal and external crises.

Areas of major concern (above 2.25 on the Permeability Index) are:

- lack of cohesion among the political elite concerning the country's foreign policy orientation, including attitudes to Atlanticism
- dysfunctional intergovernmental coordination in case of a crisis
- national security institutions subject to political influence and cronyism
- strategic framework unsuited to existing regional security challenges
- lack of awareness of the danger of information warfare
- ineffective state actions against hybrid threats





# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Western Balkans are at the receiving end of asymmetric hostile influence. Malicious actions are customised to take advantage of a target's weaknesses. Vulnerable institutions and low public trust in the institutions of representative democracy—from governments to the media—as well as other thorny domestic issues can enhance the influence of hostile foreign actors who aim to further divide the publics and weaken states.

The threat is horizontal and ever-evolving, versatile and crowd-sourced. It is also transversal — seeking influence across domains, institutions, and organisations. In response, governments must develop their awareness of these vulnerabilities and build resilience through long-term measures to reduce their state's susceptibility to outside influence and to enhance the ability of both government and society to withstand pressure.

While hard-won political virtues such as rule of law, transparency, anti-corruption, etc. are the necessary long-term ramparts against illicit influence, effective tools for immediate action against hostile foreign influence are: increased awareness at all levels, deconstruction and denouncement of the mechanisms used to disseminate manipulative messages, uncovering the

methods used, highlighting lessons learnt, debating best practices and remedies with the widest and most diverse possible audiences, and empowering decision-makers and opinion-leaders to identify and resist attempts at manipulation and/or influence.

We offer the following recommendations to address this threat and mitigate its potential effects:

- There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each state must understand its own vulnerabilities, identify institutional gaps, and create a tailored strategy to close resilience gaps.
- To counter hostile influence, countries should adopt a whole-of-society approach governed by strategic thinking. In the short-term, countermeasures should be centred on response (preventing hostile actions, raising the cost of such actions), while measures should be taken to build resilience in the long run.
- Investment in civil society—enhancing civic education, critical thinking, and media literacy—is fundamental to building resilience, especially in an increasingly networked environment.



- Cooperation, sharing of best practices and lessons learnt is paramount to success. While each country has its own specific environment, the Western Balkans share many common challenges and threats. Each country can benefit from the experience of the others. The national governments of these states should be able to access the expertise of EU and/or NATO member states in drafting their resilience and response strategies, and in building institutions and improving their expertise in analysing and dealing with the phenomenon.

These recommendations are not limited only to the governments of the six Western Balkan countries. The international community, including the EU and NATO, should also engage in creating a comprehensive strategy to strengthen the region's resilience to hostile influence. The Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic partners have made a significant strategic investment in ongoing cooperation frameworks with the region. However, these processes can only deliver the best results for both sides if they genuinely endeavour to face these challenges together.



# Endnotes

- 1 Rufin Zamfir, *Propaganda Made-to-Measure: Dimensions of Risk and Resilience in the Western Balkans* (GlobalFocus, 2019)
- 2 The Kremlin is pushing this narrative through its media outlets, as demonstrated by this example from sputniknews.com: Nebojsa Popović, 'NATO bez rukavica krenuo u obračun sa Srpskom crkvom u Crnoj Gori', 20 July 2019. [Retrieved 13 January 2020]
- 3 For more information about the tools of malign influence see: *Countering Information Influence Activities: A Handbook for Communicators* (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2018).
- 4 Benjamin Heap (ed.), *Hybrid Threats. A Strategic Communications Perspective* (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).
- 5 The questionnaire used to measure vulnerabilities in the Black Sea Region project was amended for use in the Western Balkan region.
- 6 The Permeability Index of each country was calculated by averaging the numerical values of the permeability indexes of each of the four fields of analysis: Society, Economy, Politics, and Foreign Policy and Security.
- 7 Russia's strategic objectives and areas of influence are discussed in detail in prof. Dimitar Bechev's report *Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans* (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).
- 8 'Ndikimi rus ne Shqipëri: Kreni SHISH tendence për ta prekur administratën', Top Channel TV, 27 March 2018; 'Secret Service Reports Increased Efforts for Establishing Russian Influence in Albania', Top Channel TV, 11 March 2019.
- 9 The protests were a reaction to the current Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's signing of the Prespa Agreement with Greece for the name change of what was formerly known as FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).
- 10 One of Montenegro's main vulnerabilities is the divided East/West sympathies of its people. Whilst a narrow majority rejects NATO membership (42% against NATO versus 40% in favour), according to the International Republican Institute's polling results from 2017, more than half of Montenegrins (55%) consider Russia a partner and only one in five (21%) see it as a threat to Europe.
- 11 In the run-up to Montenegro's 2017 accession to NATO, several government institutions and media outlets noted an increase in cyber-attacks connected with the Russian hacker collective Fancy Bear.
- 12 See the section on Sputnik Srbija's narratives in the original report: Zamfir, *Propaganda Made to Measure*.
- 13 Cronyism is the practice of partiality in awarding jobs and other advantages to friends or trusted colleagues, especially in politics and between politicians and supportive organisations.
- 14 In the case of Albania, political conflicts are escalating and thus undermining the reforms needed to achieve EU integration.
- 15 As is the case with some political parties in North Macedonia or Montenegro.
- 16 Such as the case of the Montenegrin Democratic Front (DF, a right-wing political alliance, now in opposition) which, in June 2016, co-signed—together with other pro-Russian WB parties—an agreement with Vladimir Putin's United Russia '[...] for a military-neutral Balkans', in their attempt to stop Montenegro's accession to NATO.
- 17 Dimitar Bechev quoted in Zamfir, *Propaganda Made to Measure*, p. 49.
- 18 The statement refers to both institutional and societal resilience to hybrid threats posed by outside actors in relation to the perceived level of threat to national FP&S decisions as understood by regional FP&S experts, responding to questions related to their field of expertise.





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The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) is a NATO accredited multi-national organisation that conducts research, publishes studies, and provides strategic communications training for government and military personnel. Our mission is to make a positive contribution to Alliance’s understanding of strategic communications and to facilitate accurate, appropriate, and timely communication among its members as objectives and roles emerge and evolve in the rapidly changing information environment.

Operating since 2014, we have carried out significant research enhancing NATO nations’ situational awareness of the information environment and have contributed to exercises and trainings with subject matter expertise.