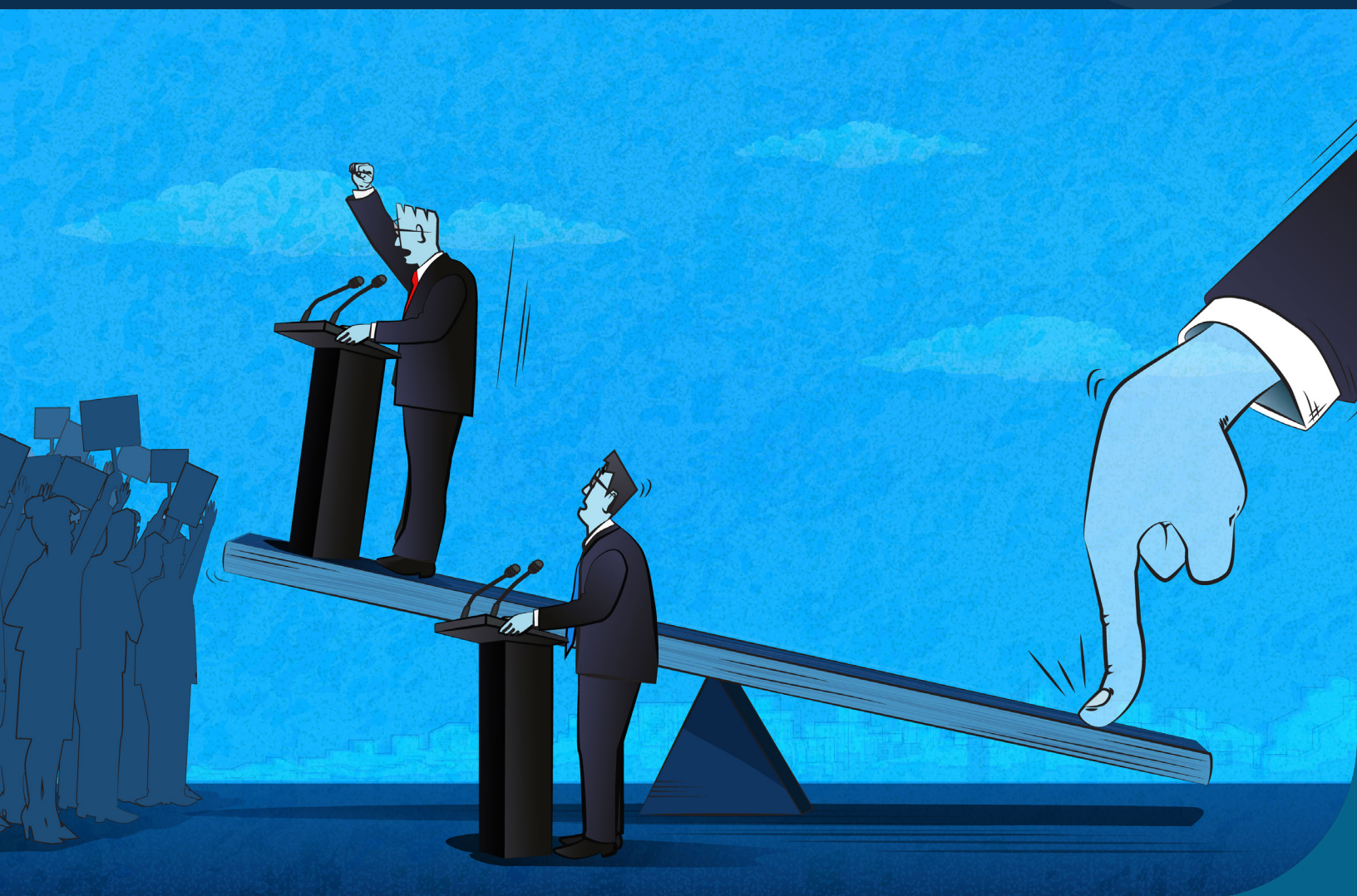


THE STRUGGLE AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

MONTENEGRO AS A TEST CASE

// VANJA ČALOVIĆ MARKOVIĆ



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THE STRUGGLE AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

MONTENEGRO AS A TEST CASE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authoritarians have employed evolving strategies to subvert democratic norms and practice across the Balkan peninsula, and **Montenegro has served as an ideal testing ground for authoritarian influence**. Due to the country's small size, external powers can exert disproportionate influence on political outcomes with relatively modest "investments." As a result, **lessons learned from such influence experiments in Montenegro can be applied by powerful authoritarian players globally**.

Russia and China have aimed to wield their influence in Montenegro and across the Balkans more broadly. **These illiberal powers have exploited political divisions, drawn on shared cultural or religious identity, and leveraged economic channels to exert antidemocratic influence over Montenegro**. Furthermore, Serbia has acted as a conduit for Russian influence, parroting the Kremlin's narratives and developing new ways to influence its neighbor.

For example, the Kremlin has sought to influence Montenegrin parliamentary elections by backing and developing closer ties with pro-Russian political organizations, like the Democratic Front. Serbia has amplified Russian influence operations in Montenegro—and proffered its own narratives—by funding pro-Serbian political parties, expanding ownership of Montenegrin media outlets, and establishing Serbian cultural institutions that reinforce Kremlin influence in the country. Finally, China took advantage of existing corruption in Montenegro as well as unfavorable loan deals and conducted vaccine diplomacy to portray itself as a benign economic force focused solely on economic, scientific, and cultural collaboration—all while furthering its political influence over the country.

These illiberal actors also spread propaganda and manipulate information in traditional media spaces and online. They are funding ideologically aligned cultural and religious institutions, and leveraging major economic investments, including via corrupt dealings that sidestep regulators. When successful, **these influence operations degrade democracy in Montenegro by sowing mistrust in fundamental institutions like the media and government, deepening societal divisions, and undermining the protections that democracies afford their citizens**.

While Montenegro's independent journalists and civil society have worked doggedly to uncover and expose corruption and state capture, these problems persist.

Corruption and state capture significantly undermine the ability of Montenegrin government institutions to confront the adverse impacts of foreign authoritarian influence.

To counter these threats to democracy, it is crucial for civil society and international partners to devise swift and agile responses, and develop the capacity to learn and adapt quickly. Furthermore, these strategies must be rooted in innovation, collaboration, and sustainability.

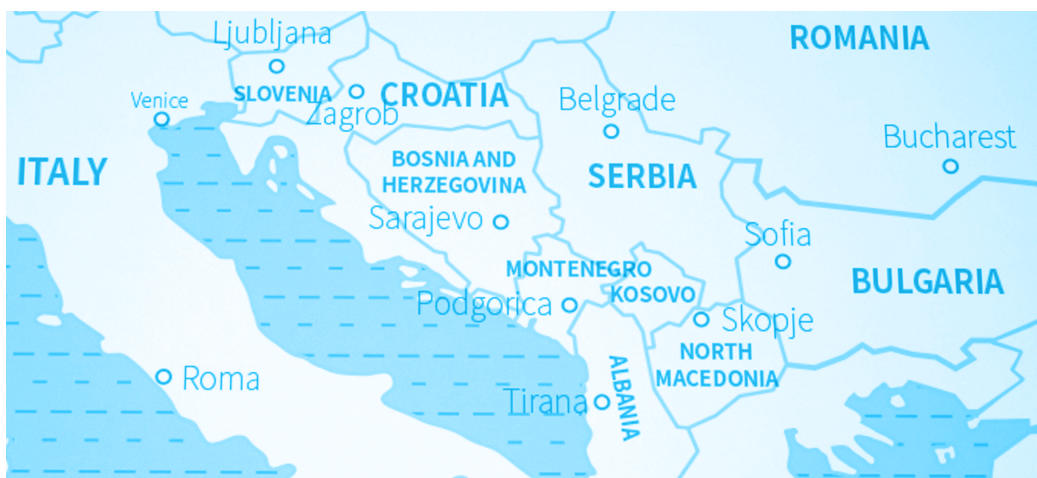
- **Early warning systems and response plans:** Developing robust early warning systems and response plans is essential for detecting and mitigating threats posed by foreign interference such as malign influence campaigns, cyberattacks, illicit financing, or political manipulation. These systems should be supported by clear protocols and procedures for activating critical-incident response plans in the event of a suspected or confirmed act of interference.
- **Strengthening Transparency, Accountability, and Electoral Integrity:** Civil society groups should advocate for electoral reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, integrity, and fairness, and preventing foreign interference in electoral processes. Such reforms might include stricter campaign finance regulations, enhanced oversight mechanisms, and improved voter registration systems.
- **Investing in Sustained Long-Term Monitoring and Exposure of Threats:** Committing resources that allow NGOs to engage in long-term monitoring of political, media, and social landscapes can facilitate the evolution of sophisticated strategies to combat malign authoritarian influence.
- **Cooperation with Journalists to Enhance Capacity, Outreach, and Communication:** NGOs should collaborate with investigative journalists to attack the complex challenge of exposing malign foreign interference on multiple fronts.
- **Building Global Coalitions around Shared Democratic Values:** Groups should prioritize efforts to strengthen existing democratic and civil society networks and to reach out to newly established groups to expand a global coalition against authoritarian influence. These networks serve to enhance opportunities for pooling resources, expertise, and advocacy efforts to amplify impact. Groups should prioritize long-term collaboration, working together not just on individual projects but strategizing on multi-year plans.

Malign authoritarian influence corrodes democratic institutions in small countries like Montenegro that lack sufficient resources, knowledge, and power to confront powerful authoritarian countries. Moreover, the tools authoritarian actors have developed in Montenegro may be used elsewhere to similarly undermine other emerging democracies. It is crucial to empower and mobilize democratic forces by providing timely and specialized support to civil society to combat foreign authoritarian interference in democratic systems before they subvert democratic norms and practice altogether.



MECHANISMS OF MALIGN AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE: THE CASE OF MONTENEGRO

Southeastern Europe holds significant geopolitical importance due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. While most governments in the region have adopted a prodemocratic and Euro-Atlantic posture, corruption and ethnic divisions persist, and the region is home to some extreme far-right movements that are hostile to democracy outright. Authoritarian actors are exploiting such vulnerabilities to their benefit, including through covert influence operations.



Montenegro, a small country on the Balkan peninsula, serves as an ideal testing ground for authoritarian influence, offering easy access to—and sway over—decision makers. The country still grapples with corruption, deep ethnic divisions, and the legacy of past governance that resembled a captured state, where government bodies served to benefit a few powerful individuals.¹ Societal cleavages, including those pertaining to attitudes toward independence from Serbia² and relations with Serbia and Russia,³ are exacerbated by sociodemographic factors, including tensions between ethnic Montenegrins, Serbs, and others.⁴

Due to the country's small size, external powers can exert disproportionate influence on political outcomes with relatively modest "investments." As a result, lessons learned from such influence experiments in Montenegro can be applied by powerful authoritarian players globally.

The combined influence of Russia, China, and an increasingly autocratic Serbia presents a formidable challenge to Montenegro's aspirations for European integration and to the health of its democracy. At the same time, Montenegro is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and among the most promising current candidates for accession to the European Union (EU). Democratic governments have supported Montenegro's institutions and democratic trajectory, but their responses to domestic issues like corruption and other antidemocratic behaviors are not always coordinated.

This report outlines the rapidly evolving strategies that foreign authoritarian powers are using to subvert democratic processes in Montenegro and their consequences for democratic institutions and civil society in this small nation and beyond. To counter these threats to democracy, it is crucial for civil society and international partners to devise swift and agile responses, and develop the capacity to learn and adapt quickly. Such responses should foster cross-national collaboration, resource sharing, and coalition building based on common democratic aspirations. This report concludes with specific recommendations for civil society responses, rooted in innovation, collaboration, and sustainability.

Due to Montenegro's small size, external powers can exert disproportionate influence on political outcomes with relatively modest "investments," and lessons learned from such influence experiments can be applied by authoritarian players globally.

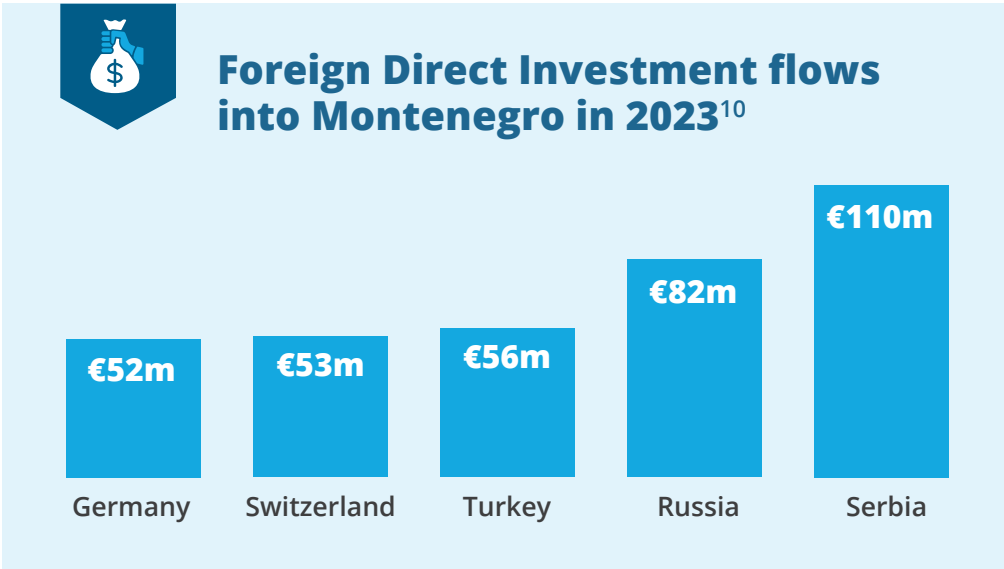
RUSSIAN INFLUENCES AND ITS EVOLUTION IN MONTENEGRO

The Western Balkans struggle with ethnic tensions, socioeconomic disparities, and governance issues, all of which hinder stability, development, and impede the region's full integration into the EU. Often, politicians exploit ethnic divisions to their personal advantage, distracting from pressing domestic issues and creating a smokescreen for poor governance. Persistent economic challenges and limited opportunities have contributed to emigration and the rise of Euroskeptical politics across the region. Corruption, the lack of transparency, and weak democratic governance also create fertile ground for

the expansion of organized crime networks and erosion of popular trust in institutions, further impeding democratic progress.

Throughout history, Russia has aimed to wield its influence in the Balkans, drawing on shared cultural, religious, and historical bonds. It played a pivotal role in supporting Serbia and Montenegro during the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, for example, and has historically positioned itself as a guardian of Orthodox Christianity.⁵ A cultural connection is also underscored by shared Slavic heritage.⁶

More recently, Montenegro has been the preferred vacation destination of Russian oligarchs.⁷ In 2006, after Montenegrin independence was declared, Russia was also one of the largest investors in the country, with many Russians buying property in Montenegro, and many Russian businesses operating from or expanding business into the country. Facing scrutiny from journalists and anticorruption groups, these investments were frequently alleged to be money-laundering schemes operating outside the purview of regulators and other relevant institutions.⁸ (Russian investment was surpassed briefly by Chinese investment in 2020, which has brought its own problems, as explained in greater detail below.)⁹



Despite Russian money pouring into the country, Montenegro’s government continues to support a Euro-Atlantic trajectory. It joined NATO in 2017 and, following the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion, has supported Ukraine financially and in its ambitions to join the EU.¹¹ Serb nationalists in Montenegro, however, have looked to Russia as their protector—reflecting a cleavage in Montenegrin society.¹² And in 2023,¹³ a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political coalition—For the Future of Montenegro, which opposes Montenegro’s NATO membership—won about 15 percent of the vote in legislative elections and secured the key position of parliament speaker.¹⁴

Russia's Involvement in the 2016 Montenegrin Parliamentary Elections

Following Montenegro's invitation to join NATO in December 2015, pro-Russian actors within the country intensified their activities and strengthened ties with Russian officials and affiliated organizations.¹⁵ Throughout 2016, pro-Russian activists from Montenegro made frequent trips to Moscow, engaging with senior Kremlin officials, including military personnel.¹⁶ Members of the Movement for Neutrality, a Montenegrin nongovernmental organization (NGO) that opposes NATO membership, focused their efforts on influencing Montenegro's media sector. For instance, some of these individuals transitioned into journalism roles, offering pro-Russian reporting from war zones in Ukraine¹⁷ and managing pro-Russian online portals and public broadcasters established by some Montenegrin municipalities.¹⁸ The Democratic Front, a pro-Russian political entity (of which For the Future of Montenegro had been a part),¹⁹ signed cooperation agreements with United Russia,²⁰ Russia's ruling party, and made strategic visits to Moscow as well.²¹ This formal partnership resulted in more coordinated activities between the two groups—as well as heightened suspicions concerning the Democratic Front's financial backing.²²

Meanwhile, other pro-Russian organizations across the region, such as sports teams, religious centers, and clubs,²³ intensified their collaboration,²⁴ fostering ideological alliances and resource sharing capabilities.²⁵ Montenegrin pro-Russian activists have developed closer ties to counterparts in neighboring countries and organizations directly linked to Russia, such as the Night Wolves and Balkan Cossack Army (formed in Montenegro), cooperating extensively with similar associations even beyond the Balkan region to forward their preferred narratives and worldview.²⁶

The Democratic Front, for its part, engaged a foreign consultant for Montenegro's 2016 parliamentary elections, hiring him for campaign design and video production.²⁷ His invoices, however, failed to detail expenses for video production and online advertising, raising questions about financial transparency and potential hidden sources of the election campaign's financing.²⁸

The 2016 parliamentary elections were shaken by allegations of a coup attempt.²⁹ In response, Montenegrin prosecutors charged numerous individuals with plotting to overthrow the government violently, among them Democratic Front leaders, two Russian citizens, and several Serbian citizens.³⁰ Allegations emerged that the effort received Russian funding and was linked to Russian intelligence agents,³¹ underlining concerns about foreign interference. In 2019, thirteen people were sentenced, including the two Russian nationals; however, procedural errors led to a retrial in 2022, which is still ongoing.³²

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SERBIAN INFLUENCE AND SERBIA'S ROLE AS RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE AMPLIFIER

While Serbia is an independent actor with its own interests in influencing politics in Montenegro—with which it shares similarities in language, religious practice, and cultural traditions—it is also widely perceived as a potential conduit for Russian influence. Serbia acknowledged Montenegro's independence in 2006, albeit reluctantly, and remains a critical trade partner. Yet narratives that deny the legitimacy of Montenegrin statehood persist, and Serbia continues to see itself as having strategic interests in influencing its neighbors.³³

The convergence of various actors and strategies used by Serbia and Russia suggests that the former may also operate as a proxy for Russian influence within Montenegrin elections and political institutions. In recent years, Serbian intermediary companies have acquired and resold advertising space ahead of Montenegrin elections. There have been reports that significant debts related to these deals were not paid from officially declared sources, which raises concerns about potential illegal foreign funding. This tactic aims to conceal foreign electoral campaign financing, making this type of covert electoral manipulation difficult to expose and assess.³⁴

For example, in the 2016 parliamentary elections, two political entities, including the Democratic Front, purchased advertising space worth over 370,000 euros through a Belgrade-based intermediary company.³⁵ Similarly, during the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Democratic Front leased advertising space on Serbian television (also broadcast in Montenegro) via a Montenegrin intermediary company. In this case, the amount paid for this advertising space went undisclosed due to the lack of transparency in media pricing.³⁶ A significant portion of the reported costs for this advertising campaign were never paid from bank accounts of that political structure.³⁷ Based on this information, either the incurred costs were paid, whether in undisclosed cash by the Democratic Front or by some undisclosed donor, or they were granted by Serbian television, which would also constitute a hidden contribution to the campaign.

The Serbian government has also made major investments in Serbian Houses in Montenegro—cultural centers for the Serb population—including a 3.4 million euro allocation³⁸ for the Serbian House in Podgorica, the first to be established in 2017. Owned mainly by representatives of the Democratic Front,³⁹ they serve as hubs for various Serbian organizations, including pro-Serbian media outlets, bolstering their political and cultural influence.⁴⁰ Belgrade has spent millions more supporting other associations in Montenegro, illustrating the pervasive nature of foreign influence, even in the non-profit sector.⁴¹

The convergence of various actors and strategies used by Serbia and Russia suggests that the former may also operate as a proxy for Russian influence within Montenegrin elections and political institutions.

Serbian media conglomerates have also expanded ownership over Montenegrin media outlets,⁴² reflecting a multifaceted approach to exerting Serbian foreign influence, and additionally providing an avenue for pro-Russian messaging and influence campaigns. These outlets provided free airtime for political marketing during the 2023 parliamentary elections in Montenegro, predominantly favoring the Democratic Front,⁴³ whose foreign policy goals, before it dissolved in May 2023, included lifting sanctions on Russia and Montenegro's exit from NATO.⁴⁴

Serbian authorities also exert influence through the control of telecommunications infrastructure and a significant telecommunications market share. For example, M-tel,⁴⁵ part of Serbia's state-owned Serbian Telekom, provides mobile and fixed-line phone services, internet, and cable and satellite television. Their television packages include Serbian channels that are widely recognized by press freedom advocates as engines of malign influence and pro-Russian propaganda, as well as propaganda for the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić.⁴⁶ M-tel has also recently undertaken an aggressive marketing campaign for its services in Montenegro.

Social media networks have also become key tools for pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political entities, with users from Serbia engaging in paid political marketing to influence Montenegrin audiences.⁴⁷ Typically, these efforts go undisclosed in official filings and most have been identified by researchers. The secretive nature of these online influence campaigns underscores the clandestine nature of foreign interference in this and other contexts.

The Serbian Orthodox Church's involvement in political affairs adds another dimension to foreign authoritarian influence in Montenegro. Church representatives comment on political events frequently, including by encouraging census respondents to identify as Serb, and have repeatedly asserted that the Montenegrin Orthodox congregation is Serbian.⁴⁸ There is a broad perception that a significant part of the church is aligned politically with pro-Serbian entities such as the Democratic Front.⁴⁹ Investigative journalists have also revealed the presence of extremist organizations closely tied to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.⁵⁰ Researchers have suggested that some of these organizations also serve as conduits for Russian influence,⁵¹ presenting a more subtle challenge to the integrity of democratic institutions.

CORRUPTION, DEBT TRAPS, AND VACCINE DIPLOMACY AS TOOLS FOR CHINA'S INFLUENCE

In addition to Serbia and Russia, the People's Republic of China (PRC) also wields influence in Montenegro and does so primarily through economic channels—often leveraging corruption among domestic political elites. Montenegro, a participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),⁵² has also suffered under unsustainable debt, much of which was held by state-affiliated Chinese banks.⁵³

The People's Republic of China (PRC) wields influence in Montenegro primarily through economic channels.

In 2014, Montenegro's government entered into an agreement with a Chinese company, the China Road and Bridge Corporation, and took a loan from the Chinese state Export-Import Bank for construction of part of a highway. Initially set at \$94 million, the project saw the actual cost escalate due to delays, currency fluctuations, and planning failures that some argue hint at corruption.⁵⁴ Annual repayments are expected to exceed 25 percent of Montenegro's gross domestic product, severely constraining the country's financial flexibility for the foreseeable future.⁵⁵

This example and other Chinese investments have bypassed public scrutiny, competitive bidding, and national regulations. They have also benefited from loopholes and exemptions. Such investment schemes pose a threat to Montenegro's democracy and European integration by undermining anticorruption efforts⁵⁶ and environmental protection standards.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the loan contract for the highway project, deemed in media circles as the "highway to nowhere,"⁵⁸ allows the Chinese state bank to demand full repayment of the loan with interest if significant project changes occur or if loan repayment becomes problematic for Montenegro.⁵⁹ Montenegro has agreed to interpret the agreement based on Chinese laws, with potential arbitration taking place in Beijing,⁶⁰ where the judicial system is subservient to the Chinese Communist Party and broader Chinese state interests.⁶¹ The contract includes unclear language about the seizure of Montenegrin assets or property as a result of arbitration proceedings.⁶² In addition, the contract with the principal Chinese construction company stipulated that domestic subcontractors should be provided with works in the range of at least 30 percent of the contracted price;⁶³ the largest portion of that amount was allocated to a local company with ties to the Montenegrin government that signed the controversial contract.⁶⁴

There are additional connections between Chinese investments and the former-Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) elite, which governed Montenegro for decades (and which was in power when the highway loan was secured).⁶⁵ Milo Đukanović, its longtime leader, has been accused by the opposition, some civil society groups, and international investigative journalists of involvement in corruption and organized crime.⁶⁶

In 2015, the DPS government awarded a contract for constructing the Mozura wind power plant to Enemalta PLC Malta—a company owned by the government of Malta, but also one in which China's Shanghai Electric Power holds a 33 percent ownership stake.⁶⁷ Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was murdered in 2017 while investigating corruption claims related to this contract,⁶⁸ and her son has stated that her investigation involved Đukanović.⁶⁹ In 2019, a consortium comprising Chinese and local companies, including one co-owned by Đukanović's son, Blažo Đukanović, was awarded the contract for ecological reconstruction of the Thermal Power Plant Pljevlja by Montenegro's state-owned energy company. The value of the procurement was 54.4 million euros.⁷⁰

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After the DPS lost power in the 2020 parliamentary elections, the new political leadership requested EU assistance to repay the unfavorable loan, but their appeal was denied. Some members of the European Parliament warned that China could seize a significant portion of Montenegro's coastline through debt leverage, cautioning the EU against repeating mistakes seen in Greece.⁷¹ Some think tanks have pointed out that the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, while innovative, falls short in addressing PRC influence and may not dissuade countries from engaging in such risky partnerships.⁷²

U.S., French, and German banks have aided the new Montenegrin government in managing its foreign-exchange risk on almost \$1 billion of debt owed to China.⁷³ Still, the issue remains only partially resolved. Efforts to ease the debt burden have dampened criticism of the new power elite's dealings with China. PRC authorities also garnered public appreciation for their "vaccine diplomacy,"⁷⁴ when Beijing dispatched essential medical gear⁷⁵ and, later, vaccine shipments to Montenegro during the COVID-19 pandemic while the EU's aid was delayed.⁷⁶

Moreover, China's foreign policy strategies aim to portray the country as a benign economic force focused solely on economic, scientific, and cultural collaboration rather than political influence.⁷⁷ In Montenegro, the University of Montenegro hosts a Confucius Institute, one of a network of cultural institutes Chinese authorities have established at universities around the world to disseminate this vision. Ostensibly meant to promote Chinese culture, their operations are often opaque, their programming lacks independent intellectual inquiry, and staff in some locations have aggressively sought to block discussions on topics like Tibet and Taiwan.⁷⁸ Indeed, many local media outlets depict the PRC in terms proffered by Chinese diplomats and Confucius Institutes.⁷⁹ Research suggests that this controlled, approving, and nontransparent discourse serves to deflect attention from the detrimental effects of Chinese investment in the Western Balkans.⁸⁰

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES TO COMBATING THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF FOREIGN INTRUSION

The cumulative effects of Russian and Chinese political influence—and Serbia's role in amplifying some of this messaging—presents a formidable threat to the integrity of democracy in Montenegro and its aspirations for the EU membership. These illiberal actors are spreading propaganda and manipulating information in traditional media spaces and online. They are also funding ideologically aligned cultural and religious institutions, and leveraging major economic investments, including via corrupt dealings that evade regulators. When successful, these influence operations degrade democracy in Montenegro by sowing mistrust in fundamental institutions like

the media and government, deepening societal divisions, and undermining the key protections that democracies afford their citizens. Despite the gravity of these threats, domestic institutions still face severe challenges in confronting authoritarian influence.

While Montenegro's independent journalists and civil society have worked doggedly to uncover and expose corruption and state capture, these phenomena have significantly undermined the ability of the government institutions to confront the adverse impacts of foreign authoritarian influence. For example, Montenegrin prosecutors' limited expertise in financial investigations, compounded by a lack of political will to trace financial activities in a deeply corrupt environment,⁸¹ contributed to the failure of a case involving Russian influence in the country's elections. More specifically, prosecutors were unable to substantiate money laundering allegations against a Democratic Front member linked to Russian funding for the 2020 parliamentary elections—the charges were later dropped.⁸²

In addition, the DPS regime's control over the Agency for Prevention of Corruption hindered efforts to address election-related irregularities. During the 2016 parliamentary elections, the agency faced challenges in verifying how much the Democratic Front was paying a foreign consultant for campaign-related services. Yet, due to procedural mistakes, a temporary halt in the transfer of public funds to the Democratic Front—which like all qualified political entities, receives a certain amount from the state budget for campaigning—was lifted.⁸³ The agency's failure to identify and address other irregularities, including potential illegal funding from Serbia in subsequent election cycles,⁸⁴ further illustrates the role of domestic institutional capture in enabling foreign authoritarian interference.⁸⁵

Concerning PRC economic influence, relevant institutions have mostly failed to address transparency issues, potential corruption, and environmental degradation⁸⁶ among other problems, despite strong warnings from stakeholders such as the European Commission, European Parliament, UNESCO,⁸⁷ and other local and international NGOs.⁸⁸

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An illustration at the top of the page shows three stylized figures in business suits working together to assemble a large lightbulb. The lightbulb is composed of red and white puzzle pieces. One figure stands on a ladder, placing a piece into the top of the bulb. Another figure stands on the ground, holding a large red puzzle piece. A third figure is also on the ground, working with another piece. The background is a light blue sky with a faint city skyline at the bottom.

CIVIL SOCIETY APPROACHES FOR ADDRESSING FOREIGN AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE OVER DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The effects of malign foreign influence from Russia, Serbia, and China are not limited to Montenegro: these powers are exerting similar forms of influence across the Western Balkans and elsewhere. Moreover, PRC and Kremlin influence has negative repercussions for democracy across the globe.⁸⁹ The following section outlines potential civil society responses, rooted in innovation, collaboration, and sustainability. They are based on the experience of Montenegrin civil society, but can be studied and adapted to address the challenge across the Western Balkans region and globally.

Civil Society Approaches to Addressing Foreign Influence on Democratic Institutions



Early Warning Systems and Response Plans



Strengthening Transparency, Accountability, and Electoral Integrity



Investing in Sustained Long-Term Monitoring and Exposure of Threats



Cooperation with Journalists to Enhance Capacity, Outreach, and Communication



Building Global Coalitions around Shared Democratic Values



Early Warning Systems and Response Plans

Developing robust early warning systems and response plans is essential for detecting and mitigating threats posed by foreign interference such as malign influence campaigns, cyberattacks, illicit financing, or political manipulation. These systems should be supported by clear protocols and procedures for activating critical-incident response plans in the event of a suspected or confirmed act of interference, taking into account the diverse nature of such threats.

By integrating technology, data analysis, and human expertise, civil society groups can enhance their capacity to detect emerging threats in real time, and implement fast and effective responses. Once groups detect an interference incident, they can expose it publicly to raise awareness about the threat, advocate for policy changes to strengthen resilience, and mobilize support from other prodemocracy actors. Regular training exercises and simulations can help civil society groups test the effectiveness of their response mechanisms and build capacity among staff to respond to crises and coordinate responses across organizational boundaries effectively.

Also, by harnessing the capabilities of AI technologies, NGOs can enhance their capacity to detect, analyze, and counteract malign foreign influence in the digital age. AI-powered tools can process vast amounts of data in real time from online sources, including social media, news articles, and websites, to identify patterns indicative of malign influence operations and other forms of interference like coordinated bot campaigns that amplify divisive content. AI algorithms can then rapidly alert civil society groups to suspicious activity and potential threats. By visualizing network structures and identifying key actors quickly, NGOs can uncover hidden relationships and better understand the dynamics of foreign influence operations.



Strengthening Transparency, Accountability, and Electoral Integrity

Civil society groups should advocate for electoral reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, integrity, and fairness, and preventing foreign interference in electoral processes. Such reforms might include stricter campaign finance regulations, more effective oversight mechanisms, and improved voter registration systems. Groups can also advocate for greater transparency and accountability in government decision making, and for good-governance groups to be consulted in policymaking, to reduce opportunities for foreign interference.



Investing in Sustained Long-Term Monitoring and Exposure of Threats

Committing resources that allow NGOs to engage in long-term monitoring of political, media, and social landscapes can facilitate the evolution of sophisticated strategies to combat malign authoritarian influence. Multiyear efforts can be

especially useful for civil society to outflank well-resourced and rapidly evolving malign influence operations.

To combat these efforts, NGOs should utilize a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyze data from sources including social media, traditional media, public opinion surveys, election observation reports, and expert assessments. By identifying patterns, trends, and anomalies indicative of malign influence, they can proactively protect electoral integrity and prevent the erosion of democratic institutions. Long-term monitoring also enables civil society to track the evolution of foreign interference tactics over time and adapt strategies accordingly to address the evolving nature of authoritarian threats.

Engaging Donors

Engaging donors in open dialogue and advocating for sustainable, flexible funding mechanisms is essential if NGOs are to respond to rapidly changing political dynamics and emerging threats successfully. Long-term commitments help sustain work over time, while flexible funding can bolster the agility of civil society organizations to respond to constantly evolving challenges. Civil society groups should collaborate with donors to identify funding priorities, ensure transparency, and align resources with on-the-ground needs. NGOs can build trust and credibility with donors and constituents by engaging with them to demonstrate the impact of existing work, explain the potential impact of new programs, and by working conscientiously to build long-term partnerships based on shared goals of strengthening democracy, human rights, and good governance.



Cooperation with Journalists to Enhance Capacity, Outreach, and Communication

NGOs can collaborate with investigative journalists to attack the complex challenge of exposing malign foreign interference on multiple fronts. First, they can share resources to uncover covert activities and hidden agendas of foreign actors seeking to influence democratic institutions. Coordinated campaigns to dig deep into financial records, leaked documents, and insider sources can reveal the true motives and methods behind interference efforts. Working together, journalists and NGOs can amplify the resulting investigative findings—including by leveraging their respective platforms and networks—to mobilize public awareness and support for countering authoritarian influence.

Moreover, they can cooperate to hold political leaders, government officials, and other influential figures accountable for actions and decisions that may enable foreign malign interference, including corruption, cronyism, and collusion. In doing so, they can jointly expose vulnerabilities in democratic institutions and pressure authorities to take action to safeguard national sovereignty.

To reach broader audiences, NGOs might also develop podcasts, short videos, infographics, and interactive content in cooperation with independent journalists. NGOs should also collaborate with independent media and fact-checking

organizations to combat information manipulation efforts and promote accurate reporting, including through media literacy programs that help people to critically assess information and recognize propaganda.



Building Global Coalitions around Shared Democratic Values

International investigative collaborations have produced some of the most consequential reporting available in recent years. Among the best known examples is the consortium that worked on the Panama Papers,⁹⁰ in which researchers and journalists worked together across the globe to reveal corrupt practices among global elites. Domestic journalists and civil society groups must therefore collaborate with international partners in order to stand a chance against transnational corruption and influence efforts.

Civil society groups should prioritize efforts to strengthen existing networks and to reach out to newly established organizations to expand a global coalition against authoritarian influence. These networks serve to enhance opportunities for pooling resources, expertise, and advocacy efforts to amplify impact. These groups should prioritize long-term collaboration, working together not just on individual projects but strategizing on multi-year plans. Having developed these sustainable strategies, they should also collaborate on donor outreach.

To counter the rapidly evolving authoritarian interference strategies, civil society groups should also establish cross-border, knowledge-sharing platforms. As a result, the identification of authoritarian innovations in one country could enable democratic actors in other settings to anticipate and preempt emerging threats. Sharing tools and coordinating strategies at a supranational level is particularly important for smaller countries that lack the necessary resources and capacities to tackle this challenge effectively.

In addition to revealing transnational authoritarian influence and related corruption, international collaboration can make coordinated efforts to inform and mobilize governments and multilateral institutions to launch joint responses, wield diplomatic pressure, and implement targeted sanctions to hold malign foreign actors accountable and deter future interference more effectively. These efforts are especially valuable for strengthening the resilience of small countries and countries where democratic institutions are deficient or under-resourced. Through joint advocacy efforts and global collective action, journalists and civil society can amplify their voices and mobilize support for democracy, transparency, and electoral integrity on a global scale.



CONCLUSION

Malign authoritarian influence can severely impact democratic institutions in small countries like Montenegro that lack sufficient resources, knowledge, and power to confront powerful authoritarian countries. Local, corrupt politicians are susceptible to being bought off with money or illegal contributions to fund political campaigns. Independent media can be drowned out by propaganda, campaign messaging, and various forms of information manipulation, while civil society voices can be suppressed. Such influence can undermine trust in institutions and in democracy itself, leading to deeper, long-term problems for targeted countries.

Therefore, it is crucial to empower and mobilize democratic forces by providing timely and specialized support to civil society to combat foreign authoritarian interference in democratic systems. NGOs should equip themselves with early warning systems to detect threats before they cause significant harm. They should advocate for electoral reforms to enhance transparency, monitor government actions to ensure accountability, and collaborate with investigative journalists to uncover the rapidly changing tactics of authoritarian actors. Through such efforts, civil society can combat foreign authoritarian interference in democratic systems before they subvert democratic norms and practice altogether.

ENDNOTES

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