Bulgaria's big brother
What is Brussels turning a blind eye to? Rebecca Pardon explores

In 2019, a tourist park was opened to the public in the small, north-eastern Bulgarian village of Neofit Rilski, situated 40km from the Black Sea city of Varna. The vast site was constructed on 130 acres of land and is designed to give visitors the experience of stepping into an ancient, Neolithic village. Each building is constructed of stone, wood and metal. Ducks lap contentedly around lakes. Traditional Bulgarian food and drink is served in venues adorned with Thracian helmets and weaponry, and visitors can fill their time practicing horse-riding and archery or simply revelling in nostalgia for a time no longer in living memory.

The mastermind behind the project is Bulgarian politician Ivelin Mihailov, leader of the pro-Russian Velichie ("Greatness") party. It wasn't long before the rejuvenated village attracted a new community of young people to re-populate the area, interested in investing in the park, but also out of allegiance to the party's ideology. The site has grown to become Greatness' cradle. Mihailov speaks from large plasma screens in the local pub, preaching on how to fix Bulgaria, how to live healthily and how to be Bulgarian. The theme park's activities have also attracted the attention of lawmakers, however.

In May, Bulgaria's interior minister Kalin Stoyanov revealed that military equipment, including weapons, military trucks and communications gear, had been discovered at the site. A far-right group, which Stoyanov described as "paramilitary", had reportedly conducted military training there. The ministry of interior claimed it was investigating the matter.

The project has become symbolic of the growing infiltration of Russian-backed corruption and the erosion of political stability in Bulgaria. Over the past decade, the Balkan nation has been mired in political turmoil, with elections failing to yield a stable government. Its most recent election, held in October last year, marked the seventh in less than four years, and has failed to unblock the political impasse that has deprived it of a stable government since 2020. Although the centre-right GERB party, led by former prime minister Boyko Borissov, remains the largest, with just 26% of the vote, no party has been able to form a majority coalition.

For years, Bulgaria has been called Moscow's "Trojan horse" within the EU and NATO. The 2008 financial crisis triggered the exodus of Western media conglomerates from smaller markets like Bulgaria and Slovakia, creating a vacuum that local oligarchs rushed to fill. These wealthy individuals, many with ties to Russia, took control of media outlets, crafting narratives to suit their

interests. Goran Georgiev is an analyst at the Sofia-based Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) and identifies 2014 as a crucial year for the decline of independent journalism in the region. “That's when the Western conglomerates were basically supplanted by local oligarchs, many of whom have business interests in Russia. And the editorial policies of the authors changed to reflect that. They started increasingly pushing narratives that were extolling the benefits from large energy infrastructure projects, such as South Stream. And of course, that was ultimately able to convince a significant portion of voters.”

The most notorious example is Delyan Peevski, a media mogul and politician who has come to symbolise Bulgaria’s captured state. Through his ownership of outlets like Blitz, which now reaches around 40% of Bulgarian internet users, Peevski has helped mould a media landscape that has become a mouthpiece for pro-Kremlin propaganda. Georgiev recounts how the original owners of Blitz were forced to sell the outlet in 2014, under duress from the government. “There is a complete lack of transparency around where the money used to capture these media outlets came from, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that it basically came from illicit cash flows. There's only one reason why law enforcement wouldn't want to investigate it – because they themselves are serving the same informal interests.”

Peevski’s influence on the Bulgarian media landscape is significant. He has been sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act in July for facilitating corrupt practices, particularly in the media sector. His outlets have been criticised for spreading disinformation, much of it aimed at promoting Russian interests; Peevski has come to epitomise Bulgaria’s captured state, in which shadowy oligarchs, spies and criminal gangs have wrapped their tentacles around core institutions. Nikolay Denkov, former Bulgarian prime minister, described Peevski as the “biggest evil” to befall the Balkan nation. Georgiev says his ownership has been integral to the spreading of pro-Russian narratives and maintaining the political status quo. “Politicians need media to convince people this was the right path. And that's exactly what happened: the media became extremely uncritical.”

The spread of pro-Russian content in Bulgaria today is not limited to traditional media. In recent years, a new breed of so-called “mushroom” websites has emerged: typically created in bulk and on the cheap, they sprout up around major news events to churn out fake news and pro-Kremlin propaganda. These sites often target social media platforms, particularly Facebook, which is the dominant social media channel in Bulgaria, used by 90% of the country’s online population. During NATO exercises in Poland, for example, disinformation operatives quickly mobilised to publish fake stories about the military drills, contributing to an ongoing cycle of misinformation.

A report by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), a disinformation analytical unit of the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think tank, found at least 25 Bulgarian websites had spread fake news about the NATO exercises, and a local NGO put the total number of such sites at 400. The sites create thousands of fake articles and are monetised through digital advertising platforms, such as Google AdSense. The sheer volume of articles, cramming websites with sensationalist pro-Kremlin content rarely read by real people, is designed to manipulate algorithms and spread disinformation. The reach of mushroom websites extends to Facebook groups, where sensationalist, pro-Russian content is often shared in "entertainment" categories to avoid detection by Facebook's content moderation tools.

As disinformation becomes more sophisticated, so do the tactics used to spread it. In 2023, Bulgarian platform Factcheck.bg revealed that the network of mushroom sites had spread lies about Ukrainian refugees, claiming that their children had been "taken" from them by authorities in EU countries. The previous year, disinformation websites falsely claimed that Ukraine had committed genocide against ethnic Russians in Donbas. Such narratives are deeply embedded in Bulgaria's political landscape, where Russian influence still holds influence, particularly among older generations who still fondly think of Russia as a "brotherly" figure.

This problem is compounded by the rise of Telegram, a popular platform for more covert forms of disinformation. In contrast to Facebook, Telegram allows users to bypass censorship and create echo chambers for nationalistic and pro-Russian content. Here, misinformation is spread not just through links to dubious articles but through images, memes and even direct interactions in private groups, making it harder to track and combat.

Bulgaria's relationship with Russia is one that is closely entwined culturally, beyond media manipulation and disinformation. This makes such sensationalist misinformation much harder to dispel. Many of Bulgaria's politicians and business leaders are closely tied to Russia through energy projects like the South Stream pipeline, a deal that has been criticised as a gift to the Kremlin. By facilitating this project, Bulgaria's political elites helped Russia circumvent Ukraine in its energy supply to the EU, financially aiding Moscow's geopolitical ambitions, including its invasion of Ukraine.

Russian influence has even extended into cyberattacks, with Bulgarian businesses targeted by disinformation campaigns, especially on platforms like TikTok, which has gained popularity among younger Bulgarians. Devora Kotseva is an analyst at A Data Pro, a business intelligence service based in Sofia. She describes how Russian-backed disinformation campaigns often include anti-globalist and anti-

EU rhetoric, undermining public trust in European institutions. “There is a big community of science deniers on the platform, which is very active and often lurks in the comment section of their fact-checks. Our research has found that one of the leading posts in an attack was a TikTok video by one of the most popular accounts, presenting itself as anti-globalist, which was uploaded to a Facebook group and then distributed to other groups. It was shared mainly in nationalistic and pro-Russian groups, alleging that the EU wants to ban real meat and force us to eat 3D printed fake meat instead.”

Currently, there are companies in the tech sector, academia and media working to monitor, measure and analyse information threats, as well as to promote media literacy. Kotseva cites software companies like Sensika and Ontotext which are working on providing technological solutions. Factcheck.bg is a product of the Bulgarian branch of the Association of Journalists and one of the few platforms dedicated to fighting disinformation. Yet this is often overshadowed by the scale of the disinformation machine. In a country where trust in institutions is already low, the continued spread of false narratives is eroding the foundations of Bulgarian democracy.

A large element of the agency with which corrupt officials feel they can act depends on the leniency of other nations. Local oligarchs in Eastern Europe, for example, will suddenly face less pressure from the US once Republicans are in power. Smaller countries follow in the footsteps of larger ones; if the Germans start building Nord Stream, for example, then the Bulgarians will start developing the South Stream.

The most beneficial interventions come from outside, such as the Magnitsky sanctions. The lifeline for Bulgarian civil society appears largely external: it is Brussels, it is Washington DC and it is London. Turning a blind eye to the region will ultimately have a cost. Without the support of other international powers, Bulgaria’s political elite may continue to operate with impunity, fuelling corruption, disinformation and Russian influence in the heart of Europe.

Georgiev says trust is crucial to improving transparency in Bulgarian politics. “How do we build trust? Because trust is the biggest vulnerability. It is also the best long-term defence. It's the best long-term way of building societal resistance and resilience. A big part of it is high quality, consistent, strategic communication by the government, which is totally lacking in Bulgaria.”