

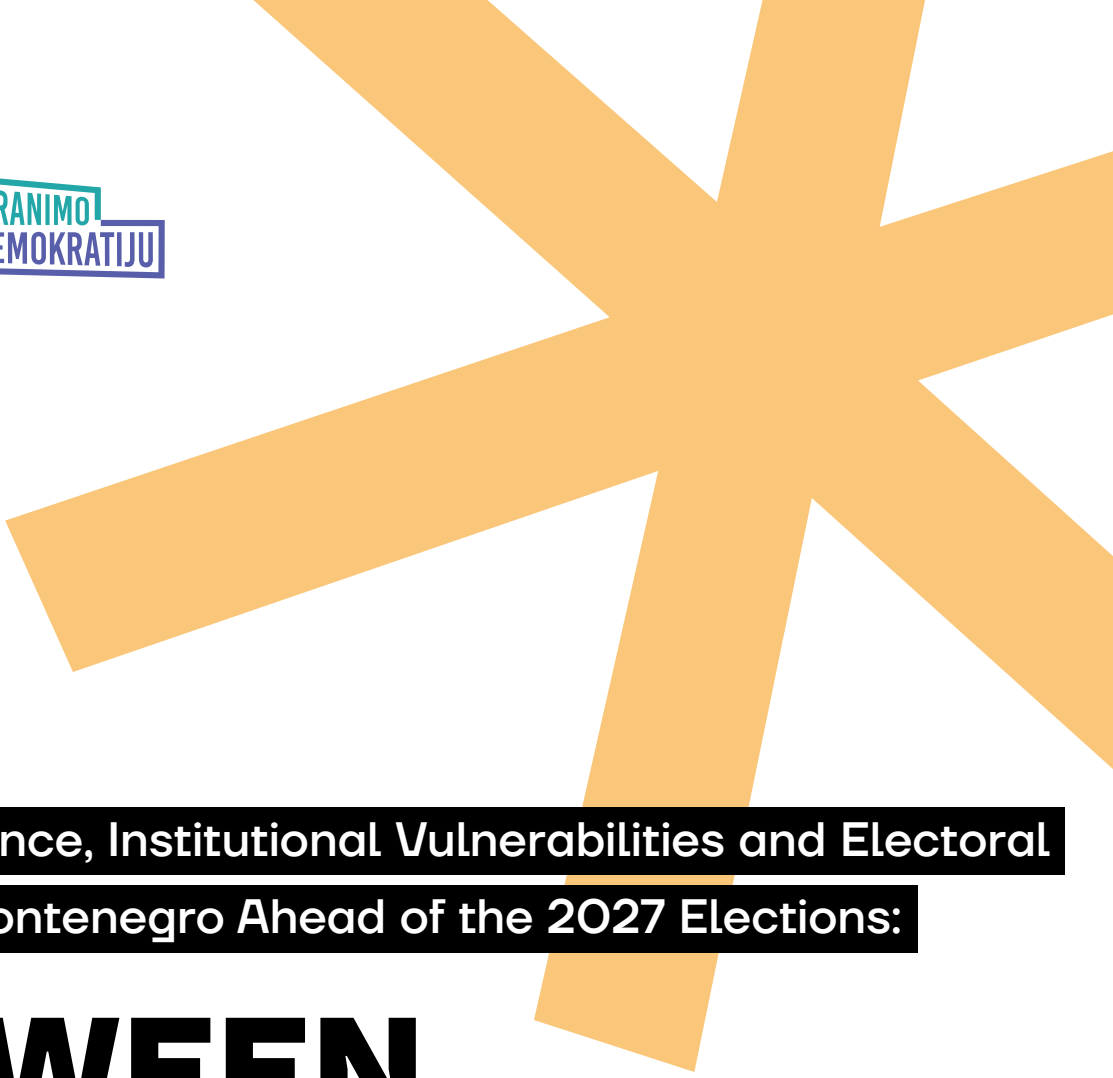
Foreign Influence, Institutional Vulnerabilities and Electoral
Integrity in Montenegro Ahead of the 2027 Elections:

BETWEEN INFLUENCE AND INTERFERENCE



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Foreign Influence, Institutional Vulnerabilities and Electoral
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WHEN FOREIGN INFLUENCE BECOMES A RISK TO DEMOCRACY

Montenegro faces harmful foreign influence not as a series of isolated incidents, but as an ongoing political and institutional challenge. It draws its strength not only from the resources and intent of foreign actors, but also from domestic vulnerabilities that allow it to take root: non-transparent media ownership and funding, the political dependence of state institutions, the flawed electoral legislation, unresolved issues surrounding citizenship and residence, weak oversight of political party financing, and deep identity divisions that can be swiftly instrumentalized.

Foreign interference thus rarely takes the shape of overt external pressure clearly detached from domestic politics and actors. It most frequently operates through local proxies, the legitimate-appearing commercial and media arrangements, political alliances, religious and parapolitical networks, third-party actors, and the coordinated dissemination of manipulative narratives. The tendency of turning domestic divisions into an infrastructure for foreign influence is an especially hazardous pattern in Montenegro.

Foreign influence is not inherently illegitimate. Any open society engages in international diplomacy, attracts foreign investment, shares media content, fosters cultural ties, and exchanges political ideas originating beyond its borders. The problem arises when such influence is hidden, non-transparent, coordinated, or leveraged through the exploitation of institutional and societal vulnerabilities; when its aim is not about contributing to public discourse, but curtailing free and democratic choice, rigging the electoral playing field, imposing the interests of foreign centers of power, or eroding trust in democratic institutions.

The continuous lack of a robust state reaction is just as concerning as the persistence of these threats. For years, the authorities have been offering only belated and fragmented response, and primarily only when an isolated case escalates into a public scandal or directly threatens those in power. When warnings get ignored for years, when identical patterns persist, and recognized vulnerabilities remain unaddressed, the institutional inaction becomes a political reality and an integral part of the very problem, regardless of the underlying motive.

Inaction comes at an additional cost: it normalizes foreign influence. Practices initially viewed as an anomaly gradually become accepted norms of political conduct. Cross-border media campaigns become accepted as standard practice, obscure media takeovers as regular market transactions, backing the interests of foreign political centers as a legitimate political stance, and the actions of foreign state institutions targeting Montenegro's electoral and political processes as an inevitable result of close relations between the countries.

The state must not respond through censorship, societal isolation, or the targeted creation of new enemies. It is equally critical that any response be grounded in evidence and universally applied rules, ensuring that the fight against harmful foreign influence is not weaponized to target political opponents or restrict freedom of expression. Nevertheless, this principle must not serve as a pretext for ignoring patterns that are clearly visible, documented, and corroborated through

actor behavior, media ownership structures and their political ties, institutional decisions, and media campaigns.

This publication builds upon CDT's long-term commitment to countering harmful foreign influence in Montenegro. Rather than detailing every single case and the forms the meddling activities take, it focuses on the key and highly illustrative examples to expose mechanisms likely to reappear in the next electoral cycle. The goal is to identify patterns through which foreign political interests, aided by domestic actors and exploiting institutional flaws, can compromise electoral integrity, media pluralism, societal cohesion, and Montenegro's EU integration path.

1. OUR APPROACH TO MONITORING FOREIGN INFLUENCE

1.1. Methodological Approach and Analytical Scope

The analyses conducted by CDT within its efforts to curb malign foreign interference in Montenegrin elections and core democratic functions are designed around case studies. These analyses seek to identify and understand the political, media, financial, and economic facets of external influence.

Our monitoring rests on reviewing legal compliance, official state documents and institutional reports, findings of international organizations, civil society analyses, as well as publicly available media coverage and documented cases that exert – or have the potential to exert – a direct or indirect influence on Montenegro’s electoral and democratic processes. The investigative journalist team behind Raskrinkavanje.me forms an essential pillar of this effort by mapping new media influence trends and documenting instances of disinformation.

The third data source involves the deployment of advanced software tools that scan a vast array of news portals and social media accounts to analyze the scope, origin, and dissemination paths of these contents. This methodology does not aim to capture every single instance of undue influence, but rather to identify the most critical ones – whether by their reach, intensity, or the novel modalities through which such influence is executed and disseminated.

In this publication, we clearly distinguish legitimate foreign influence from illicit or malign interference. International diplomacy, investments, cross-border media content, cultural ties, and political ideas originating abroad are inherent components of an open society. The problem arises when such influence is covert, conducted through non-transparent financial or ownership arrangements, illicit political financing, the abuse of state institutions, or coordinated manipulative campaigns.

A line gets crossed when domestic vulnerabilities are exploited to distort the political and electoral landscape, advance the interests of foreign centers of power, erode trust in democratic institutions, or manipulate societal divisions for political gain. Under these conditions, analyzing individual messages in isolation falls short – we must map out the full network of actors, media ownership ties, funding streams, timing, and repeated patterns.

2. MONTENEGRO'S CORE VULNERABILITIES AHEAD OF THE 2027 ELECTIONS

2.1. Cross-Border Media Ownership and Pluralism in Montenegro

The media landscape in Montenegro has been defined in recent years by a distinct regionalization of media ownership. This ownership setup has sparked widespread concerns over media pluralism, undue political influence, and the potential spillover of political and corporate interests and influence from neighboring countries into the Montenegrin public domain, particularly during election cycles.

The Digital Media Ownership Map, presented by the Agency for Audiovisual Media Services, delivers a key institutional contribution to decoding media ownership in Montenegro. It was highlighted during its presentation that while formal ownership transparency is vital for protecting media pluralism, the registration of ownership alone does not expose the true decision-making hubs. A full picture demands the mapping of affiliated legal entities, cross-border ownership ties, financial streams, and commercial interests that can steer editorial policies. The data confirm that television broadcasters with national or near-national reach are predominantly owned or controlled by decision-making centers located outside Montenegro, primarily entities registered in or commercially linked to Serbia.¹

As highlighted in the European Commission's 2026 Non-Paper, Montenegro needs to continue the full implementation of the new media legislation, ensure the functionality of regulatory bodies, and further improve the transparency of media ownership and funding in line with European standards. Particular emphasis is placed on further alignment with the European Media Freedom Act, which introduces stricter standards for beneficial ownership transparency, media funding, and the protection of editorial independence.²

While Montenegro's legal framework and practices are aligning with European standards, albeit at a slow pace, the actual media market is undergoing continuous buyouts by Serbia-based media power hubs backed by strong indications of ties to Aleksandar Vucic's regime. Both the nature and timing of these acquisitions signal potential groundwork and mobilization in the lead-up to Montenegro's upcoming elections. On May 5, the owners of the Serbian tabloid Alo and its online portal, both closely aligned with the Serbian regime, acquired the IN4S portal, further expanding their Montenegrin media portfolio that already included Pogled and Borba.³

Long-term research and analyses by Raskrinkavanje.me have been identifying these outlets as vectors of foreign information manipulation and sources of anti-EU narratives. In numerous instances, after Raskrinkavanje flagged their reports as manipulative, these portals would issue swift corrections, publicly acknowledging that the contentious articles indeed misled the public.

¹ Agency for Audiovisual Media Services (AMU), transparentnostmedija.me portal.

² Biljana Matijašević, Danijela Lasica, "Non-pejper EK: Crnoj Gori je za reforme potreban intenzivniji rad i politička posvećenost" ["EC Non-Paper: Montenegro Needs More Intensive Work and Political Commitment for Reforms"], *Vijesti online*, June 04 2025.

³ Danilo Misita, Mihailo Jovović, "IN4S prodan srpskom tabloidu 'Alo'", ["IN4S Sold to Serbian Tabloid 'Alo'"] *Vijesti online*, May 5 2026.

The sheer volume of hundreds of corrected pieces shows that disinformation here is not an occasional misstep, but a systematic pattern that requires rigorous oversight⁴.

A potentially even more severe blow to Montenegrin media pluralism emerged with the announced sale of United Media's majority stake in Vijesti. Alpac Capital CEO Pedro Vargas David sought to convince the public that the buyout would uphold the media outlet's editorial independence and pro-European stance.⁵ In response, minority shareholder and co-founder of Vijesti Zeljko Ivanovic challenged the transparency of Alpac Capital's ownership structure and political ties, announcing that the founders would contest any prospective takeover attempt before the national regulatory bodies and EU institutions⁶. The buyout announcement triggered immediate pushback from media freedom NGOs, as well as the European Federation of Journalists⁷, alongside calls for greater transparency and strict regulatory scrutiny.

Montenegro's Agency for Protection of Competition warned that proceeding with the deal without prior regulatory clearance would trigger legal sanctions.⁸ By mid-August and early September, the Commercial Court of Montenegro granted an injunction following a motion by the founders and minority owners of TV and Daily Vijesti, temporarily freezing any changes in the company's ownership and management structure. The court found sufficient grounds to preserve the current structure pending the resolution of the dispute over the sale of the majority stake⁹.

Our research team will be monitoring this case closely, as it serves as one of the most telling indicators of potential influence over the upcoming election cycle, which could result in near-total takeover of our media landscape by commercial and political structures from Serbia.

2.2. Voter Register, Dual Citizenship and Cross-Border Voting Rights

Montenegro faces a long-standing, systemic issue of its citizens holding citizenship of another state in addition to their Montenegrin citizenship, even though this is prohibited by law in most cases. This undisclosed dual citizenship poses a major challenge to the integrity of electoral processes, especially because contrasting citizenship laws across the region and the lack of reliable data exchange leave ample room for manipulating residence records and voting rights.¹⁰

Countries in the region maintain substantially different citizenship regimes and varied approaches to the exercise of voting rights, as indeed falls within their sovereign rights. However, these disparate legal frameworks, compounded by insufficient administrative records exchange, generate fertile ground for political disputes and voter manipulation. As a rule, countries do not exchange citizenship records, leaving Montenegro with no reliable means to identify all individuals who simultaneously hold voting rights in multiple jurisdictions.

⁴ Jovana Đurišić, "Navodno "brisanje" Srba iz starog udžbenika: Nema ih u primjerima, ima u podacima" ["Alleged 'Removal' of Serbs from Old Textbook: Omitted from Examples, Included in Data"], *Raskrinkavanje.me*, Aug 18 2026.

⁵ Direktor kompanije Alpac Capital: Proevropski mediji za evropsku budućnost Crne Gore" ["CEO of Alpac Capital: Pro-European Media for Montenegro's European Future"], *CDM portal*, June 19 2026.

⁶ Mihailo Jovović, "Odgovor Ivanovića Vargasu Davidu: U Vijestima nema šta da traži niko ko misli da može da ih kupi ili otme" ["Ivanovic's Response to Vargas David: No One Who Thinks They Can Buy or Seize Vijesti Has Any Business Here"], *Vijesti online*, June 20 2026.

⁷ Ivana Vlaović, "Sever: Pokušaj Vargasa Davida da preuzme "Vijesti" predstavlja udar na demokratiju i nezavisnost uređivačke politike" ["Sever: Vargas David's Attempt to Take Over Vijesti is a Blow to Democracy and Editorial Independence"], *Vijesti online*, June 29 2026

⁸ Mirko Kotlaš, "Biće posljedica pokušaju li da nas zaobiđu: Jovović o potencijalnoj prodaji "Vijesti" i transakciji mimo AZZK-a" ["There Will Be Consequences If They Try to Bypass Us: Jovovic on Potential Sale of Vijesti and Transaction Bypassing AZZK"], *Vijesti online*, June 26 2026

⁹ Mihailo Jovović, "Stopirana promjena vlasništva u TV Vijesti: Privremena mjera Privrednog suda zbog spora o prodaji većinskog udjela" ["Change of Ownership at TV Vijesti Halted: Commercial Court Issues Interim Injunction Over Majority Stake Sale Dispute"], *Vijesti online*, Aug 18 2026

¹⁰ Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), *Dvojno državljanstvo i biračko pravo u Crnoj Gori: Između pravnog okvira i izazova promjene* [Dual Citizenship and Voting Rights in Montenegro: Between Legal Framework and Challenging Implementation], Podgorica, 2026.

Analyses conducted by non-governmental sector¹¹, show that more than 63,000 adult citizens listed in Montenegro's electoral roll are indicated as residing abroad, with the presumption that the majority of them have likely obtained voting rights in this other country, while retaining their entry in the Montenegrin electoral roll. Accounting for roughly 11.6% of the total electorate, this finding underscores grave flaws in keeping the voter register up to date.

NGO research¹² further highlights the distinct cross-border dimension of this challenge. In the run-up to the 2021 Niksic local elections, data emerged identifying nearly 1,000 voters concurrently enrolled on the voter registers of both Montenegro and Serbia, in direct violation of the applicable law. A comparable situation was documented in Herceg Novi¹³, where reports indicated that more than 10% of the overall electorate held active residency and voting registrations in neighboring Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The political impact of this vulnerability is most evident in elections decided by razor-thin margins. The 2006 independence referendum was carried by a margin of merely 2,000 votes over the required 55% threshold, while the 2020 parliamentary elections were decided by a margin of approximately 7,000 votes. In such high-stakes political moments, importing voters can yield high returns for both domestic and regional actors seeking to unlawfully sway election results in neighboring countries.

A prime example illustrating this pattern is the 2023 election in Serbia, which prompted the European Parliament to pass a resolution calling for an international probe into irregularities, with a focus on the Belgrade City Assembly elections. The resolution cited convincing evidence of irregularities executed as part of a systematic strategy of unlawful and illegitimate electoral engineering, including the organized transfer of voters from both Serbia and neighboring countries to cast ballots in local elections in Belgrade.¹⁴

EU legal framework strictly reinforces the principle that no voter may cast a ballot more than once in the same election, a rule that hinges on effective cross-border administrative exchange and verifiable voter records. Council Directive 93/109/EC sets up a dedicated data exchange protocol among Member States to eliminate instances of multiple voting during European Parliament elections.¹⁵

Potential manipulation of voter registers, residence records, and citizenship status would not only introduce illicit foreign interference into national elections within the region, but could also spill over into elections for the European Parliament. Should Montenegro join the EU without addressing these loopholes, questions would arise as to whether citizens of non-EU countries could exploit dual citizenship and residency status to directly sway the election of Montenegro's representatives to the European Parliament.¹⁶

¹¹ Society of Statisticians and Demographers of Montenegro, "Živimo li u Crnoj Gori ili samo glasamo? Neslaganja između biračkog spiska i popisa" ["Do We Live in Montenegro or Just Vote Here? Discrepancies Between the Voter Register and the Population Census"], 2025. Available at: <https://demostats.me/>.

¹² Bojan Bugarin, "Crnogorsko državljanstvo i prebivalište: Kako doći do ažurnog biračkog spiska" ["Montenegrin Citizenship and Residence: How to Come to an Updated Voter Register"], CEMI, Podgorica, June 2021
See also CDM, "Vujović: Skoro hiljadu birača iz Nikšića upisano i u birački spisak Srbije" ["Vujovic: Nearly One Thousand Voters from Niksic Also Registered in Serbia's Voter Register"], CDM, March 16 2021.

¹³ "CEMI: U Herceg Novom preko 2.500 birača iz drugih država" ["CEMI: Over 2,500 Voters in Herceg Novi Registered in Other Countries"], *Radio Free Europe*, April 13 2021.

¹⁴ Dragan Koprivica, Milica Kovačević, *Dvojno državljanstvo i biračko pravo u Crnoj Gori. Između pravnog okvira i izazova promjene promjene [Dual Citizenship and Voting Rights in Montenegro: Between Legal Framework and Challenging Implementation]*, Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2026.

¹⁵ Dragan Koprivica, Milica Kovačević, *Studija slučaja – Bosna i Hercegovina, Crna Gora, Hrvatska i Srbija: Balkanski četvorougao: migracija birača i granice biračkog spiska* ["Case Study – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia: The Balkan Quadrangle: Voter Migration and the Boundaries of the Voter Register"], Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2026.

¹⁶ Ibid.

2.3. Electoral Institutions Between Domestic Vulnerabilities and External Interventions

The single most critical and alarming example of direct interference in the 2023 electoral process was the involvement of the Serbian Republic Electoral Commission and Ministry of the Interior in checking Milojko Spajic's eligibility. Representatives of certain political parties within Montenegro's State Election Commission (SEC), facilitated by Serbian state authorities initiated an unprecedented and non-statutory mechanism and solicited information on whether Spajic held residence and voting rights in Serbia. Prompted by the official response from Belgrade, SEC rejected his candidacy, effectively allowing foreign authorities to directly interfere in a domestic election.

It is particularly telling that neither REC nor SEC felt compelled to extend this type of "collaboration" to other presidential candidates or the hundreds of contenders for MP seats. Serbian state authorities, which remain notably uncooperative toward Montenegrin institutions in numerous other matters, acted with remarkable speed to supply the exact information needed to disqualify a major contender. This case established a harmful precedent and subsequently led to a first-instance court judgment convicting SEC of discriminatory conduct.¹⁷

Previous election cycles have demonstrated that foreign influence manifests through political engagement by foreign state officials and institutions, financial backing for political and parapolitical actors, activities of religious organizations, media campaigns, disinformation, cyber threats, and attempts to influence post-election coalition-building. Interference originating within the region, primarily from Serbia, is particularly prominent.¹⁸

¹⁷ Nikola Dragaš, "Spajića otpisali samo zbog politike: Kako Osnovni sud obrazlaže presudu da je DIK diskriminisao lidera PES-a" ["Spajic Written Off Solely Due to Politics: How Basic Court Justifies Ruling That SEC Discriminated Against PES Leader"], *Vijesti online*, July 24 2026.

¹⁸ CDT team, *Inostrani uticaji na izborni proces u Crnoj Gori 2016–23* [Foreign Influences on the Electoral Process in Montenegro 2016–2023], Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2026.

3. HOW INFLUENCE WORKS IN PRACTICE: CASE STUDIES

3.1. Foreign Influence in Previous Election Cycles: Patterns and Precedents

The 2023 electoral processes were marked by intensive disinformation campaigns. Serbian tabloids blatantly endorsed specific political options while framing their opponents through negative and frequently manipulative content. Alleged public opinion polls of obscure origin and dubious methodology were heavily deployed to shape voter perceptions ahead of the polls.¹⁹

The 2021 municipal elections in Niksic were dubbed by regime-aligned Serbian media as the “Battle for Niksic”, giving it media coverage on par with major political developments in Serbia. Individuals linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Serbian political structures were present on the ground amid the campaign, with several actors subjected to police checks for suspected illicit cash inflows intended for voter bribery. Concurrently, fake news reports alleging power cuts at polling stations, organized violence, and other disruptive events were disseminated to sow fear and distrust among citizens.²⁰

The 2020 parliamentary elections took place in a highly polarized atmosphere following the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the massive religious processions organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). During this period, the SPC emerged as a key socio-political actor, openly supporting political forces that were opposing the law and subsequently stepping directly into government formation. Recent public testimonies by direct participants in those post-election talks, Milan Knezevic and Dritan Abazovic, revealed that three meetings were convened in SPC monasteries in Montenegro to discuss government formation, and that the SPC directly interfered in shaping the Democratic Front’s candidate slate and choosing the Prime Minister-designate for the 42nd Government of Montenegro.²¹

Financial flows from Serbia to local organizations and initiatives aligned with favored political groups were recorded, alongside explicit public endorsements for some parties and candidates by regional leaders.²²

Far from being isolated events, these dynamics manifest a continuous deployment of coordinated instruments that only get adjusted to suit political circumstances of the moment. Media campaigns, voter mobilization along identity lines, political backing, and financial and institutional channels operate synchronously, turning domestic elections into an arena for regional political competition.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ TV Adria, “30. avgust – šest godina kasnije” [“30 August – Six Years Later”], YouTube channel: ADRIA TV Montenegro, available at: 1:03:00 – 1:16:15.

²² CDT team, *Inostrani uticaji na izborni proces u Crnoj Gori 2016–23* [Foreign Influences on the Electoral Process in Montenegro 2016–2023], Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2026.

3.2. From Support to Discreditation: The Shifting Stance of Regional Media Toward Montenegrin Politicians

To better illustrate how Serbian regime-aligned media operate, we examine three short case studies tracking their coverage of Montenegrin political figures: Milo Djukanovic, Milojko Spajic, and Andrija Mandic. Despite their ideological differences, all three followed the same trajectory: transitioning from praised allies to targets of tabloid hit pieces. The cases show that ideological stances matter far less than whether a politician is getting in the way of immediate strategic needs of Serbia's governing establishment.

Milo Djukanovic: From Acceptable Partner to Primary Target

Under Milo Djukanovic's long rule, branches of Serbian media outlets were widely set up across Montenegro, rapidly becoming platforms for attacking political opponents and disseminating hate speech. A notable case involved the particularly brutal campaign against MANS Executive Director Vanja Calovic, while the headline "Siptarska svinjarija" ("Albanian filth") was officially denounced as hate speech by the Ombudsman²³. The close ties between the ruling elite at the time and Informer were clearly on display when the then-Montenegrin Ambassador to Serbia, Branislav Micunovic, attended the tabloid's anniversary event.²⁴

. The close relationship between the ruling structure at the time and the Informer tabloid is illustrated by the presence of the then-Montenegrin Ambassador to Serbia, Branislav Micunovic, at an anniversary event hosted by the tabloid.

Between 2012 and 2015, tabloid coverage of Djukanovic remained favorable or at least neutral, highlighting regional stability and strong bilateral ties. However, this coverage later turned sharply hostile. For almost a decade, Djukanovic was vilified as the primary target in Montenegro and framed as the main adversary to Serbian national interests and the SPC, a "dictator" who created a private state, and the head of organized crime structures.²⁵

Milojko Spajic: From "Promising Young Leader" to "Western Proxy"

Milojko Spajic followed a comparable path. Only a few years prior, Serbian outlets framed the narrative around his Serbian heritage links, portraying him as a promising, devout young politician, showcasing his academic accolades, scholarships, and professional achievements. They published almost idealized feature stories about a foreign-educated expert returning home to modernize Montenegro.²⁶ This narrative very quickly flipped as he was now labeled "Western proxy" and subjected to repeated attacks from Vucic's media apparatus.²⁷

²³ Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro, Opinion No. 01-444/14 dated on Jan 26 2025.

²⁴ "Ambasador Crne Gore kod inspiratora mržnje: Mićunović slavio sa "Informerom"" ["Montenegrin Ambassador With Instigators of Hate: Micunovic Joins Informer's Celebration"], *Vijesti online*, June 04 2018.

²⁵ "ZAKRVIO KLANOVE I POSTAO ŠEF KAVČANA! Otkrivamo kako je Milo Đukanović stvorio mafiju od koje strepi Evropa: AKCIJA ZAVADI PA VLADAJ!" ["HE PITTED CLANS AGAINST EACH OTHER AND BECAME HEAD OF THE KAVAC CLAN! We are revealing how Milo Djukanovic Created the Mafia Feared by Europe: Operation Divide and Conquer!"], *Republika.rs*, Oct 16 2022; "Mafijaški bos šefovao braći Đukanović: Milo i Aco radili za Koza nostru - U dilu i Tači" ["Djukanovic Brothers under the Thumb of Mafia Boss: Milo and Aco Worked for Cosa Nostra - Thaci Also in on the Deal"], *Informer.rs*, March 7 2026.

²⁶ "ZOVU GA MIKI, GOVORI 6 JEZIKA, ŠKOLOVAO SE U JAPANU Ko je Milojko Spajic, premijer Crne Gore! Ova zgodna brineta rodila mu ćerkicu" ["THEY CALL HIM MICKEY, HE SPEAKS 6 LANGUAGES, STUDIED IN JAPAN: Who is Milojko Spajic, Prime Minister of Montenegro! This Beautiful Brunette Gave Birth to His Daughter,"], *Kurir portal*, Oct 31 2023.

²⁷ *Raskrinkavanje.me* / search: *Milojko Spajic*

Raskrinkavanje.me documented numerous disinformation campaigns and overt media attacks targeting the prime minister. The shift was neither subtle nor gradual: the same media ecosystem that built him up as a desirable new leader turned hostile as soon as his policy stance diverged from Belgrade's agenda.

It is particularly telling that Prime Minister Spajic recently publicly cited intelligence reports on coordinated hybrid interference timed around Montenegro's EU chapter closures, involving state officials from at least two neighboring countries – a likely reference to Serbia and Albania.²⁸

Andrija Mandić: When Media-Driven Political Support Expires

Even Parliament Speaker Andrija Mandić – long regarded as the primary favorite of Belgrade's media landscape – experienced this shift. Throughout 2023, Serbian media heavily backed his candidacy, describing him as the “guarantor of Djukanović's defeat” and framing his prospective victory as “divine justice”.²⁹ Within a few years only, his standing within these same outlets deteriorated, giving way to sharp public criticism of his performance.³⁰ Mandić unexpectedly became a frequent target for negative coverage in tabloid media and from Serbian state leadership.

It is interesting how these media outlets managed to converge all three distinct politicians into a unified narrative. The trigger was a proposed constitutional amendment related to judicial functioning intended to advance Montenegro's EU integration. Rather than acknowledging the milestone, Serbian tabloids launched attacks claiming: “All Joined Together Against the Serbian Language”.³¹

The coverage of Djukanović, Spajic, and Mandić demonstrates that these media narratives do not reflect independent journalism in the public interest, but rather serve as deliberate political instruments deployed to advance the official political agenda in Serbia.

²⁸ Mihailo Jovović, “Srbija i Albanija su države na koje je Spajić mislio kad je govorio o hibridnom djelovanju” [“It was Serbia and Albania that Spajic was Referring to When Speaking of Hybrid Action”], *Vijesti* online, Aug 27 2026.

²⁹ Jelena Jovanović, “Jutarnje emisije iz Srbije aktivno rade na promociji Mandića” [“Morning Shows from Serbia Actively Working to Promote Mandić”], *Raskrinkavanje.me*, March 17 2023.

³⁰ “Mediji iz Srbije napali Mandića: ‘Krenuo Milovim stopama’, ‘Bruka do vijeka’...” [“Serbian Media Attack Mandić: ‘Following in Milo's Footsteps’, ‘A Disgrace Lives on Forever’...”], *CdM*, June 03 2026.

³¹ “Skandal! Spajić i Mandić u paktu sa Milom Đukanovićem, svi zajedno protiv srpskog jezika?! (FOTO)” [“Scandalous! Spajic and Mandić in Pact with Milo Djukanović, All Joined Together Against the Serbian Language?! (PHOTO)”], *Informer.rs*, July 06 2026.

3.3. Tivat Summit: A Security Incident as a Trigger for a Disinformation Campaign

The EU–Western Balkans Leaders’ Summit on June 5, 2026, in Tivat, illustrated how even high-level integration events are exploited to destabilize Montenegro’s political scene and exert pressure on both internal and external policy. Centered on enlargement and regional integration, the summit gathered more than 30 top European and regional leaders – a strong signal of support for Montenegro as the next country in line to join the EU.

On the eve of the summit, a major security incident took place when 87 individuals unexpectedly arrived from Belgrade. Citing an official Police Directorate security assessment indicating that the group posed a potential threat to national or internal security, Montenegrin border police refused entry and turned back the Serbian citizens, who had reportedly been tasked with informally securing the stay of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Media investigations subsequently revealed that the group predominantly comprised of individuals with criminal records linked to the Serbian ruling regime.³²

In response, Serbian tabloid outlets triggered a wave of disinformation, claiming that Serbs faced “a campaign of persecution” at Tivat airport, that women, children, the elderly, and the sick were among those turned away, and that Montenegrin authorities subjected Aleksandar Vucic to double standards compared to other attending leaders.³³ The narrative was then rapidly steered toward long-standing points of contention: language, historical relations between the two nations, anti-fascism, crime, and the status of Serbs in Montenegro.

The negative campaign persisted with claims branding Montenegrins are “anti-Serbs” and “worse Ustasha than the Ustasha themselves,” paired with claims that Croatian President Zoran Milanovic had traveled to Montenegro aboard a naval warship and received full military honors³⁴, all while seeking to diminish and question Vucic’s diplomatic treatment. Raskrinkavanje.me also documented other contents attempting to depict Vucic as humiliated or sidelined during the summit.³⁵

This case demonstrates how easily the agenda of a major international event can get hijacked: while formal focus remains on EU enlargement, divisive identity-driven narratives dominate public attention. This precise tactic can prove highly effective during an electoral campaign, where the goal is to displace rational policy debate with highly charged topics that rapidly incite fear, anger, and identity grievances.

³² Biljana Nikolić, “Putnici sa spiska – ekipa SNS-a za specijalne zadatke”, [“Passengers on the List – the SNS Team for Special Assignments”] *Vijesti online*, June 3 2026.

³³ “Kakva tortura! Srbi prošli golgotu na aerodromu u Tivtu – Šta smo vam mi uradili?” [“What a Torture! Serbs Endured Persecution at Tivat Airport – What Did We Ever Do to You?”], *Informer.rs*, June 03 2026.

³⁴ Jovana Đurišić, “U stavu mirno ali prije šest godina: Milanović nije došao Vojnim brodom u Tivat” [“Attention on Deck! – but from Six Years Ago: Milanovic Did Not Arrive in Tivat on a Warship”], *Raskrinkavanje.me*, June 04 2026.

³⁵ Jovana Đurišić, “Pored Sančeza i za stolom: Vučić u Tivtu nije bio 13. prase u magarećoj klupi” [“Seated Beside Sánchez and at the Main Table: Vucic Was Not Sidelined in Tivat,”], *Raskrinkavanje.me*, June 10 2026.

3.4. “Referendum – The Story of Fabricated Freedom”: From Insults to Censorship Narratives

The documentary film “Referendum – The Story of Fabricated Freedom”, produced by the Serbia-based organization Center for Social Stability, was broadcast in Serbia on Informer TV, B92, and Dokumentarna TV, while Montenegro’s Adria TV and Prva TV aired it on May 20 and 21, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of Montenegro’s independence referendum. The film was also uploaded to multiple YouTube channels.³⁶

The film explicitly denies Montenegrin independence and national identity while putting forward a series of discriminatory and dehumanizing claims regarding Montenegrins. The Center’s affiliation structure confirms that this was an organized and coordinated effort and not an isolated and harmless endeavor of a CSO: out of 49 contributors, at least 15 are card-carrying members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), 24 work in public institutions or state-owned enterprises controlled by SNS in Vojvodina and nationally, and eight are otherwise affiliated with the party.³⁷

The Montenegrin Agency for Audiovisual Media Services has suspended the rebroadcasting of Serbia-based Informer TV for six months, and fined Prva TV and Adria TV for airing the documentary, citing hate speech, incitement to national intolerance and discrimination, violation of human dignity, and denial of the legitimacy of Montenegrin national identity and constitutional order.

Additionally, another release by the same production company aired on Adria TV triggered legal intervention, this time by the High State Prosecutor’s Office, over their documentary “Srebrenica – Anatomy of Deception”. Prosecutors filed for misdemeanor proceedings against Adria TV and its editor-in-chief for violations under the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination.³⁸

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic publicly stated that he saw “no offensive content” in the film “Referendum – The Story of Fabricated Freedom”, claiming that Montenegro was practicing “undemocratic censorship”.³⁹ This censorship narrative was quickly picked up by the pro-Belgrade outlets in Montenegro and the affiliated media in Serbia. The debate over the documentary’s inflammatory content was reframed as a matter of “censorship,” expanding into grievances over media freedom, freedom of expression, the status of Serbs in Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, Stipe Mesic, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), the independence referendum, and other long-standing identity-driven, historical and political divides.⁴⁰

This serves as a prime example of the operational model employed by Montenegro-based broadcast media tied to Serbian political and commercial interests. Even severe insults, disinformation, and the outright denial of their host state’s sovereignty did not deter them from airing the documentary. More importantly, the case illustrates what could likely unfold ahead of key political developments and particularly during election campaigns: the core issue gets sidelined, while public debate is redirected toward a much broader identity-driven conflict designed to trigger and mobilize audiences more effectively.

³⁶ You Tube channel: ADRIA TV Montenegro, “Referendum: Priča o izmišljenoj slobodi” [“Referendum – The Story of Fabricated Freedom”].

³⁷ Balša Rudović, “Vučićevi ‘dokumentaristi’: Od 49 saradnika Centra za društvenu stabilnost, dvoje nema direktnu ili posrednu vezu sa SNS” [“Vucic’s ‘Documentarians’: Only Two Out of 49 Center for Social Stability Associates Have No Links to SNS,”], *Vijesti online*, May 28 2026.

³⁸ Mina, Ne.V., “Tužilaštvo traži pokretanje prekršajnog postupka protiv TV Adria zbog filma ‘Srebrenica – anatomija obmane’” [Prosecution Seeks Misdemeanor Proceedings Against TV Adria Over ‘Srebrenica – Anatomy of Deception’], *Vijesti online*, June 18 2026.

³⁹ “Zaustavljanje TV programa u Crnoj Gori nedemokratsko, strah od drugačijeg mišljenja” [“Suspending TV Broadcasts in Montenegro Is Undemocratic: Fear of the Opposing Views”], *RTCG portal*, June 22 2026.

⁴⁰ Milica Kovačević, “Kako je priča o govoru mržnje postala priča o cenzuri” [“How Hate Speech Warnings Were Reframed into Censorship Claims”], *Raskrinkavanje.me*, June 11 2026.

3.5. Montenegro and Croatia: Bilateral Disputes at the Intersection of EU Policy and Regional Narratives

A distinct chapter in Montenegro–Croatia relations was symbolically initiated on June 28, 2024, following the Montenegrin Parliament’s adoption of the Jasenovac Resolution. The decision was made despite the absence of any public denial in Montenegro regarding the genocide and crimes committed against Serbs, Jews, and Roma, or the crimes against Croats who opposed the Ustasha regime in NDH. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic actively fueled the campaign preceding the adoption, asserting that Montenegro “would not dare” pass the resolution. Croatia responded with firm political and diplomatic steps, notably blocking the closure of Chapter 31 and bringing unresolved bilateral disputes to the fore.⁴¹

Raskrinkavanje.me consistently keeps track of the anti-Croat narratives that are carefully cultivated across media outlets in Montenegro and Serbia owned by companies or individuals close to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Shaped through political discourse, sensationalist and unverified news and viral social media content, the underlying premise paints Croats as inherently fascist and Ustasha-aligned, while systematically promoting historical revisionism and downplaying Croatia’s anti-fascist history.⁴²

These narratives gained traction amid a wave of far-right incidents in Croatia, such as acts targeting the Serb minority and the public use of WWII-era pro-Ustasha slogans. Rather than going unanswered, these actions sparked strong political and societal pushback, including anti-fascist protests across Croatia. Nevertheless, Serbian and some Montenegrin media outlets leveraged these real far-right incidents to push broad generalizations and collective labeling against Croatia and its citizens.

Political actors actively reinforce these storylines. Milan Knezevic claims that Croatia is being granted “unilateral concessions beyond its own demands,” while Serbs in Montenegro are denied their rights. Aleksandar Vucic portrays Croatia as a power seeking to “bring Podgorica under its control” and drag Montenegro into an “anti-Serb policy,” while Serbian government officials assert that Montenegro has become a “staging ground for Ustasha rampages” and that Croatia has placed it “under its protectorate”.⁴³ Certain members of SPC clergy have also played a role, with their statements about Croats in Boka Kotorska prompting a reaction from the national Ombudsman.⁴⁴

These narratives systematically build an image of Croatia as a hostile state seeking to assert dominance and humiliate Montenegro. This undermines good-neighborly relations, polarizes society, and amplifies ethnic tensions. As Montenegro moves closer to EU accession, these campaigns cast Croatia as an impediment to its European integration, framing any bilateral compromise with Zagreb as a betrayal of national dignity.

On the other hand, media coverage in Croatia carries much less intensity. Reporting primarily focuses on official foreign ministry statements concerning open issues, while major political parties across the spectrum generally highlight the value of EU enlargement, diplomatic dispute

⁴¹ Dragan Koprivica, Sanja Despot, *Crna Gora i Hrvatska: novi i stari problemi i njihova evropska dimenzija* [“Montenegro and Croatia: New and Old Challenges and Their European Dimension”], Center for Democratic Transition, Faktograf, Podgorica, 2026.

⁴² Jelena Jovanović, “O komšijama sve najgore: Anti-hrvatski narativi kojima se cilja i EU” [“Only Speak Ill About the Neighbors: Anti-Croat Narratives as a Way of Targeting the EU”], *Raskrinkavanje.me*, Feb 22 2026.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jelena Jovanović, “Backović će morati da pazi šta priča” [“Backovic Will Have to Mind His Words”], *Vijesti online*, Feb 20 2026.

resolution, and refraining from provocations. The right-wing Homeland Movement (Domovinski pokret) remains the primary exception, taking a substantially more rigid stance.⁴⁵

Far-right media outlets in Croatia portray Montenegro as a state with an unstable identity susceptible to Serbian influence, while framing Boka Kotorska as historically and inherently Croatian cultural space whose identity is allegedly being suppressed. Extreme variants of this discourse claim Boka was “snatched” from Croatian territory and that its “every stone speaks Croatian.” While these fringe outlets have minimal reach within Croatia’s broader media environment, their rhetoric provides ammunition for anti-Croatian propaganda in Montenegro and Serbia.⁴⁶

Montenegro has become an arena for political, media, and diplomatic “battles” between Croatia and Serbia, with several domestic political parties actively playing their role. Serbia leverages its media infrastructure, proxy networks, and close ties with some political actors in Montenegro to generate ongoing instability and stall Montenegro’s path to the EU. Meanwhile, Croatian diplomats have increasingly linked EU accession benchmarks to unresolved bilateral disputes as a mechanism to apply political pressure and advance their domestic policy goals.⁴⁷

This intricate regional triangle can very easily be weaponized during the upcoming election campaign. Montenegrin authorities must therefore formulate a clear response that resists media ultimatums and identity-driven mobilization, steering bilateral disputes back into institutional channels, European procedures, and, where necessary, international arbitration mechanisms.

⁴⁵ Kukavica: Nikada više nećemo dopustiti da Crna Gora bude platforma za napad na Hrvatsku” [“Kukavica: We Will Never Again Allow Montenegro to Be a Launchpad for Attacks on Croatia”], *Portal Analitika*, Jan 12 2025.

⁴⁶ Davor Dijanović, “Boka kotorska – biser Mediterana u kojemu svaki kamen govori hrvatski” [“Boka Kotorska – Gem of the Mediterranean Where Every Stone Speaks Croatian”], *Obnova*, April 15 2019.

⁴⁷ An illustrative example is the recent statement by the Croatian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Gordan Grlic Radman, who argued that the property of Croats in Montenegro is not merely a bilateral issue, but a matter concerning minority rights under Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights). While minority protection is an established benchmark within Chapter 23, this specific dispute had not previously featured in European Commission reports on Montenegro — pointing to a deliberate effort to address bilateral disputes through “EU rules of the game”.

4. WHAT THE CASE STUDIES REVEAL: PATTERNS OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

While individual case studies vary in their key protagonists and immediate triggers, they collectively expose a distinct and repeatable modus operandi. Foreign influence in Montenegro rarely operates as a standalone message from abroad; rather, it relies on domestic proxies, cross-border media networks, divisive identity issues, and institutional weaknesses. When these mechanisms repeat cycle after cycle, diagnosing them is not political interpretation, but a vital foundation for safeguarding the democratic process in a timely manner.

4.1. Foreign Influence and the Reliance on Domestic Proxies

Foreign actors achieve maximum efficacy by channeling influence through local proxies — including registered or unregistered media outlets, political parties, public institutions, religious organizations, NGOs, parapolitical entities and influential individuals. These proxies lend local credibility to external agendas, obscure or downplay their origin, and frame foreign political agendas as genuine domestic initiative.

4.2. Cross-border Media Infrastructure Amplifies Reach

Interconnected ownership, content distribution network, and editorial coordination form a conduit through which political messaging produced in Serbia rapidly enters Montenegrin public discourse. When ownership ties align with ideological proximity, shared narratives, synchronized campaigns, and the dissemination of manipulative content, media infrastructure becomes one of the primary tools for exerting external political influence.

4.3. Identity Topics as a Conflict Accelerator

Questions surrounding language, religion, national identity, the independence referendum, World War II, regional foreign policies, and minority rights act as immediate catalysts for political mobilization. Specific events such as a national security decision, a regulatory measure, or a bilateral dispute are rapidly reframed as imminent threats to collective identity. Consequently, facts get sidelined, and public discourse shifts to emotional terrain where fear, historical grievances, and perceived threats become potent political instruments.

4.4. Targets May Change, but the Model Operandi Persists

Case studies centered on Djukanovic, Spajic, and Mandic illustrate that “favorites” and “adversaries” are fluid categories. While campaign targets change, the operational pattern remains intact. A politician previously endorsed as a preferred partner can instantly be branded a “Western asset,” traitor, or adversary of Serbian interests as soon as their policy actions diverge from the expectations of power centers in Serbia.

4.5. Institutional Gaps Facilitate External Influence

Ambiguous electoral procedures, weak oversight of campaign financing, insufficient media ownership transparency, outdated residence registries, and other systemic flaws are not merely administrative shortcomings. They act as critical entry points, enabling foreign political actors to channel their interests into domestic policy outcomes. Prolonged institutional inertia, despite repeated warnings, is thus inherently part of the problem.

4.6. Topic Hijacking – a Distinct Form of Information Tactic

Shifting the subject remains a highly effective tactic in information manipulation operations. Cases involving the Tivat summit and the documentary “Referendum – The Story of Fabricated Freedom” reveal a clear pattern: initial security measures or movie contents were swiftly obscured, replaced by debates over media censorship, the status of Serbs, accusations of Ustasha fascism, national dignity, and historical disputes. Factual arguments are transformed into identity-driven clashes, rallying public support through emotional appeals rather than verifiable facts.

Ultimately, foreign influence does not require persuading the public of a specific viewpoint; it succeeds by shifting the campaign agenda, eroding trust, stoking identity divisions, or exploiting procedural loopholes.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ELECTORAL RESILIENCE

The recommendations below outline short- and medium-term priorities for addressing key vulnerabilities. While a number of measures can be initiated or scaled up ahead of the next election cycle, others require a more sustained legislative, institutional, and regional process. Rather than pledging to resolve every issue by 2027, their purpose is to establish a clear course of action and initiate reforms that progressively narrow the space for harmful foreign influence.

5.1. Transparency in Media Ownership and Funding

- Introduce a single, fully operational system for publicly disclosing data on formal and beneficial ownership, corporate affiliations, the origin of initial capital, executive management structures, and key revenue streams to identify potential political or financial leverage over editorial policies across all media formats, including online news portals.
- Grant the Agency for Audiovisual Media Services (AMU) explicit authority to audit the accuracy and completeness of media ownership and financial disclosures, enforce compliance, and impose effective sanctions for submitting inaccurate or incomplete data or concealing relevant information.
- Designate the media industry as a strategic sector under the proposed foreign direct investment (FDI) screening mechanism to safeguard democratic processes and the public interest, requiring mandatory evaluations of funding sources, beneficial ownership structures, market concentration, and potential external foreign political influence.

5.2. Political Financing and Third-Party Campaigning

- Strengthen the legislative framework, ensure its consistent enforcement, and establish effective oversight to eliminate avenues for covert, illicit, indirect, and foreign funding of political entities and election campaigns.
- Align with ODIHR recommendations and refine the regulatory framework governing third-party involvement in election campaigns by clearly defining campaign participants, enforcing transparency regarding their true funding sources, extending campaign finance restrictions to third parties, and introducing rules for closing loopholes that allow spending and donation limits to be bypassed through third parties.
- Reinforce the independence, resources, and oversight powers of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (ASK), obligating the agency to conduct proactive and timely audits — including comprehensive cross-database checks across relevant public registries, and publicly release audit findings and decisions.

- Establish a comprehensive, proportionate, and deterrent system of sanctions for violations of campaign and party financing regulations based on the gravity and scale of the infraction, specifically targeting the financial and political gains accrued through illegal practices; introduce criminal liability for the most severe and socially damaging forms of illegal campaign funding.

5.3. Professionalizing Election Administration

- Ground the transformation of the State Election Commission (SEC) into a professional and independent Central Election Commission (CEC) on merit-based criteria and references, transparent and competitive appointment procedures, and clear accountability mechanisms.
- Legally define the operational procedure for verifying candidate eligibility, detailing the grounds, mechanisms, and strict timeframes for cross-border data verification with foreign state bodies, guaranteeing non-discriminatory treatment across all candidate submissions and party lists.

5.4. Independence of the Media Regulator

- Safeguard the operational autonomy of the Agency for Audiovisual Media Services in monitoring the media coverage of election campaigns, eliminating provisions that would grant political entities or election management bodies authority over matters falling under its jurisdiction. State bodies — and specifically not the CEC — must not hold veto or prior approval power over the regulator's methodology or operational decisions.
- Grant the media regulator an explicit mandate to oversee compliance with election campaign regulations within its scope and resolve complaints under urgent administrative procedures, backed by a clear system of proportionate, scalable sanctions tailored to the nature, severity, and consequences of the non-compliance.
- Ensure that any restriction on media content is clearly prescribed by law, necessary, proportionate, and directed at a legitimate goal, while fully respecting freedom of expression and the right to an effective legal remedy.

5.5. Voter Register and Regional Data Exchange

- Upon establishing precise legal preconditions, execute a comprehensive field audit of the voter register, conducted on a case-by-case basis through verified documentary evidence. Automatic cross-referencing of international databases must not serve as sole ground for deregistering voters; it must only trigger individualized verifications subject to formal decisions and the right to appeal.
- Ensure that electoral roll reform is not reduced to a one-off "purging" exercise, but rather focus on upgrading source registries through continuous, legally regulated maintenance and verification.

- Establish a formalized and inclusive oversight body within the Ministry of the Interior (MUP), involving Ministry representatives, political entities, and accredited election observation organizations, to monitor voter register updates and removals, while maintaining strict data privacy safeguards.
- Advance cross-border data-sharing agreements across the region to maintain accurate electoral rolls. Institutional support from the European Commission should help formalize reliable and continuous cooperation frameworks ensuring that data exchange does not depend on the shifting political will of incumbent governments.

5.6. Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

- Develop a coordinated multi-stakeholder framework to combat disinformation and foreign information interference, by bringing together regulatory bodies, civil society, media organizations, and self-regulatory bodies, with a clear focus on transparency, access to reliable information, independent fact-checking, media literacy, and other support measures, establishing clear content restriction parameters while treating media bans as a last resort.
- Set up an early detection system for disinformation campaigns and FIMI by integrating real-time media and online content monitoring data with available datasets on political ad spending, funding streams, and beneficial ownership. Focus tracking efforts on coordinated narrative hijacking, artificial reach amplification, and the organized dissemination of divisive identity narratives or manipulative content capable of distorting electoral fairness.
- Ensure that any legal limitation on freedom of expression is explicitly defined by law, serves a legitimate public interest, and strictly adheres to legal necessity and proportionality standards, preventing regulatory overreach that could restrict legitimate political debate or induce self-censorship among news media.

