

Special Section: Media Capture in the Western Balkans and Beyond
Peer-Reviewed Original Article

Is there a Captured Media System? Advancing the Typology of Media Systems through the Cases of Hungary and Serbia

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Abstract: This article extends theoretical debates on media capture by proposing the Captured Model as a refinement of Hallin and Mancini's typology of media systems. Building on observations from post-2008 developments in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe, the model conceptualises environments where democratic backsliding and media capture systematically erode pluralism, and therefore cause the media system to fall out of the Polarised Pluralist model, not reaching the Authoritarian model (Dobek-Ostrowska), but rather a stable Captured Model, typical for electoral autocracies. In the proposed model, all four dimensions of media systems are structurally transformed into a new reality that is significantly different from both Polarised Pluralism and Authoritarianism. Hungary and Serbia are briefly described as examples of this possible new model, with indications that other countries are heading in this direction.

Keywords: media capture, media systems, Hungary, Serbia, Captured model

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When Hallin and Mancini (2004) formulated their media systems theory, they both did and did not include media capture in their criteria. They did not because the term media capture had not yet gained prominence in 2004. But they did think of the core relationships behind media capture. In three out of their four dimensions – role of the state, market structure, professionalisation of journalism and political parallelism – determining the media system, they consider the relationships between politicians and journalists, between the state and the media, and the resulting professionalisation of journalists, as crucial (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 49-72). Media capture theory examines the same relationships, albeit from a slightly different perspective. Thus, this provides space for links between these two theories.

Since the first publication of *Comparing Media Systems* in 2004, there has been an extensive debate about where to place the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the Balkans and the Baltics on the map of the three models. Scholars noticed that Eastern Europe does not fit into the original three models, but they differ in proposing an alternative. Some perceive CEE as “transitional” or a space of “battle of models” (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, p. 28) while others framed this as media systems in weak democracies being structurally hybrid, where democratic norms coexist with authoritarian practice and episodic journalistic autonomy (Veltmer, 2013, p. 4-6). Mancini acknowledged that these countries are not fitting the three systems, but identified common traits in them: political clientelism, instrumentalisation and weaker professional autonomy (Mancini, 2012, p. 379-397).

Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) attempted to reply to the inadequacy of the original models by suggesting four additional models just for the post-communist world: (1) the Hybrid Liberal model in Poland, (2) the Transitional, and (3) Politicised models elsewhere in CEE, and (4) the Authoritarian Model in Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan. Yet, after recent developments, this approach is no longer sufficient as it still does not include the phenomenon of media capture. This does not imply to merge all four models described by Dobek-Ostrowska into a new one, because that would not mirror reality. Despite similarities with our proposed Captured model, the Authoritarian model differs and can still be compared to De Smaele’s (1999), who has seen an Eurasian model typical for Russia. It is a coercive, non-democratic, non-pluralist and state-centred model, where one centre of power has a monopoly over media, its regulation, often over ownership or licensing, and only those allied with the government are allowed to operate media.

Capture is also different from what was described as a politicisation, instrumentalisation, and colonisation of media (Bajomi-Lazár, 2013). All these are inherent parts of media capture, but media capture is a process that connects and combines them into a structural change of the media system. Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) in her Politicised model, still assumes competitive pluralism, but media capture changes the system into a far less pluralistic one. It is closer to the notion of state capture, an informal order combined with corruption and clientelism, where these practices are obscured by a veil of formal democratic order (Milojević & Kleut, 2023, p. 58). In

this sense, media capture does not merely denote politicisation or ideological parallelism. The durable concentration of regulatory, financial and ownership power around one dominant political-economic centre transforms conflictual pluralism into an asymmetrically managed system. This is different from the original democratic Polarised Pluralist model.

When applied to countries that developed new forms of media capture after 2010, the four dimensions discussed by Hallin & Mancini remain analytically useful (Peruško et al., 2021). Moreover, these dimensions contribute to the formulation of a fourth media systems model – *the Captured Model* – which is both stable and coherent. As an ideal type, this model also functions as a reference point and potential role model for backsliding democracies. Hallin and Mancini (2004) do not suggest an undemocratic model, hence, this is where we supplement their theory and propose a fourth model.

Several publications used data from around 2010–2015 (e.g., Peruško et al., 2021, p. 5). Since then, a lot has happened in the region – such as an increasing oligarchisation of media ownership (Hanák, 2022), and democratic backsliding to authoritarianism (Nord et al. 2024, p. 24) that included media system shifts. Moreover, the Hungarian self-proclaimed “illiberal democracy” inspired others to copy the playbook executed by Viktor Orbán that led to the deterioration of democracy and, crucially for this article, the decline of pluralism in the media system (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Dragomir, 2026). Peruško et al. (2021) combine aspects of Hallin and Mancini’s Mediterranean model with capture in their analysis of Balkan countries such as Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro, arguing that Polarised Pluralism is insufficient here.

This article attempts to build on these existing theories and proposes a fourth model where media capture as an attack on pluralism plays an essential role. Our proposed Captured model will not be defined by the presence of typical features for capture alone. It rather aims to re-structure all four dimensions detailed by Hallin & Mancini (2004) in a systematic configuration that points to the distinct features for a given region and political system.

There are countries that no longer fall within the democratic model framework, but they have not yet reached the authoritarian qualities of Russia or Belarus. Such countries can turn into competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2012) or an electoral autocracy (Nord, 2025). This creates a space between the original democratic Polarised Pluralism and the Authoritarian model of total state control. This article argues that the space between can be filled by a fourth system, typical for different forms of control, that can be analysed on Hallin and Mancini criteria, and as a result, we will propose the Captured model, typical for South-Eastern Europe and an oligarchic type of capture.

Polarised Pluralism, however, is seen as the closest of the original three to the fourth system, and we frame the Captured model as a stop on the way for the countries transitioning from a democratic to an authoritarian model. However, clear lines separate the Captured model from all alternatives and we are going to describe them in this article.

Methodological Aspects

This article aims at updating the existing theories on media systems, especially Hallin & Mancini's (2004, 2012), and it consists of a literature review and a theoretical analysis, and it comes up with the proposal of adding a fourth model alongside the existing three established models of media systems.

The literature review consists of the work by several projects monitoring media freedom and pluralism, namely the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR – consortium of media freedom organisations), Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM), and other sources, such as the media capture reports issued by the International Press Institute (IPI) in collaboration with the Media and Journalism Research Centre. In addition, we use the data from the 2025 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

This monitoring work is connected with the data on quality of democracies published by the V-Dem Institute based at the University of Gothenburg (Nord et al., 2024, 2025), and the author's previous original work in the field of media capture, media systems (Hanák, 2017), and media law, including his dissertation (Hanák, 2022). All this data combined provides us with enough evidence for connecting the two theories – media capture and media systems. We use the framework of four components of media capture by Marius Dragomir (2019) and four dimensions of media systems by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Common traits are identified and analysed in a given geographic region, and a new media systems model is proposed, while examples of countries possibly fitting into the systems are listed and briefly described. We acknowledge that full country analysis for each mentioned country, providing empirical evidence supporting its classification into the Captured Model would require a far larger space – possibly a book, not an article. That is why we do not attempt to analyse each country separately. This article does not aim at a comprehensive empirical classification, but at theory building through ideal-typical cases. We offer a new perspective – the dynamic concept of countries *falling* through the systems (including our proposed fourth model) towards an end-station, which is the authoritarian model.

Media Capture and Media Systems

The main question of this article is whether media capture changes the media system in a way that makes it distinct from all alternatives. Hallin & Mancini (2004)

describe their three models as each having interrelated characteristics that “result from meaningful patterns of historical development, and do not merely co-occur accidentally” (p. 11). We argue that media capture is an integral part of this broader process of historical development, namely democratic backsliding. It follows a distinct internal logic and occurs across a cluster of countries that share similar recent historical experiences. Rather than emerging accidentally or independently, its key features and patterns are deliberately implemented and replicated from one country to another.

To analyse how media capture transforms the media system, it is necessary to examine the criteria that define both concepts. The four components of Media Capture, widely used to analyse the situation in many countries, are: a) regulatory capture, b) control of public service media, c) use of state financing as a control tool, and d) ownership takeover (Dragomir, 2019, p. 8).

Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions are: a) role of the state, b) journalism professionalisation, c) political parallelism, and d) market structure (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). When compared, not only do these have a lot in common, but a clear pattern for the Captured model emerges, because media capture systematically restructures all four dimensions.

Media capture theory involves private actors, not only state-driven influence over media. The collusion of the two powers is the most important for media capture theory (Schiffrin, 2017, p. 2). It is not just political parties, but business elites from highly-regulated industries who buy and operate media not for profit, but for influence (Nielsen, 2017, pp. 33-41). However, since it is a collusion with the political power, the role of the state is relevant in both theories. Compared to existing models, it takes a new form – one that is foundational for a new model.

The growing body of literature on media capture (Milojević & Kleut, 2023; Kleut, 2023; Dragomir, 2026) shows that capture transforms the media environment across multiple dimensions. We argue that these transformations can be framed as changes affecting all four dimensions of media systems. This interpretation is consistent with Dragomir's (2024) argument that media capture is not merely episodic interference, but rather an institutionalised and systemic transformation of the media ecosystem. It also aligns with Mungiu-Pippidi's (2015) concept of competitive particularism, according to which media in captured environments operate within a stable particularistic equilibrium – in other words, media capture is neither a temporary deviation, nor merely a more advanced degree of existing media-system characteristics; instead, it constitutes a distinct and durable configuration of the media system.

The regulatory capture component closely corresponds to the dimension of the role of the state. At its core, capture reflects the operation of state-media relations through the design and implementation of media regulation. The use of state

financing is another mechanism within the same state-media relationship. Hallin and Mancini (2008, p. 71) explicitly identify state subsidies as elements of the role of the state dimension, having a potential impact on both journalistic professionalisation and political influence over the media. From this perspective, regulatory capture and the strategic allocation of state resources can be understood as key instruments through which state actors reshape the media system.

The public service media in the Captured model are formally public service media, but in practice lean towards state broadcasting. There is some overlap with journalistic professionalisation and political parallelism, as journalists in captured public media are usually unable to avoid political influence and find it difficult to perform their professional watchdog role effectively. This is consistent with notions of party colonisation (Bajomi-Lazár, 2013), instrumentalisation and the Politicised model (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015).

However, in the Captured model, the political parallelism is transformed into something new: the media are not classically parallelist but instrumentalised. Journalists are traded by powerful actors, often oligarchs; entire newsrooms are bought and sold as instruments of power and then used to achieve the political or economic goals of their owners. Mancini (2012) himself recognises this distinction (p. 262), and other authors understand it in similar terms (Wollenberg & Richter, 2020, p. 1174).

Moreover, political parallelism in the democratic model assumes relatively fair competition between political parties. In the Captured model, however, pluralism is systematically undermined, as competition between political actors becomes increasingly asymmetrical. A dominant power centre emerges and uses its privileged access to political, economic and media resources to strengthen its position at the expense of competing actors and institutions. As a result, the conditions for political competition are distorted, and political parallelism takes on a fundamentally different form.

Importantly, a “dominant power centre” does not necessarily refer to a single actor. More often, it consists of a network of aligned or mutually dependent actors. These may include oligarchs whose economic interests depend on the state, for example through state contracts or regulation. Together with political allies and clientelistic networks, they form what Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) describes as an informal cartel of vested interests. This network creates structural disadvantages for actors outside it, thereby weakening pluralism and reinforcing the captured nature of the system.

All this means that the Captured model differs from Polarised Pluralism and also Dobek-Ostrowska’s Politicised model (2015) through the structural foreclosure of pluralist competition via coordinated control of regulation, financing and ownership. In pluralist models, governments change regularly following fair elections. In

the Captured model, by contrast, the same power groups retain a structural advantage and maintain control despite holding elections.

Finally, ownership takeovers are often another means to achieve the same goals in the market with private media, and are closely related to the market structure dimension. Hallin & Mancini (2008) predicted that the concentration of capital, both in the media industry and in the wider economy, would correlate with a high level of state and media owners' connectedness (p. 78). Furthermore, journalists from countries with captured media confirmed a direct link between instrumentalisation, declining professionalisation, and content quality (Tóth et al., 2025).

Captured model: Oligarchic and South-Eastern?

South-Eastern European countries, together with some of the CEE states, were identified to have common traits already in 2013, when Hungary, Lithuania, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, together with Greece and Italy, were described by Peruško et al. (2013) as constituting the Southern and Eastern European Model.

Their empirical analysis is based on data from 2010 and 2011, which, given the development in the region since then, is now outdated. Their analysis also contradicts Hallin and Mancini (2004), who regard Greece and, especially, Italy as textbook examples of their democratic Polarised Pluralism model. Peruško et al. (2013) have described the Southern and Eastern model as comprising countries that “tend to have lower scores in quality of public television, newspaper circulation per capita and journalistic culture of independence and higher scores in party and owner influence” (p. 145). We argue that the Captured model differs from Polarised Pluralism to a much greater extent than this. What we share with Peruško et al. is the view that there is indeed a geographic cluster centred on South-Eastern Europe.

“South-Eastern European” in the name of our model is situational rather than defining, similar to “Mediterranean” or “North-Central European”, which are used as practical labels for media systems models. Media systems are not defined by geography, but primarily by political development. And for the Captured model, this means democratic backsliding that has stabilised at a stage of semi-authoritarianism or electoral autocracy. It could also include some CEE countries and is open for other countries adopting similar patterns, such as Georgia.

Hungary became the textbook example of democratic backsliding (Anghel & Jones, 2024; Hénault, 2022) towards a self-proclaimed illiberal democracy (Juhász, 2014), but in reality, an electoral autocracy (European Parliament, 2022), ultimately becoming the world's fastest autocratising country (Nord et al., 2025, p. 24). Transformation of the media system was at the core of these changes. Can Hungary therefore be classified within any of the pluralist models if it lacks sufficient pluralism? And

can it fit within the democratic models if the Orbán regime has already been established as autocratic?

A country can move between media system models (Hanák, 2017, p. 52, 71). For instance, the Czech Republic was once seen as closest to the Democratic Corporatist model (Jiráček & Trampota, 2008). Since then, an oligarchic wave struck not only Czech media (Klíma, 2022) but the whole region, and since 2014, Czechia would arguably be closer to the Polarised Pluralist model. This means that Czechia has *fallen out* of the Democratic Corporatist model. Similarly, other countries have undergone significant changes since they were analysed a decade or two ago.

The potentially two-way dynamics of political and, consequently, also media system can also be a reason for optimism. If the right measures are taken, the political system can develop into a more democratic one. Changes in media systems result from social and political change, but they can also work in the opposite direction: media can drive political change (Hallin & Mancini, 2008, 291).

Media systems dimensions transformed by capture

According to theories of democracy developed by G. Sartori (1987) and R. Dahl (1998), one of the key defining features of democracy is pluralism. This requires a robust pluralistic society in which dissent is not impeded, alternatives are available, leaders are held accountable to the people, abuses of power are prevented, and power is constrained by liberal-democratic institutions. Tasks such as holding leaders accountable by exposing abuses of power cannot be done effectively by media captured by political leaders or their oligarchic allies.

Under media capture, there is insufficient space for the qualities that make a democracy. Sartori (1987) sees autocracy as the opposite of democracy, as “uncontrolled, unlimited and concentrated (monocratic) power” (p. 207). We can reasonably call autocracies non-pluralist. Democracy begins with power that is “limited, controlled and as polycratic as required for its taming” (Sartori, 1987, p. 207).

A country may call itself an “illiberal democracy”, or, as Robert A. Dahl (1998) reminds us, “proletarian democracy”, or create any other self-proclaimed adjective to advertise its own modification of democracy. “Fictions like these were also created in Central and Eastern Europe in countries that fell under Soviet domination during and after World War II. But why should we cravenly accept the claims of despots that they really are democrats?” (p. 101).

If a country loses meaningful pluralism and one power centre begins to dominate, particularly through control of the media, this is where the Captured model stabilises. Capture entails the concentration of power over the media into the hands of the powerful, who then weaken its watchdog function by cooperating with the

government rather than holding it accountable. Opposing voices may still exist, but they are marginalised. Where political competition and genuine elections exist but the playing field is structurally uneven, then we can talk about electoral autocracies in terms of the V-Dem classification (Nord, 2025, p. 13). This is a crucial distinction: competition exists formally, but the outcome is structurally pre-determined. This is another clear criterion in the classification of countries below the threshold of democracy.

Table 1: Hallin and Mancini (2004) dimensions, Polarised Pluralism compared to the two additional models by author

Dimension/ Model (Political Regime)	Polarised Pluralism (Democracy)	Captured Model (Electoral Autocracy)	Authoritarian Model (Closed Autocracy)
Role of the state	Strong, but pluralist. State intervenes, but the control is dispersed among more political actors.	Strong. Formally neutral, but in reality, selectively interventionist. Regulation used asymmetrically; institutions are captured by one dominant power group.	Dominant and coercive. State exercises direct and comprehensive control.
Journalistic Professionalisation	Weakly institutionalised, autonomy limited by political pressures, but still in pluralist conditions.	Structurally constrained. Smaller space for autonomy. There are more jobs for journalists serving the dominant power centre than for watchdog journalists or those with opposing views.	Journalism is fully subordinated to a single political authority. No space for watchdog function or opposing views.
Political Parallelism	Ideological alignments. Party-press tradition, stable political identities.	Instrumentalisation replaces ideology. Transactional alignment is driven by media owners or the strongest power centre.	Enforced alignment with the ruling power, no meaningful pluralism.
Market structure	Broad spectrum of media aligned with different power centres.	Ownership concentration through media capture by oligarchs. Oligopolic market structure with the dominant position of the strongest power group. Formally pluralist, but the media with the largest audiences captured.	The whole market is subordinated to one power centre - usually the state.

The table illustrates that the Captured model shows a different position in every dimension of the original media systems theory.

The process of capture is dynamic, and a country can be on the path towards a captured system without having fully entered it. This can be seen in countries such as the Czech Republic and some Balkan states, where the media are captured by several oligarchs who do not necessarily belong to a single power centre. However, the *fall* may be only one major media merger away.

Concentration is not a black-and-white issue. Economic methods can be used to measure both the scale of concentration and also the distribution of power among key oligarchs (Hanák, 2022, p. 33, 55-69, 164-207). The concept of a dominant player on the market is borrowed from competition law and economics, where dominance generally starts with a market share exceeding 40 per cent (European Commission, 2009).

If there is a dominant player—a power centre stronger than the others—forming a network of connected media outlets and reinforcing its domination through state subsidies, exclusive access to interviews and information, and captured regulation, this constitutes a clear case of media capture. Even when media owners are formally independent from one another, cartels can emerge through informal relations with political power.

Role of the state

In the Captured Model, the state plays a strong role, usually within a context of existing but limited freedom of expression. The law is often democratic, but enforcement is selective in practice. Formally independent regulatory institutions, such as broadcasting councils, are filled with pro-government nominees whose role is not to counterbalance concentrated power but to serve as an extension of the ruling elite.

Even when members of regulatory bodies are legally independent and do not have formal ties to political parties, as such ties are banned by law, *informal* connections often exist (Hanák, 2025). These are particularly common in the Balkans and parts of CEE for historical and cultural reasons. (Peruško et al., 2021)

In contrast to authoritarian regimes, where watchdog journalists are formally persecuted and jailed, the mechanism in the Captured model, is different. The mere possibility of sanctions is often sufficient to deter or harass journalists, even when sanctions are not actually imposed. Unlike in democratic systems, the state and its officials may play a role in harassing journalists. Smear campaigns, impunity for attacks on journalists, surveillance, SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), and other methods are used to exert pressure.

In this model, public service broadcasting serves the dominant power group: broadcasters act as government mouthpieces and propaganda channels. When they overstep the often unwritten rules of what those in power consider acceptable, the reporters may be punished, management changed, or the entire institution

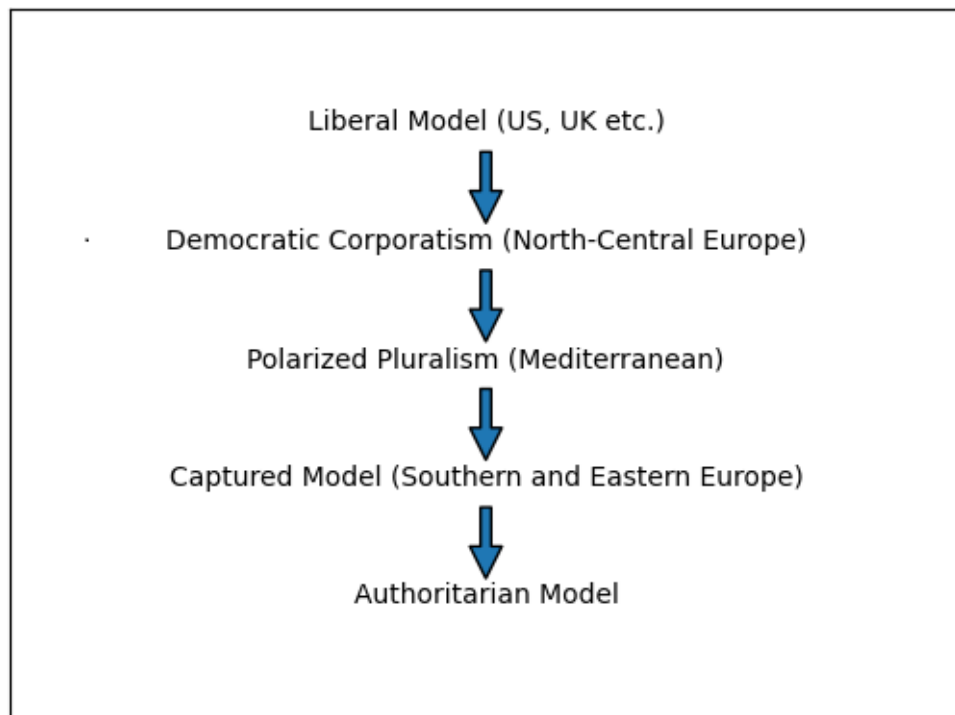
dismantled. Critical journalists may lose their jobs or be assigned less important work, while their work may be relegated to less prominent time slots or platforms. Entire programmes may be cancelled, suspended or simply prevented from being broadcast.

The role of the state is a component of the media system through which the decline of democracy becomes visible through the lens of media systems theory. While the Liberal model provides the greatest freedom of expression and involved the least state intervention, the Democratic Corporatist model combines regulated but still substantial freedom of expression with a stronger role of the state to achieve the public good. In Polarised Pluralism, we see stronger state intervention, including state ownership of the media, alongside the tradition of etatism, censorship and clientelism in the state's approach to the media. Hallin and Mancini (2008) attribute this partly to the relatively short democratic traditions of countries such as Portugal, Greece and Spain (p. 79, 97, 147). Thus, they view the role of the state as detrimental to freedom of expression and as weakening journalism's watchdog role. This remains democratic pluralism, in which the media are partially "captured" by political parties, but power remains distributed among parties that alternate through democratic elections. Berlusconiization of the media in Italy is an example of this dynamic (Wyka, 2006).

When one of the capturing groups gains dominance over both the state and the media market, a country heads towards autocracy and the Captured model. If the situation deteriorates even further, resulting in a much tighter grip on the media, censorship and formal rules outlawing critical watchdog journalism emerge, and the country becomes a closed autocracy. The resulting system has the least freedom of expression, the strongest role of the state, the weakest watchdog role for journalism, the highest degree of media instrumentalisation and the most extensive persecution of journalists.

The five systems can therefore be ranked from the greatest to the least freedom from state intervention. This is partly supported by existing theory. For example, partisan media are seen as beneficial for democracy as long as the distribution of political power is relatively balanced and the media market is not too excessively concentrated; otherwise, we might see authoritarianism (Baker, 2007, p. 18). We argue that this relationship is gradual, and that the Captured model represents one stage along this continuum.

Figure 1: Models hierarchy according to freedom from state interference



Source: The author. The figure was generated with the help of ChatGPT (version 5.2).

Political Parallelism

Another media systems criterion is the division of the media between political camps. Some media are openly partisan, while others remain formally independent but their content clearly has a clear political orientation (Hallin & Mancini, 2008, p. 56). This external pluralism means that there are diverse or opposing views across the media market, not necessarily only within one particular medium.

In our fourth model, pluralism is severely weakened. It is a system in which one party, political orientation or set of views dominates an otherwise formally pluralist environment. Opposing views and independent media may still exist, but they are marginalised, discriminated against or harassed and are not proportionally represented in the public media.

A large share of the audience in the Captured model is served by media owned or controlled by the dominant power centre, whether directly by the state or through companies allied with the government. Media outlets with political influence are bought, bribed, blackmailed or regulated into obedience to avoid conflicts with the dominant power centre. The mechanisms of institutional alignment and political control of the media may be similar to those in Polarised Pluralism or the Politicised model. The crucial difference, however, is that a single power centre exerts influence

over a large share of the media market. This does not require a state monopoly over information. It is sufficient that dissenting voices are marginalised to the point where they cannot effectively compete with the dominant group. The system is no longer characterised by several roughly equal players competing for influence.

In the Captured model, control over the majority of the audience can be achieved by capturing the majority of the television market. Opposition media still exist, but they are usually not major television stations with large audiences. In this model, independent media tend to operate online or through small print newspapers or marginal radio stations. The general rule is that the most influential media outlets, with the largest audiences, are captured, primarily through ownership, and are tied, formally or informally, to the dominant power centre.

Professionalisation of journalism

There are three main dimensions of professionalisation: autonomy, professional norms and public service orientation (Hallin & Mancini, 2008, pp. 62–64). The Captured model is characterised by weak autonomy: many journalists serve powerful owners and their interests, becoming instrumentalised and thereby losing the key element of professional journalism. At times, they work for seemingly independent publishers who have undisclosed business connections, often with the government. Professional norms may formally exist, but their importance is much lower when they conflict with the owner's interests. Informal relationships therefore become more important than formal rules.

The same applies to public service broadcasting: rather than serving the public as a whole, it serves just one part/segment of the political representatives of the public. Low professionalisation has previously been observed in the region, with journalists often reaching the peak of their career at a relatively young age before moving into other professions, such as PR for politicians and the private sector, in search for better salaries. (Smilova & Smilov, 2015). Many leave journalism as a *result* of media capture: they are dismissed by new media owners, leave newsrooms in a protest against censorship, or sometimes find their entire newsrooms dismantled. As a consequence, there are not enough jobs for watchdog journalists anymore. Junior reporters are hired instead, and they either succumb to the expected role of “not biting the hand that feeds them”, or they end up leaving the profession – and the cycle repeats.

As demand for watchdog journalism declines, the profession becomes poorly paid, prompting many journalists to seek additional sources of income, and a large part consider leaving the profession altogether (Hanák, 2017, p. 62–63). Additional employment can, in turn, create conflicts of interest. Those who continue to perform the watchdog role after losing their job as professional journalists often work for NGOs or operate independent platforms, sometimes with little or no pay. This represents a shift from professional journalism towards volunteering and activism.

Structure of the media market

Comparing Media Systems divided the original three models according to predominant audience behaviour, ranging from the highest level of newspaper readership to lower levels of readership and, ultimately, mass television consumption. The Captured model can, in this sense, be seen as a continuation of this decline: the more people rely on television, the easier it is to capture the media market, since television markets are typically oligopolistic and tend to stabilise around a handful of large national networks. This market power can also extend to online and social media platforms, as the accumulation of resources enables dominant actors to buy attention.

The media market structure can be formally pluralist while having informal connections between media owners and the government. A typical example is a media owner with interests in a heavily regulated industry or with direct business dealings with the state. This creates incentives to cooperate with political power rather than perform a watchdog role.

If media outlets compete for audiences and advertising revenue (or even state funding) but all have alliances with the dominant power centre, audiences are deprived of sufficient alternative and critical views of those in power. The market structure in the Captured model is therefore skewed towards a dominant cartel, with more or less transparent ties, connections or shared interests with the country's key political players.

Countries possibly fitting the model

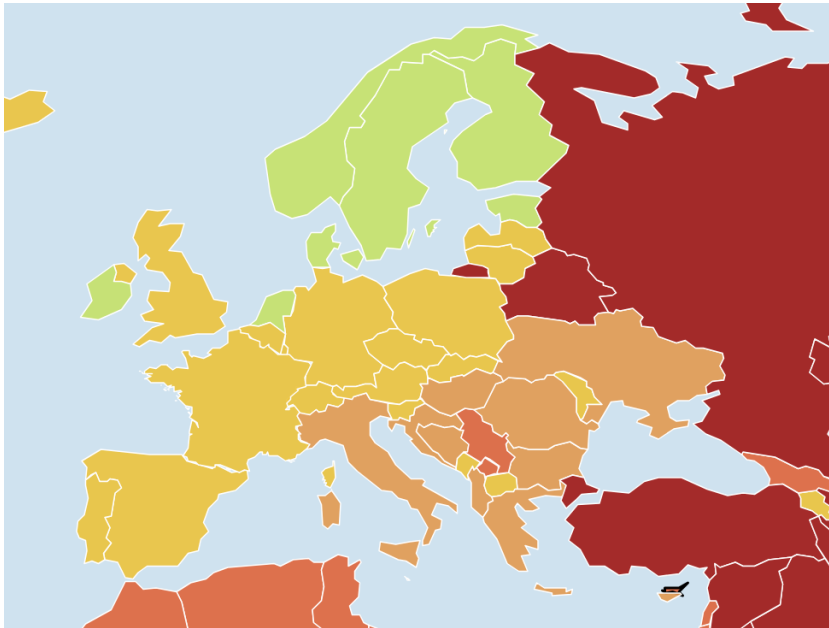
The original three models were developed primarily with established democracies in mind. The Balkans, CEE and Eastern Europe, however, constitute a large region that is experiencing one of the world's fastest rates of democratic decline. According to the V-Dem Institute, autocracy has taken hold or strengthened in Hungary and Serbia, while Romania and war-torn Ukraine are also contributing to the region's shift towards autocracy (Nord, 2025, p. 10-11).

The Media Pluralism Monitor (Blagojev et al., 2025), which measures a core defining feature of the Captured model, assessed the highest risk for media pluralism in Turkey, Hungary, Albania and Serbia (ranked as very high risk), while Malta, Romania, Cyprus, Greece and Bulgaria are close behind (ranked as high risk).

The World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders is another useful proxy for several dimensions of media systems, including the level of state intervention in the media market. A cluster of South-Eastern European countries occupies similar positions in the middle of the ranking, roughly between 50th and 90th place in the year 2025 (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). Two countries

rank lower still: Serbia and Kosovo, occupying 96th and 99th place, respectively (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

Map 1: World Press Freedom Index, RSF, 2025



Many of the listed countries are located within one geographic region. Beyond the original understanding of media systems models as a result of a common historical development, it also forms a clear geographic cluster.

The purpose of this article is not to analyse the situation in all countries of this large region, but to propose a framework for future research and a hypothesis worth testing: whether the majority of these countries can indeed be classified within a specific media system model. To illustrate the proposed fourth media system and which countries might fit it, we focus on the two clearest examples: Hungary and Serbia. We restrict the analysis to these two countries due to space constraints and the availability of data on media capture. Serbia and Hungary also show the stability of media capture as a media system. In both cases, media capture is clearly not episodic, but represents a stable equilibrium that has persisted for more than a decade. This means that these two countries can be considered textbook examples of what is meant by a captured media system.

This does not mean that other countries fail to meet the criteria. On the contrary, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Kosovo and others display similar characteristics, depending on their political development, and may be analysed in future research. Other countries, such as Slovakia or Czechia, may be moving in the same direction but have not yet fully stabilised within the Captured model. As with the original models, the reality is usually more complex than the models themselves, and countries may fit the model only partially, with exceptions across particular dimensions.

Serbia

Serbia is classified as an electoral autocracy (Nord, 2025, p. 14–16), and its media freedom and media capture situation has been described as a “state of emergency” (International Press Institute [IPI], 2025).

The state does not guarantee the safety of journalists, which is documented by numerous cases of physical attacks, death threats and dangerous accusations from high-level politicians. Journalists have also been targeted with spyware, harassed through smear campaigns – all of this happened in an atmosphere of impunity for the perpetrators (Media Freedom Rapid Response [MFRR], 2025). On a smaller scale than in closed autocracies, arrests of journalists occur too, and the state security agency has been involved in such cases (MFRR, 2025). Documented incidents of censorship include campaigns against journalists initiated by high-level state figures, including President Aleksandar Vučić (MFRR, 2025). This has been described as the government's “war against journalism” (Petković, 2025).

In terms of regulation, the government has been reluctant to meet EU standards, while the broadcasting regulator has been undermined by the government and Parliament and dominated by their nominees (Milojević & Kleut, 2023, p. 62–64).

There is still some pluralism in Serbia, as independent media continue to operate, but their space is diminishing. The partially state-owned company Telekom Serbia/Srbija is directly and indirectly acquiring media outlets and financing media takeovers to steer them in a pro-government direction (MFRR, 2025). The Media Pluralism Monitor describes this as a growing media concentration under state-party control, creating unfair competition in the advertising market, leading to the establishment of a state-party media conglomerate. It also identifies a visible pro-government bias and very little scrutiny of the government or president in the public service media (Milutinović, 2025). This is highly characteristic of the Captured model: one strong political power centre controls both public and a large share of private media, leaving them unable to perform an effective watchdog role and instead serving the powerful. This is also confirmed by local researchers, who cite numerous and methodologically diverse assessments of the pro-government bias of Radio and Television of Serbia (Milojević & Kleut, 2023, p. 67).

Serbia's media capture is described by international media freedom organisations as one of the strongest in Europe because the political influence over private media, the state broadcaster, state advertising and media regulation all remain particularly strong (IPI, 2025). Public funds are channelled to media outlets allied with the governing party, while various non-transparent and arbitrary contracts have also been documented (Milojević & Kleut, 2023, p. 69–70).

The clearest evidence that Serbia fits the proposed Captured media system is its description as exhibiting “one-party dominance over media market and media institutions” (Kleut, 2023). This is a textbook example of a situation in which a dominant power centre distorts competition and obstructs meaningful pluralism.

Hungary

Viktor Orbán has dominated the media market through a network of connected oligarchs and consolidated 476 outlets under the KESMA foundation of pro-government media, and this conglomerate received 75-80 per cent of all state advertising (Németh, 2025). The Hungarian media market has experienced hostile takeovers and closures of entire media outlets, resulting in many journalists losing their jobs. Independent media continue to exist, but for many years they have struggled to compete effectively in an unfair environment in which their direct competitors received state subsidies. Data on state advertising are clear: immediately after Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010, state advertising was redirected towards government allies, while independent media were largely excluded (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2019).

The instrumentalisation of journalism in Hungary has had a profound effect on professionalisation. Hungarian journalists noticed that pro-government media failed to meet professional standards, and instrumentalisation by the authoritarian government was a key factor in this decline (Tóth et al., 2025).

It is an empirical fact that the public service media in Hungary have functioned as government mouthpieces. As is typical of the Captured model, the formal legal framework differs from actual practice. Although the law safeguards independence, the government has controlled both funding and content through Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA), resulting in biased reporting (Németh, 2025).

In terms of regulatory capture, Hungary ticked all the boxes. Media regulatory bodies were dominated by nominees of the then ruling Fidesz party, with no representation from the opposition or independent NGOs (Németh, 2025).

Until the crushing defeat of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party on 12 April 2026, journalists in Hungary faced harassment and smear campaigns (European Federation of Journalists, 2025). Rather than guaranteeing their protection, public officials often participated in their harassment. Examples include the use of spyware against journalists (Zöldi, 2021) and charges brought against reporter Szabolc Panyi shortly before the 2026 election (IPI, 2026).

In Hungary, the captured system has persisted despite regular elections since 2010. Even if the government changed shortly before the publication of this article, ownership-based capture and the resulting dominance of one political force over the media market would not disappear quickly. It will therefore be interesting to observe how, and whether, the Hungarian media system can be de-captured.

Conclusion

We have proposed a fourth media systems model alongside the original three and clearly distinguished it from the opposing Authoritarian model. We call this the Captured model, which is particularly characteristic of South-Eastern Europe.

The Captured model is a semi-pluralist, semi-autocratic model associated with political regimes classified as electoral autocracies, in which media capture restructures the media system across all four Hallin and Mancini's dimensions. When oligarchs collude with the government to distort competition in media markets, coordinated and institutionalised capture of regulatory, economic and ownership structures forecloses meaningful pluralist competition.

The professionalisation and autonomy of journalism are severely weakened. Journalism becomes transactional rather than ideological as a consequence of the instrumentalisation of journalism (instead of political parallelism). Polarised Pluralism requires at least two poles competing within a pluralist manner. The Captured model, by contrast, has one dominant pole and perhaps several weaker ones that are unable to compete effectively with the dominant one. This distinguishes it from the Authoritarian model, in which there is no space for meaningful dissent. While opponents in the Authoritarian model are often jailed or exiled, in the Captured model opponents remain legally permitted to operate but are structurally marginalised and delegitimised.

The Captured model is proposed as a consequence of democratic backsliding and as a stage on the way to autocratisation. If the whole media system gets captured, and the capture reinforces the power of a dominant power group, this ceases to be just a temporal process. To the contrary, this becomes a stable model.

The two prominent examples are Hungary and Serbia. However, many other countries may already fulfil the criteria for this model or may do so in the near future as they fall below democratic standards. Conversely, because the model is conceived as part of a two-way dynamic system with a clear hierarchy, countries can also improve across the relevant criteria and move from closed autocracy and the Authoritarian model towards the Captured model; or from the Captured model towards a democratic model. Although developed from examples in CEE and the Balkans, the model identifies structural features that may be observed in other countries experiencing democratic backsliding.

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