

Special Section: Media Capture in the Western Balkans and Beyond
Book Review

State Capture through Media Clientelism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina: Challenges to Normative Power Europe

Dragojlov, Aleksandra (2026). State Capture through Media Clientelism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina: Challenges to Normative Power Europe. Routledge

DOI: 10.4324/9781003670452
ISBN: 978-1-041-13108-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-041-13581-4 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-67045-2 (ebk)

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To cite this article: Silajdžić, Lamija (2026). Book Review on Dragojlov, Aleksandra (2026). State Capture through Media Clientelism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina: Challenges to Normative Power Europe. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 16(1), DOI: 10.60678/6thk1w42

The long-lasting and seemingly unbreakable bond between politics and the media is analysed in this book, more specifically, it examines how political power is exercised through the media. It fills gaps in the literature, as existing research more often focuses on state capture in the Western Balkans and rarely on political clientelism vis-à-vis the media. This book examines how political clientelism and media capture shape democratic processes in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also explores their implications for the effectiveness of the EU's transformative power in countries aspiring to European integration.

“State Capture through Media Clientelism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina” consists of an introduction, a theoretical framework and empirical chapters with two exemplary case studies – Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). These countries were chosen because the author considers them to be among the leaders in the politicisation of the media in the Western Balkans countries. The author has adequately combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to answer the key questions: (1) how state capture causes democratic regression as a result of ineffective governance, and (2) how media clientelism contributes to this process while impacting external EU policies vis-à-vis Serbia and BiH and, consequently, both countries' EU integration. In the qualitative part, semi-structured interviews were conducted with EU officials and journalists and media experts from the respective countries, alongside an analysis of EU official documents, press and journalists' associations reports and scholarly articles. The quantitative part focused on the analysis of advertising spending during election campaigns and its correlation with the presence of dominant political elites in the print and television media. Data on the importance of the main nationwide television channels in Serbia through audience measurement and the share of state advertising was also included. The triangulation of the data enabled in-depth insights into the investigated phenomena, which is a very valuable contribution of this book.

The analysis goes beyond individual cases by questioning the fact that there are EU member states that are explicit examples of democratic backsliding (state capture and political clientelism) – such as Poland or Hungary. It exposes the EU to the charge of inconsistency (double standards) vis-à-vis member states and candidate countries. The EU is criticised for prioritising the stability of the Western Balkans region over a substantial democratic transformation, to which media freedom is essential. The author concludes that the EU apparently tolerates the existence of media capture through the dismissal of critical journalists, redistribution of media outlets to oligarchs, smear campaigns, and other means. Although it has soft and hard power instruments such as withholding of funds, it is not enforcing them, partially due to the vague definition of media freedom and the rise of populist forces within EU countries.

The theoretical part offers a comprehensive analysis of the concept of state capture and demonstrates that the term was originally coined in the late 1990s to describe the highly corrupt post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and the former

Soviet Union, where oligarchs acquired political influence through dubious means. Later, the definition of state capture was expanded and described as a process driven by political, not just business, interests. However, more attention is paid to the term media capture. It is described as the colonisation of the media where the media promote the interests of certain groups that control the media industry, instead of criticising their actions and holding them to account. The author significantly contributes to shedding light on the complex clientelist relations between political elites and the media, by analysing five mechanisms: regulatory capture, control of public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, ownership takeover and disinformation campaigns.

The results presented in the empirical part of the book – the two case studies – illustrate the exceptional research and scientific quality, and highlight key issues in the media sphere in two countries that are in principle democratic, but essentially highly captured and entangled in a network of inadequate relationships and processes.

When it comes to the case study of Serbia, the author clearly emphasises that media freedom in Serbia has been in a steady state of decline, culminating in almost total media capture under Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who rose to power with his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in 2012. Interviewed journalists, editors and media experts point out that the media scene in Serbia is worse than in the 1990s because the control mechanisms are more subtle and less visible. Several key aspects have been identified, such as the capture of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, control over private television networks with national coverage through allocation of broadcasting licences, non-transparency and murky ownership structures of certain media, and others.

The author argues that Serbia manipulates EU rules and conditionality, relying on the EU's preference for stability over genuine democracy promotion. This claim extends beyond the book's original research questions and merits further discussion. The "awakening" of the citizens of Serbia through mass protest after the collapse of the train station canopy in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024 is seen by the author as a promising development, considering the general passiveness of citizens and strong distrust in institutions.

When it comes to the case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author states that BiH teeters between a hybrid regime and a semi-consolidated authoritarian state, where the media are also divided along ethnic lines. State capture of media outlets in BiH is revealed through connections between media owners and political elites, the politicisation of the public service broadcasters and the allocation of advertising funds as a means of indirect government control. Although influence through political control is most explicit in the entity of Republika Srpska, the author states that clientelist practices have been present at all levels of government. Even though BiH is seemingly in a better position when it comes to freedom of expression compared to Serbia, the most recent data show that media freedom in BiH has been in a steady state of decline following 2010. Dysfunctional and politicised public service

broadcasters, non-transparent media ownership, a non-transparent advertising industry, economic and political pressures on the media, the politicisation of the Communication Regulatory Agency, and the recriminalisation of defamation in Republika Srpska entity, are just some of the well-addressed issues.

What is also evident in the case is that the lack of adequate state and nation-building, in conjunction with an absence of a unifying national identity leads to the absence of a strong political culture in BiH, which also holds true for the entire region. The political culture in the countries of the Western Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, is characterised by low emancipatory values and a weak focus on universal freedom, which has led to political passivity and acceptance of competitive authoritarian rule. Besides that, politicians, citizens, as well as judicial authorities, do not seem to fully understand what democracy and the concept of freedom of expression are. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in the case of Serbia, the author points to the fact that the EU has been reluctant to push domestic elites to reform and to demand accountability.

In conclusion, key characteristics of hybrid media systems are summarised showing that media capture and clientelism cannot be limited solely to the WB6 (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo), as this phenomenon is found to some degree throughout all EU member states. With reference to the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), the aim of strengthening the independence and pluralism of the media, as well as transparency of ownership and the advertising market, is emphasised, but there are still unclear definitions of media services or criteria for the political independence of the media.

Although she sees student protests in Serbia as a source of hope for more significant social and political changes, the author claims that Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not yet close to joining the EU. The author calls for a more detailed and more coherent EU methodology for monitoring rule-of-law reforms, arguing that the current Chapter 23 benchmarks remain vague and that EU progress reports often amount to little more than a bureaucratic formality that fails to capture substantive political change on the ground.

While the book offers a thorough analysis of media capture mechanisms, the author herself points to the role of civil society and its engagement with international actors as an avenue meriting further research. This aspect could have been more fully integrated into the current analysis, particularly given its relevance to the ongoing protests in Serbia. Considering all the above, this book is a valuable contribution to the communication literature in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also more widely, considering the EU context in which the author places her analysis. The book is significant for researchers, students, media professionals, and decision-makers because it points to several key obstacles that the media cannot overcome on their own. For a wider audience, the book could have shed light on the existence of complex connections between politics and the media.