

Special Section: Media Capture in the Western Balkans and Beyond
Essay

**Pressures on Minority Media in Hybrid Regimes:
A Case Study of Hungarian-Language Media in
Serbia**

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Abstract: This paper analyses political pressure on Hungarian-language media in Vojvodina as a case study of media capture within a hybrid regime in Serbia. Drawing on the theoretical framework of hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010) and the concept of media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), it argues that minority media are subject to a specific, doubly legitimised form of political control – both through the mechanisms of the hybrid regime at the state level and through the rhetoric of minority identity defence at the level of the community. Political loyalty to the ruling minority party is presented as defence of the community itself, whereby a journalist's critical distance is reinterpreted as a threat to national identity. The case study traces the role of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (AVH) and the National Council of the Hungarian National Minority in controlling the media space, as well as the transnational financial influence exerted by Hungary under the rule of Viktor Orbán. It then examines the intercultural dimension of the problem: a captured minority medium loses its capacity to serve as a space for negotiating identities within the community and in relation to mainstream society, while internal pluralism – gender-based, generational, political – is suppressed in favour of a homogenised image of the community. The concluding section examines, through the example of the Szabad Magyar Szó portal, founded following the politically motivated dismissal of the editor of the daily Magyar Szó, whether editorial independence can be established outside the boundaries of the captured system or only through renewed institutions.

Keywords: hybrid regime; media capture; minority media; Hungarian national minority; intercultural communication

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Vojvodina is a region whose identity has always been defined through cultural encounters rather than through exclusivity. Six languages are in official use, more than twenty national communities, and a long tradition of multiculturalism make this province an exception in a region that, over the past 35 years, has been more often associated with wars and divisions than with coexistence. Within this picture, the Hungarian community – the largest and most organised national minority in Serbia – occupies a particular place, not only because of the number of its members but also by virtue of an extensive media infrastructure that was, formally intended to serve as a guarantor of the preservation of language, culture, and identity.

Vojvodina is an autonomous province of Serbia, situated in the northern part of the country, bordering Hungary, Romania and Croatia. With a population of approximately 1.75 million (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023), it is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Europe, home to more than twenty national communities and with six languages in official provincial use. The Hungarian community is the largest national minority in Serbia: according to the 2022 Census, 184,442 people identified as Hungarian, representing 2.8 per cent of Serbia's population, of whom the vast majority – 182,321 – live in Vojvodina, where they constitute 10.5 per cent of the provincial population (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). The community has been experiencing a sustained demographic decline: between 2011 and 2022, the number of Vojvodina Hungarians fell by 27.4 per cent, and for the first time since records began, the community fell below 200,000 – a threshold widely regarded as symbolically significant (Roscoe Loustau, 2026). Emigration to Hungary, low birth rates, and the ageing of the population are the main drivers of this trend, which lends an additional urgency to questions of cultural and media preservation.

This essay proceeds from the thesis that precisely this infrastructure has, over the past fifteen years or so, become the site of a broader and deeper process: media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), which in the minority context does not operate by the same rules as in the majority context. When the media system is captured within a hybrid regime, minority media do not merely face the same pressures as the rest of the media ecosystem; they bear an additional burden, because political loyalty towards the ruling structure within the community is presented as a defence of that community itself, while the journalist's critical distance is cast as a betrayal of the national interest. This is the mechanism that makes media capture – perhaps paradoxically at first glance – easier to carry out, yet harder to recognise and contest.

The case study we propose here concerns political pressure on Hungarian-language media in Vojvodina, examined through the relationship of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (AVH) with those media and the transnational influence of Hungary during the rule of Viktor Orbán. But the purpose of this text is not merely to describe one specific, local case. The aim is to open, through it, a question that lies at the heart of intercultural communication: what happens to the space of dialogue – both with the majority community and within the minority community itself – when the

media that should sustain it become an instrument of homogenisation? And, ultimately, whether that space, once lost, can be renewed.

Hybrid Regime and Minority Media

When we speak of Serbia today, we speak of a state that numerous researchers of media freedoms describe as a hybrid regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010) – a system that formally retains democratic institutions, elections, and constitutional guarantees, but in which political power is strongly concentrated, state resources are captured by the ruling structure, and the space for media pluralism is systematically curtailed. This theoretical framework is useful because it explains why media capture in Serbia does not operate through open censorship or the formal abolition of media freedoms, but rather through financial dependence, regulatory pressure, and the gradual suppression of pluralism – mechanisms that leave the democratic façade apparently intact. Empirical confirmation of this diagnosis is provided by international reports: the European Commission (2025), in its 2025 progress report on Serbia, records a significant regression in the area of freedom of expression, citing political and economic influence on the editorial policies of media and the passive conduct of the regulatory body (REM). According to Reporters Without Borders (2026), Serbia ranks 104th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index 2026, the lowest in the Western Balkans region. In such an environment, local and minority media are particularly vulnerable. They are, as a rule, financially dependent on state, provincial, or local budgets, operate in a small market with a limited audience, and have no realistic prospects for economic self-sustainability outside that dependency. This vulnerability is neither new nor specific to Serbia, but the minority context adds a layer that is theoretically particularly interesting.

That layer is the following: in the majority media system, political pressure on journalists is presented – at least declaratively – as pressure on the profession or on “hostile” media, i.e., as a conflict within the same national corpus. In the minority context, the same pressure is presented as a matter of the community’s survival. Political loyalty towards the ruling structure – in this case, the strongest minority party in Serbia, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (AVH) – is presented as a defence of national identity, language, and culture against assimilation or marginalisation. Critical journalism, within this framework, is easily characterised as an “attack on one’s own community”, and the journalist’s professional distance as a lack of national solidarity.

This is, in our view, the key difference that makes minority media an analytically particularly significant case within the broader concept of media capture: it is not legitimised through patriotism towards the state, but through loyalty to a community whose survival is, at least rhetorically, already under threat. This double legitimisation – through the hybrid regime at the level of the state and through the defence of identity at the level of the community – makes minority media particularly

closed to external criticism, since any intervention, from within or from outside, can easily be propagandistically presented as a threat to the very existence of the community.

The position of minority-language media in Serbia's broader media system is structurally precarious. Research conducted by the OSCE Mission to Serbia (Sejdinović, 2020) found the minority media landscape to be, in the researchers' own words, "chaotic" and extremely difficult to map comprehensively: existing registers maintained by the Business Registers Agency and the Electronic Media Regulatory Body (REM) are incomplete and frequently out of date. Public broadcasting plays an uneven role: while Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV) maintains rich and diverse programming in minority languages, the national public broadcaster RTS largely fails to meet its legal obligations in this regard. The 2015-2016 media privatisation process, which affected the media system as a whole, inflicted particular damage on multilingual media of special social significance, without providing adequate mechanisms for their long-term sustainability (Sejdinović, 2020).

Case Study: The Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians and Transnational Influence

The minority media system in Vojvodina has a specific institutional history that is crucial for understanding the current situation. Until 2004, the founding rights over the majority of minority-language media were held by the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. That year, these rights were transferred to the newly established national councils of national minorities, which thereby became the indirect founders of the media and gained direct influence over their management and funding (Sejdinović, 2020). The Law on National Councils of National Minorities of 2009 further formalised and expanded this influence, including the right of the councils to provide opinions on candidates for editorial positions in minority-language programming at public media services. The problem of media instrumentalisation by minority political elites has been present, according to researchers, practically from the moment of that first transfer of founding rights (Sejdinović, 2026). The media privatisation carried out in 2015 and 2016 inflicted additional damage on minority-language media, particularly on multilingual media of special social significance, without providing mechanisms for their long-term co-financing (Sejdinović, 2020). The Hungarian national minority has the largest number of media in its own language of all minorities in Serbia. According to research from 2019, as many as 50 media outlets report in Hungarian – twice as many as in Romani, which ranks second (Sejdinović, 2020). The spectrum includes the daily Magyar Szó – the oldest Hungarian-language daily in Serbia, with 195 employees and an annual budget of nearly 400 million dinars (Sejdinović, 2020) – the weeklies Hét Nap and Családi Kör, the media company RTV Pannon (television, radio and portal, founded by a foundation whose founder is the National Council of the Hungarian National

Minority), and several portals with different editorial orientations, including the critical portals VajdaságMa and Szabad Magyar Szó (Free Hungarian Word).

Over the past fifteen years or so, a large number of Hungarian-language media in Vojvodina have been directly or indirectly connected to the institutions of the Hungarian national minority, as well as to the political structures that dominate within the community itself. That community has, during the period in question, been dominated by one political party – the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians – whose rule, analogous to the authoritarian logic that characterises the majority political system, has led to an almost complete suppression of political pluralism within the Hungarian community.

Formally, this system of minority autonomy is well conceived and should ensure the preservation of the language, culture, and identity of minority communities. In practice, however, the question of the political instrumentalisation of minority media and their editorial autonomy comes to the fore. The Law on National Councils of National Minorities (2009, Art. 2) defines these competencies very broadly: the national council represents the minority in the areas of education, culture, information, and the official use of language and script, participates in decision-making or decides independently on matters within those areas, and may establish institutions and commercial enterprises in order to realise the right to public information in the language of the community. Precisely this breadth – education, culture, and media in the hands of the same body – explains why political control over one of these areas almost inevitably spills over into the others. In the Hungarian case, this risk has not remained theoretical: the National Council of the Hungarian National Minority is today entirely under AVH control, and its composition reflects this formally – all members of the current council were elected from the single list of that party, as it was the only list to participate in the last elections for the Council (Sejdić, 2026). In other words, this is a case of partitocratic governance of minority media and cultural infrastructure, in which an institution conceived as an expression of the community's cultural autonomy functions as an extension of a single political party.

An additional dimension to this case is provided by the strong political and financial influence from Hungary, particularly pronounced during Viktor Orbán's rule. Over the preceding years, significant funds from Hungary were channelled towards institutions, organisations, and media within the Hungarian community in Vojvodina. This process was not merely cultural or identity-based; it was, in essence, political in nature, with AVH playing a dominant political and institutional role in its implementation. The Centre for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (Marković, 2021) estimates that Hungarian citizens paid approximately 12 million euros for the operation of Hungarian-language media in Serbia between 2011 and the end of 2019, the largest share of which went to the RTV Pannon media company in Subotica – a medium over which the National Council of the Hungarian National Minority exercises indirect control. The extent of political control over Pannon RTV became apparent from the perspective of the new Hungarian government as well: Péter Magyar, leader of

the victorious TISZA party and the incoming Prime Minister of Hungary, stated in April 2026 that he had not received a “reassuring explanation” from AVH president Bálint Pásztor as to how it was possible that his party’s name was mentioned only twice in Pannon RTV programming over the course of two years, and that he considered it unacceptable that the same television station had “cut, on political orders”, part of his election-night speech (Autonomija, 2026). In recent months, following political changes in Hungary and the weakening of the Orbán system after his electoral defeat, testimonies from journalists and indications of political pressure on the editorial policies of Hungarian-language media in Vojvodina have begun to emerge publicly. There is open talk of pressure on editorial decision-making, as well as of informal mechanisms of political control. The most striking documented example of such pressure was recorded earlier, in November 2023, when employees of the daily Magyar Szó, according to the testimony of an anonymous employee, were called upon to sign their collective support for the AVH electoral list, with a warning that those who refused might face problems in the workplace (Sejdinović, 2026).

The structural vulnerability of these media is further compounded by the absence of systematic journalism education in Hungarian, which means that journalists lack any institutional space in which to articulate and defend professional standards against political pressure. Csaba Pressburger, dismissed for political reasons in 2011 from his position as editor-in-chief of Magyar Szó, describes this lack simply: he had received no direct calls from AVH because the party did not need to call, knowing in advance what response it would receive from the National Council (Milinkov, 2022). The price of professional independence is also paid by media that remain outside the system: the weekly Családi Kör, whose editor in 2025 announced a shift from weekly to monthly publication, cited as one reason the fact that since 2022, the Hungarian National Council had not endorsed a single one of their projects for co-financing from local, provincial, or state budgets (Sejdinović, 2026). That endorsement is not legally binding, but in practice it is.

The Intercultural Dimension: Loss of Space for the “Other”

If media capture, in its most general form, suppresses the pluralism of voices within a given community, in the minority context it has a second, less visible consequence: it suppresses the space in which that community encounters the “other” – whether that other is the majority, the Serbian community, or an alternative voice within the Hungarian community itself.

It is worth drawing a distinction here between multiculturalism and interculturalism: multiculturalism describes the mere coexistence of different communities in the same space, while interculturalism presupposes their active encounter, exchange, and mutual enrichment. Vojvodina has, in this sense, long been an example of interculturalism, but that capacity has over recent decades increasingly been reduced to mere multiculturalism – communities living side by side rather than with

one another, what one might call “multicultural nationalism” (Gruhonjić, 2015). In the working definition we employ here, intercultural communication, in its fundamental sense, presupposes the existence of a mediator: spaces, institutions, or practices through which different communities can articulate, exchange, and negotiate their narratives, interests, and identities. Minority-language media, in the ideal conception of the national council system, should function as precisely such a mediator: translating the experience of the Hungarian community for the wider Serbian public, while also opening a pluralist space within the community itself for different voices, generations, gender positions, and political sensibilities. When that media space is captured by a single political structure, it ceases to function as a mediator and begins to function as a filter – one that allows through only that version of the community which is politically desirable.

This dynamic operates along two parallel lines. Outwardly, towards the majority community, captured media project a homogenised, politically controlled image of the Hungarian community – one in which there is no internal dissent, no alternative voices, no complexity. This reduces the very possibility of the Serbian public encountering the Hungarian community in its full internal diversity to a single, politically mediated narrative. Inwardly, towards the community itself, the same mechanism operates still more deeply: voices that do not conform to that homogenised image – whether critical journalists, women whose experience does not fit the dominant, patriarchal narrative about the community, or younger generations with different political sensibilities – become the “other” even within their own community. Stuart Hall’s insight (Hall, 1997) is relevant here: media representation is never a neutral reflection of existing reality, but an active construction of meaning that determines who belongs to the community and who stands outside its boundaries. Those who do not conform to the homogenised image are not presented as a legitimate part of internal pluralism, but as a threat to the coherence of the community that the political structure seeks to maintain.

This opens a question that goes beyond the conventional framework of media capture analysis as an exclusively political-economic problem: a captured minority medium does not merely lose its editorial independence – it loses the capacity to be a place within which the community negotiates who constitutes the legitimate “we” and who becomes the internal “other”. Reporting on the other, under such conditions, does not cease to exist – on the contrary, it intensifies – but in an inverted, exclusionary direction: instead of opening space for an understanding of difference, it is used to render internal differences invisible or suspect.

Precisely at this point, the minority case speaks to something broader about the very nature of intercultural communication in captured media systems: it does not disappear suddenly and visibly, as direct censorship would, but gradually transforms into its opposite – into an instrument for controlling the boundaries of the community, rather than a mechanism for bridging them.

Conclusion: Can Editorial Independence Be Established Within Captured Minority Media?

The question that confronts every researcher of media capture in the Balkans is not only how capture came about, but whether it is possible to build and establish editorial independence, professional standards, and a space for pluralism once they have been lost. The case of Hungarian-language media in Vojvodina does not offer a simple answer, but it offers something perhaps more valuable: a concrete example that such a step forward, though difficult, is not impossible.

Following the act of censorship at the daily Magyar Szó in 2011 – when editor-in-chief Csaba Pressburger was dismissed for political reasons (NDNV, 2011) – part of the editorial team decided to leave the paper and establish their own portal, Szabad Magyar Szó (Free Hungarian Word). The portal is funded through international donors, advertising, and reader donations – a model that, in itself, does not resolve the structural problem of the economic sustainability of minority media discussed earlier, but demonstrates that it is possible, outside the captured system, to preserve professional journalism through the perseverance of those for whom journalistic ethics remains the primary standard of work.

This example, however, should not be read as proof that a return to a “better past” is easy or unfolds of its own accord. On the contrary, Szabad Magyar Szó exists outside, not inside, the captured system – it is an escape from the system, not its transformation. A genuine step forward would have to mean the renewal of editorial independence within the institutions that were originally established to serve the entire community: within the national council, within the daily paper that remains captured, within an education system that still does not provide journalists in minority languages with the professional foundation that their colleagues in the majority system, at least formally, have at their disposal.

The question, then, is not only how to preserve minority languages in the media, but how to preserve professional journalism within minority media. And, we would add, how to preserve the space in which the community – both outwardly and inwardly – encounters its own internal pluralism, rather than erasing it in the name of “unity”. For as long as that space is not renewed within the institutions themselves – rather than merely alongside them – free journalism within minority media will remain possible only as an exception, not as a rule.

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