

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

Media Capture and Resilience Strategies in Central and South-Eastern Europe

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Abstract: This editorial introduction to the special section “Media Capture in the Western Balkans and Beyond: Tools, Actors, and Effects” provides the conceptual discussion about media capture. As a flexible and overarching concept, media capture is used to describe the specific contemporary position of the media in the nexuses between politics and economy. The papers in this special section view media capture from a comparative perspective, detailing capturing mechanisms in Central and Eastern Europe. In this editorial we argue that, unlike some similar concepts, such as clientelism or instrumentalisation, media capture points to the more extreme and more broadly practiced forms of interference, systematically implemented in such a way to become one of the defining structural features of the media landscape.

Keywords: media capture, clientelism, instrumentalisation, resilience, Central and South-Eastern Europe

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Introduction – historical relevance and conceptual flexibility of media capture

A plethora of terms has been used to describe media relations with political and economic centres of power, and the situations in which these centres subjugate the media to serve their ends. The term media capture seems to be one of the most prolific ones currently, having been explored intensively over the last decade in various contexts. Following the well-paved path of similar initiatives (Schiffrin, 2018; Márquez Ramírez & Costa Ribeiro, 2024), this special section aims to explore the tools, actors, and effects of media capture in the Western Balkans and beyond. In this introduction, we will present and discuss this prolific concept and briefly outline the structure of the special section.

The widespread use of the term media capture can be attributed, in part, to its historical relevance in encompassing the new media reality created by global economic and political developments. Frequently cited pioneering studies focusing on the analysis of media ownership structures and ownership concentration date back to before the global economic crisis of 2008 (Djankov et al., 2003; Besley & Prat, 2006; Corneo, 2006). However, it was the impact of the post-crisis economic decline on the media sector (and media capture concept's use in economic field) that led to the changes best described as capture. A shrinking economy meant a shrinking advertising market, which left the media in search of new business models. Among other things, this meant downsizing newsrooms or closing cross-border operations. Such was, for example, the case with the closure of multinational media corporations' operations in countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which left the media prone to politically motivated local ownership (Štětka, 2012).

In addition, the effects of the economic crisis were aggravated by the proliferation of social networking sites that have become the key intermediaries between the media and their audiences, as well as their advertisers. In effect, financial injections from the state – through advertising, subsidies, or even more opaque transactions – were more welcome, but came, in some countries, at the cost of undue influence on editorial decisions and news content.

On the political side, the concept of media capture resonated well with the rise of right-wing populist and illiberal rulers in the second decade of the 21st century. Hungarian media under Viktor Orbán and Serbian media under Aleksandar Vučić are often analysed as textbook examples of media co-optation by the government (Csaky, 2020). Poland during PiS, Czechia with Andrej Babiš, and other Central and Eastern governments exhibiting some illiberal traits were also described as partially captured (Dragomir, 2026). What these cases have in common is that formally guaranteed pluralism and institutions of liberal democracy are eroded by legislative changes that limit democratic capacity, through political appointments – including regulatory bodies and public service media – and through the creation of clientelistic networks between the state and private actors – including the media – in order to

drain public resources and shrink the space for critical voices. In a similar fashion throughout the world, a new generation of autocrats, such as India's Narendra Modi, developed new or revamped old instruments of media control (Ravikumar et al., 2026). With Donald Trump's winning of the U.S. presidential election in 2016, and again in 2024, the recognisable pattern of hostility towards the media and the creation of conservative media alliances (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018) has shown that no democracy is immune to capture.

Another possible reason for the popularity of the term media capture is its conceptual flexibility. As one of the most frequently cited definitions states, media capture pertains to "the interference of influential actors and vested interests in the news media, as individual parties act on their benefit, for private purposes, and to the detriment of the public interest and the democratic functions of journalism" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, pp. 40–41). Recognition of multiple vested interests, and especially the involvement of the private sector, is regarded as the key contribution of the concept (Schiffrin, 2017). It also bridges two perspectives on the media, the liberal one claiming that to be truly free the media need to remain beyond the reach of the state and its mechanisms of control, and the radical one that sees privately owned, profit-oriented media, as the protectors of "the status quo and their interests anchored in conservative ideologies" (Echeverría & Márquez-Ramírez, 2025, p. 320). As such, media capture is regarded as "a useful overarching concept that permits theoretically dispersed phenomena to be covered and studied under the same conceptual umbrella, often tying media power and media control scholarship together" (Márquez Ramírez & Costa Ribeiro, 2024, p. 154).

And the concept has travelled geographically and contextually. It is most frequently used to analyse media in Latin America, Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe (Dragomir, 2026; Mabweazara & Pearson, 2025), although its application goes beyond the usual suspects, including Croatia, Slovenia (Pajnik, 2026) or Japan (Au & Kawai, 2012). It has been applied in such a way to include comparative (e.g., Dragomir, 2019; Dragojlov, 2026; Pajnik, 2026) and country-specific case studies (e.g., Finkel, 2021; Frisch et al., 2018; Indzhov, 2024; Moreira & Del Bianco, 2025; Milojević & Kleut, 2023), as well as specific capture instruments (e.g., Dragomir, 2018; Noam, 2018) or certain types of media (e.g., Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Napoli, 2021). Additionally, it moved from conceptualisations that address traditional media towards those that question how the capture works in digital arenas, both nationally and globally through the platform capture (Usher, 2021). This growing scholarship is now consolidating, paving the way towards a deeper understanding of the capture toolbox and offering a more systematic approach to analysing it.

Follow the money, follow the politics

Given the conceptual breadth of the concept, the scholarship has identified a variety of capture mechanisms and instruments. Many of them focus on how governments

use funding to keep the media in line through public funding of public service broadcasting (PSB), state advertising, state subsidies and market disruption measures (Dragomir, 2018). Others detail how media ownership is concentrated in the hands of few private companies who trade their newspaper space or airing time for a privileged position in the market or other lucrative arrangements with the authorities (Mabweazara et al., 2020; Vojtěchovska, 2017). Some, include philanthropic organisations and foundations as yet another actor with vested interest in the media (Benson, 2018). The ties between the media and these external actors for the most part remain opaque, beyond public scrutiny, and the traditional censorship is being replaced by soft influence, in-house pressures and eventually self-censorship.

Legal provisions and oversight are also instruments of capture used either to create privileges for selected media subservient to vested interests, or to create administrative or financial obstacles for oppositional and critical voices. Placing party loyalists in regulatory seats of media agencies enables inaction in examining media monopolies, monitoring election coverage, awarding broadcasting licences or making appointments to public media top management (Milojević & Kleut, 2023).

To systematise this wider array of practices in Europe, Dragomir (2019), proposes viewing capture through four components: 1) regulatory capture; 2) control of public service media; 3) use of state financing as a control tool and 4) ownership takeover. Regulatory capture pertains to public agencies in charge of media, competition and oversight, whose independence is usually guaranteed in legislation, but political appointments make them prone to advancing government interests in the media sector. With many European countries having large shares of audiences who follow public service media, controlling them through state funding, appointments of government boards or legislation is instrumental for keeping voters attuned to messaging from the authorities. With harsh media market conditions, state financing in various forms – from subsidies to advertising – becomes an important source of income and, for some media, even of survival. And finally, ownership takeover places the media in the hands of private companies whose aim is neither profit nor public service, but rather is to deliver messages of government success or smear campaigns against opposition, including independent media.

In a similar attempt to provide a media capture typology, Stiglitz (2017) differentiated between four overlapping forms: 1) ownership, 2) financial incentives, 3) censorship and 4) cognitive capture – which occurs when journalists interiorize external constraints. Observing developing democracies, Atal (2017) suggested four capture types: 1) state capture – describing the situation in which postcolonial governments have maintained colonial era legislation that treats the press as an arm of the state, 2) plutocratic capture – describing the monopolies created through privatisation, 3) corporate capture – in which the captors are donors and advertisers, and 4) intersecting capture – when some traits of the previous types overlap, as is the case when the state has the role of an advertiser.

Although sometimes observed in the literature under labels such as full capture and partial capture, there are rare attempts to distil the level of capture and provide country-specific characterisations. Thus, Márquez Ramírez and Costa Ribeiro (2024) call for distinguishing between internal and external pressure, as well as specifying the level at which capture is observed – macro, meso or micro. While most studies take a macro perspective and look at a set of countries or a region with multiple agents and tools of capture, some adopt a meso perspective, viewing a single media type or organisation, while others include micro elements such as bribery and cognitive capture. In his recent work, Dragomir (2026) responds to the calls for more systematicity and presents six types of capture at the macro-meso level: 1) the prototype (Russia), 2) the textbook model (Hungary), 3) the family model (Turkey), 4) the intelligence services model (Egypt), 5) the billionaire-patron model (Israel) and 6) the tech-oligarchic model (the United States).

Towards conceptual clarity

While previous paragraphs witness commendable attempts to operationalise and systematise media capture and the scholarship around it, there have been only rare attempts to provide it with a firmer conceptual footing, especially in relation to other adjacent concepts (Bajomi-Lázár, 2024). Authors rightly observe that media capture overlaps with some other concepts such as clientelism, neopatrimonialism, corruption and oligarchisation (Bajomi-Lázár, 2024; Ryabinska, 2014). After providing a review of approaches, Bajomi-Lázár (2024, p. 241) poses an important question: what types of interference in media operations and journalistic work are *not* media capture?

Clientelism is one such term that often co-occurs with or is interchangeably used with media capture. As defined by Hallin and Mancini, it is “a pattern of social organisation in which access to social resources is controlled by the patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for defence and various sorts of support” (2004, p. 58). Characteristic of media systems of southern Europe and Latin America, political clientelism “forces the logic of journalism to merge with other social logics – of party politics and family privilege (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002, p. 189) and as such presents one type of media instrumentalisation. As a broader concept, instrumentalisation stands at the opposite pole of journalistic autonomy guided by professional standards, and is defined as any type of media control by outside actors – “parties, politicians, social groups or movements, or economic actors” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 37)

Unlike *clientelism*, which is a form of patronage based on the reciprocal exchange of favours between actors of different status, *patrimonialism* points to structural relations in which the political elites pervert and twist formal channels for the benefit of their allies (Mabweazara et al., 2020). Such a focus on political elites is found in the concept of *media colonisation* that describes strategies aimed at “extracting from

the media resources such as airtime, frequencies, positions and money, for channeling them to party loyalists in order to reward them for various services (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, p. 76).

Comparing these definitions with those of media capture provided earlier, it indeed remains difficult to differentiate between them. Some of the concepts are more closely tied to specific geographies or historical developments, for example party colonisation of the media explains how post-communist political parties compensate for their weakness by capturing the state and the media (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, p. 76). But in essence, they move away from censorship and repression as tools of authoritarian states, recognise a plethora of involved actors and refer to more opaque attempts by particularistic interests to dominate the public service orientation of journalism.

Addressing this issue, Mungiu-Pippidi claims that instrumentalisation still presumes the media as autonomous agents (Zankova & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2024), while in captured media theory they cease to be autonomous. In another response, the author clarifies that:

A captive media system occurs whenever the goal of *most media* (regardless if traditional or new, if content producing or advertising, etc.) is in promoting particular vested interests to the detriment of classic media objectives, such as objective information or honest debate. Media capture is a macro concept indicating AN OUTCOME, while soft pressure, self-censorship, etc. are mechanisms operating at a micro level. (Mungiu-Pippidi, as cited in Schiffrin, 2021, pp. 5-6)

This brings us to a much needed clarification provided by Echeverría and Márquez-Ramírez (2025), who understand capture as “systemic instrumentalization of journalism”. In other words, instrumentalisation, clientelism, colonisation, and patronism are better viewed as capture mechanisms at the meso and micro levels, while the term media capture should be reserved for those contexts in which these mechanisms deeply permeate and dominate the media landscape.

New(est) forms of media capture and resilience

In the context of contemporary debates on media capture, it is important to emphasise that the phenomenon is not exhausted by the analysis of relations between the state and (traditional) media but also includes broader social dynamics. Particularly significant is how digital platforms, algorithmic recommendations, and global corporations shape information flows, creating new forms of dependency and vulnerability. This layer of “platform capture” raises the question of whether traditional regulatory concepts can keep pace with the speed of technological change and safeguard the public interest in the digital sphere (Usher, as cited in Schiffrin, 2021). In addition to the “old-fashioned” forms of media capture found in many countries of the

world, platform capture further narrows the space for alternative voices and open and democratic debate.

Another aspect that deserves attention is the resilience of media communities and journalists. Although capture mechanisms are often systemic and deeply entrenched, there are examples of local and transnational initiatives that strive to preserve professional standards and journalistic autonomy. These practices – ranging from independent investigative centres to international solidarity networks – demonstrate that media capture is not a final state, but rather a process that can be challenged and reversed through collective efforts.

Resilience strategies are numerous and are implemented differently in different parts of the world. However, some of the most successful ones have proved to include strategic litigation (challenging unconstitutional laws, licensing abuses and censorship), discursive resilience (countering polarisation, disinformation and fragmentation), as well as transnational solidarity and networking (Höglund & Schaffer, 2025). Dragomir (2019) also emphasises that independent watchdog organisations, cross-border investigative networks, and alternative funding models can mitigate capture by diversifying sources of support and reducing dependence on state or oligarchic financing. Similarly, Benson (2018) argues that philanthropic foundations and non-profit initiatives, when designed transparently, can provide crucial lifelines for independent outlets struggling under hostile political and economic conditions. These strategies highlight that resilience is not merely reactive but requires proactive institutional design, collective solidarity, and innovative funding mechanisms to sustain media freedom in captured environments.

Presenting the section

This section consists of research articles, essays, interviews and a book review by various authors from Central and South-Eastern Europe. Its main aim is to provide insight into different forms and models of media capture in the region, as well as to elaborate on them in a wider context, not only as local problems and specificities of the countries in which they occur.

Peter Hanák, from Comenius University in Slovakia, in his paper *Is there a Captured media system, typical for South-Eastern Europe?*, proposes the Captured Model as a new type of media system, distinct from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) original three and Dobek-Ostrowska's (2015) authoritarian model, to better describe the realities of South-Eastern Europe. Drawing on post-2008 developments in Hungary, Serbia, and other countries, Hanák argues that democratic backsliding and systemic media capture have created a stable configuration typical of electoral autocracies, where pluralism is eroded but full authoritarian control has not yet taken hold. The proposed Captured Model restructures all four dimensions of media systems: state role, journalism professionalisation, political parallelism, and market

structure, through mechanisms such as regulatory capture, state financing, ownership concentration, and instrumentalisation of media by oligarchs aligned with ruling elites. This model, marked by oligarchisation and Russian influence, is presented as a coherent, regionally typical system that explains how captured media environments stabilise between democracy and authoritarianism.

Anida Sokol, from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), in her paper *Media Financing as a Mechanism of Media Capture in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia* examines how public media financing functions as a mechanism of media capture in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, showing that financial dependence can undermine editorial independence even in formally regulated systems. Using a comparative case-study approach, it identifies three main financing mechanisms: funding of public service and publicly owned media, project-based grants, and state advertising/contracts with public institutions and enterprises. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a fragmented and decentralised system of subsidies and grants entrenches political parallelism, while in Serbia, post-2014 reforms introduced project-based financing but discretionary implementation and continued state advertising limited autonomy. The paper concludes that capture does not stem only from a lack of regulation, but also from weak safeguards, transparency, and oversight, which allow governments to reward loyal outlets and disadvantage critical voices, thereby shaping media markets and editorial behaviour.

Konrad Bleyer-Simon from the European University Institute explores how foreign agent laws have become a new tool of media capture in Russia, Hungary, Georgia, and the BiH entity Republika Srpska. Initially designed to restrict civil society organisations receiving foreign support, these laws increasingly target independent media outlets and donors, framing them as “foreign agents” to delegitimise their work and impose heavy reporting burdens, fines, or closure. The Russian case is emblematic, with laws expanded to cover NGOs, foreign-operated media, and eventually individuals, while Hungary, Georgia, and Republika Srpska adopted similar measures inspired by Moscow’s model. Through interviews with journalists and donors, the research shows that coping strategies include compliance (adhering to the law or avoiding sensitive topics) and exit (registering abroad), but these remain temporary solutions. Ultimately, the paper argues that foreign agent laws exploit the media’s financial vulnerability, transforming external support (once a remedy against capture) into a liability that governments use to consolidate control and weaken newsroom independence.

Dinko Gruhonjić and Smiljana Milinkov from the University of Novi Sad wrote an essay, *Pressure on Minority Media in Hybrid Regimes: A Case Study of Hungarian-Language Media in Serbia*, which analyses political pressure on Hungarian-language media in Vojvodina as a case of media capture within Serbia’s hybrid regime. It shows how minority media face a double legitimisation of control: at the state level, through mechanisms of hybrid regimes that suppress pluralism, and at the community level, where loyalty to the ruling minority party (Alliance of

Vojvodina Hungarians) is framed as a defence of national identity. The essay highlights the role of the Hungarian National Council, dominated by AVH, and the transnational financial influence of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, which reinforced partisan control over outlets like RTV Pannon and newspaper *Magyar Szó*. This capture undermines intercultural communication, turning minority media from mediators of dialogue into instruments of homogenisation that suppress internal diversity among the minority group. The case of *Szabad Magyar Szó*, founded after political dismissals, illustrates that independent journalism can survive outside the captured system, but true resilience requires renewal of editorial independence within minority institutions themselves.

An important part of this section is an interview with journalist and academic József Makai, which explores the transformation of Hungary's media landscape following the rise of Péter Magyar and his party, Tisza. It gives an insight into Magyar's approach to citizens during the election campaign, bypassing the captured media system, as well as the importance of media as a topic in Magyar's campaign, but also the changes related to the Hungarian media landscape in his first 50 days in office as Prime Minister. The interview highlights both optimism and scepticism: optimism about breaking the regime's monopoly on information, and scepticism about whether rapid reforms can rebuild trust in a fragmented, decentralised media environment.

Lamija Silajdžić, from the University of Sarajevo, wrote a review of Aleksandra Dragojlov's book *State Capture through Media Clientelism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina*. This book review is an excellent addition to the special issue, since it shows how the author of the book explored political elites' use of patronage networks, advertising flows, and ownership structures to subordinate media outlets, thereby weakening democratic institutions and limiting pluralism.

This special section, with contributions diverse in form (papers, essays, interviews and book reviews), offers an insightful perspective on the issue of media capture in Central and South-Eastern Europe. As such, it would, hopefully, inspire academics in the region, as well as globally, to observe and discuss the issue of media capture more and suggest potential resilience strategies in and for the future.

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