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1. Introduction

1.1 Heightened Relevance

When selecting the topic of this thesis, as a citizen of Serbia, I was fully aware of the importance it could hold for the people living there. However, what I could not have anticipated was the extent to which its relevance would grow in the years that followed, particularly after the outbreak of student-led anti-corruption protests in 2024. In the aftermath of these protests, independent and objective journalists as well as university students and professors were regularly labelled by the regime as "terrorists, Nazis, fascists, Ustaše and even enemies of the state" (Srejić, 2025), despite a complete lack of credible evidence to support such claims (SĆF, 2025a; SĆF, 2025b). Another factor contributing to the growing significance of this topic is the renewed international interest and impetus from the European Union to implement meaningful media reforms (Gajić, 2025). This includes the appointment of a new composition of the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media, whose main role is to regulate, monitor and improve electronic media in the public interest (EFJ, 2025).

At the time of writing this thesis, the ruling regime is still reluctant to carry out the necessary reforms or is merely creating the illusion of doing so (Milojević & Kleut, 2023). Not only are journalists left unprotected by public institutions, but they are also directly targeted by political figures at the highest levels. These attacks, along with increasing censorship and pressure on media professionals, have become systemic, but are still not adequately acknowledged internationally as violations of the public's right to information. In that regard, the latest European Commission's Rule of Law Report has been criticized for overlooking the severity of the situation and missing the opportunity to demand accountability (MFRR, 2025b).

Additionally alarming is the finding from the 2025 MFRR mission to Serbia, which concluded that the media freedom crisis has intensified, especially following the government's hostile response to the November 2024 student protests. Though there have been modest gains in reform over the previous decade, these are now overshadowed by escalated threats to journalists, signalling a regression in Serbia's EU accession commitments. The report highlights that although a stronger response from the EU is necessary, the ultimate responsibility lies with the Serbian government, which must stop undermining media freedom and demonstrate genuine political will to establish a pluralistic and independent media system (MFRR, 2025a).

1.2 Context and Objectives

An emerging multi-party system in Serbia in 1990 was perceived as a milestone towards democratizing its society, offering an official platform for diverse opinions and ideologies to be heard and represented within the newly established political arena. This change was expected to facilitate a more inclusive and participatory political culture, encouraging active civic engagement and dialogue among Serbian citizens as well as their political representatives.

However, nearly 35 years after the collapse of one-party regime and its first contemporary¹ parliamentary elections, fundamental political rights and civil liberties (National Assembly of Serbia, 2015) repeatedly find themselves endangered by autocratic tendencies (Freedom House, 2022a). Serbia's journey towards EU integration has been marked by both significant achievements and challenges. The country's early success in obtaining candidate status highlighted its commitment to EU standards and reforms. However, political developments in recent years have raised concerns regarding democratic backsliding and governance issues. The European Commission's reports have repeatedly pointed out the need for Serbia to enhance its democratic institutions, rule of law, media freedoms and respect for fundamental rights as part of its accession process (European Commission, 2022a).

Once at the forefront of EU integrations, recent evaluations have described Serbia as a “partly free” state with a hybrid regime, where public opinion is frequently discarded while the political opposition is often discredited (Freedom House, 2023a). However, particularly concerning is the **process of media capture**, which has progressively intensified over the last decade, indicating a concerning trend in the erosion of media freedom and plurality of expression.

Media capture, generally defined as the control of media by private or governmental interests to the detriment of journalistic independence and pluralism, has been identified as a growing problem (Green, 2021). This issue poses significant challenge to Serbia's democratic processes and, long-term, its EU accession aspirations, as reports have been increasingly highlighting a decline in media freedom, with instances of censorship, self-censorship and pressure on journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Research papers and studies on this topic so far have generally concentrated either on assessing the state of media freedom within a span of two to three years or on com-

¹ Parliamentary elections were also held during the first half of the 20th century in the Kingdom of Serbia and, later, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (also known as Kingdom of Yugoslavia).

paring key differences between past and present political regimes. Such a short-term approach has led to a **research gap**. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive overview of media capture over the past decade and to illustrate the political atmosphere which the regime created and used to exploit the Serbian media system.

Given the extensive variety of media types and the constrained capacity for comprehensive analysis, this thesis limits its scope to **television media**. This decision is grounded in the consistent finding that **television** serves as the **primary source of information** for the majority of politically engaged² citizens in Serbia (CeSID & Propulsion, 2021; Ilić et al., 2022; N1, 2019). Television remains the most widely consumed medium in Serbia, with citizens primarily relying on national frequency channels for news about political and social issues. Cable channels are mainly used for sports and entertainment, but access to them is limited as two of the three major cable operators are state-controlled. National frequency channels dominate viewership, with even the least-watched channel reaching over 1.5 million viewers in 2020. *RTS 1*, the most popular channel and the flagship station of the public broadcaster *Radio Television of Serbia*, attracts over 3 million viewers out of a total population of 6.6 million. (CRTA, 2021; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022).

This thesis conducts a qualitative analysis of interviews with Serbian journalists as well as media experts to investigate the mechanisms, key actors and consequences of media capture in Serbia from 2013 to 2023. The main aim of the thesis is to identify prevalent forms and instances of media capture, examine the influence of political actors on television media and evaluate the effects of media capture on journalistic autonomy, media freedom and democratic processes. Following this analysis, the thesis will propose recommendations to enhance media freedom in Serbia.

The following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: *What are the predominant forms and instances of media capture observed in Serbian television media between 2013 and 2023?*

RQ2: *How did political actors influence television media outlets in Serbia during this period?*

RQ3: *What implications does media capture have for journalistic autonomy, media freedom and the democratic process in Serbia?*

² Citizens who are informed and familiar with daily political events and developments.

***RQ4:** Which recommendations can be proposed to safeguard media freedom in Serbia?*

To summarize, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of media capture in Serbian television media, highlight its impacts and present strategies to safeguard against its encroachment on media freedom.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Media and its Freedom

To better comprehend what the concept of media capture encompasses, it is first necessary to define what the media represent as a means of communication and why media freedom is considered paramount in a society that seeks to develop and function within a democratic environment (Keane, 1992).

The term *media* is the plural of "medium," broadly encompassing all communication channels that disseminate information. However, for the purposes of this work, a more specific definition is applied, which considers media as: "various forms, devices and systems that make up mass communications considered as a whole, including newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television channels and websites" (Danesi, 2014, p. 192.). In the context of EU legislation, the media sector includes film, television, music, publishing and related advertising industries (European Commission, n.d.).

Media freedom refers to the right of media entities, such as broadcasting institutions, the press and other channels, to operate without interference and publish news and opinions free from state censorship. This freedom ensures the dissemination of information, supports the free formation and expression of opinions, promotes a plurality of viewpoints and underpins democratic decision-making processes by fostering transparency and enabling public oversight of politics. Media, therefore, serve a dual role as both advocates for and guardians of freedom of expression (Kmezić, 2018).

Through upholding freedom of expression, the media play a crucial role in human communication, shouldering responsibilities that range from making matters of public interest widely accessible to acting as a watchdog in democratic society by exposing fraud or corruption. Consequently, the media possess significant influence over public opinion (Oster, 2015).

Oster (2015) further elaborates that media speech privileges underscore the fact that a statement made under the protection of the media, or a particular media outlet is classified as "media speech," thus making it more difficult to justify imposing restrictions on such speech. This manner ensures the protection of journalistic freedoms while acknowledging that media freedom inherently includes the right to make mistakes. In terms of institutional protection, media freedom differs from freedom of expression by encompassing rights that extend beyond the content of publications. These rights include protections related to newsgathering, editorial decision-making and distribution, specifically safeguarding individuals working within the media sector.

2.2 Defining Media Capture

Media capture is a crucial concept in understanding the dynamics of modern media landscapes, particularly in regions with transitional or fragile democracies, which is the case in the Western Balkans. It refers to situations where media outlets either never attain or lose their autonomy, **failing to** fulfill their primary role of **objectively informing the public** (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Schiffrin, 2021). This can occur through various mechanisms, including direct government control, corporate ownership and financial dependence on advertising revenues from powerful entities.

Additionally, Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) further defines media capture as a situation where “media has not succeeded in becoming **autonomous** to manifest a will of its own and to exercise its main function, notably of **informing people**, but has persisted in an intermediate state, whereas various groups, not just the government, use it for other purposes”.

Dragomir’s (2024a) four-pillar model builds upon Mungiu-Pippidi’s (2008, 2013) definition. It describes media capture as “a phenomenon that entails the government and its affiliated businesses wielding influence and control over four key areas, regulation, public/state media, state financial resources and the private media sector, to manipulate the media narrative according to their own agenda” (p. 167). This framework clarifies how seemingly independent institutions may serve political interests and provides the analytical foundation for examining Serbia’s media landscape.

The Center for International Media Assistance, an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), describes media capture as a “form of governance failure that occurs when the news media advance the commercial or political concerns

of state and/or non-state special interest groups controlling the media industry instead of holding those groups accountable and reporting in the public interest” (CIMA, n.d.). It is also viewed as a “systemic **governance problem** where **political leaders** and **media owners work together** in a symbiotic but mutually **corrupting** relationship: media owners provide supportive news coverage to political leaders in exchange for favourable government treatment of their businesses and political interests” (CIMA, n.d.).

Media capture also involves **the political economy of media**, which examines how ownership structures and financial dependencies shape media content and behaviour. Besley and Prat (2006) highlight how captured media can undermine government accountability, while McChesney (2008) emphasizes the detrimental effects of media monopolies on democratic discourse. Prat (2016) additionally discusses that media capture can predict that media power concentration leads to a lower amount of political information and a higher level of bias. Both the government and the government funded media desire to censor information which puts it in a bad light, while still publishing favorable information. This leads to a reduction in the number of signals available to voters as well as a systematic distortion in favor of the incumbent.

Another particularly distinguished method of media capture in the case of Serbia is also known as the **tone bias**. It refers to the way in which political actors or issues are evaluated by the media, not just through explicit praise or criticism, but also via more subtle elements such as word choice and labeling (e.g., “freedom fighters” vs. “terrorists”) (Barnehl & Schumacher, 2024). When a media outlet consistently portrays a political figure or party in a highly positive or negative manner, it demonstrates a **biased tone**. Such bias has a powerful influence on audience perceptions, shaping attitudes toward political candidates and affecting how their qualities, whether positive or negative, are viewed (Barnehl & Schumacher, 2024).

Given the persuasive effect of tone, authoritarian regimes have a strong incentive to ensure consistently **favorable media portrayals** of themselves and their political allies. This often includes promoting positive reporting not only about ruling parties but also about individual leaders. In many cases, leaders become central to the regime’s legitimacy, with the media constructing a carefully curated image based on personal characteristics such as strength, charisma, or competence. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the **cult of personality**, has been a hallmark of numerous autocratic and illiberal regimes, from Stalin’s Soviet Union and Kim Il-Sung’s North Korea to mod-

ern-day examples in Turkey, Hungary, Slovakia and Georgia (Barnehl & Schumacher, 2024; Berger, 2019; Schwarzwälder, 2024; Istinomer, Demagog & FactCheck, 2025).

Apart from it, the framework of this thesis also partially includes **historical institutionalism**, which suggests that established institutional patterns and legacies are challenging to overcome as they significantly influence media operations (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Recent research has revealed that political transitions, although sometimes associated with increased media freedom, can also give rise to novel capture mechanisms that differ from traditional models of government control. For instance, Schiffrin (2018) elaborates that after significant political events (such as the fall of an authoritarian regime or a major shift in government), a proliferation of new media outlets often emerges. However, these emerging outlets frequently struggle with financial sustainability, making them vulnerable to capture through new alliances. In post-communist regions, such as parts of the Balkans, the **legacy of state control continues to influence public service broadcasters** (PSBs). Milosavljević and Poler (2018) discuss how, despite the political transition, PSBs in the Balkans still suffer from a lack of editorial independence, compounded by commercialization pressures and a fragmented media market. The rapid digitization and proliferation of new channels have further fragmented the media landscape, especially in smaller or economically weaker countries, making them even more susceptible to both political and financial capture.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Previous Studies on Media Capture in Serbia

Prior research has indicated that since the 1990s, Serbian media have been subject to significant political and economic pressures which compromised their independence (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014b). During the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević, the media were tightly controlled to serve government propaganda. Despite major political change at the beginning of the 21st century, subsequent governments continued to exert influence over media through ownership changes and economic pressures. Trpevska and Micevski (2014) outline that state advertising and government subsidies have been used as tools to manipulate media content and suppress dissent.

The implications of media capture on democracy and public opinion in Serbia have been profound. Free and independent media are crucial for a well-functioning democracy, as they ensure plurality of voices and provide citizens with the necessary infor-

mation to make informed decisions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In practice, however, media capture in Serbia has led to a homogenization of viewpoints and a suppression of dissenting voices, which has undermined democratic processes and eroded public trust in the conventional TV media (Stiglitz, 2017b). The manipulation of media content to serve political interests has distorted public perception and limited the scope of public debate, making it difficult for citizens to hold their government accountable (Couldry, 2010). Furthermore, the economic vulnerability of journalists and media outlets has made them susceptible to external pressures, including those from business interests and foreign capital, exacerbating the problem of media capture (Londo et al., 2004). This environment has fostered a culture of self-censorship and a reluctance to challenge powerful interests, further diminishing the role of the media as a pillar of democracy.

3.2 Impact of Media Capture on Democracy and Public Opinion

The impact of media capture on democracy could undoubtedly be seen as profound and multifaceted. Free and independent media are essential for containing a fully functioning democratic system, as they provide citizens with the information necessary to make informed decisions and hold those in power accountable (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). When media capture occurs, it leads to a homogenization of viewpoints that support specific political or economic interests, thereby eroding pluralism and diversity in public discourse (Stiglitz, 2017b).

Captured media often fail to expose corruption, challenge government policies, or represent diverse societal views, which diminishes their watchdog role (Couldry, 2010). This has direct implications for public opinion, as citizens are deprived of balanced and comprehensive information, leading to a misinformed electorate. In Serbia, media capture has been linked to declining trust in media institutions and increased political polarization (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015).

Moreover, the manipulation of media content can exacerbate social divisions and fuel conflict, as seen in the Western Balkans during the 1990s. The misuse of media to incite nationalist sentiments and violence during the breakup of Yugoslavia illustrates the dangerous consequences of media capture (Ramet, 2006).

3.3 The Heritage of Media Control in Serbia

At its most comprehensive level, a heritage or a legacy can be described as a group of elements from the past which continue to influence contemporary events (Cirtautas & Schimmelfennig, 2010). Predicting the extent to which heritage will impact present circumstances remains challenging. It is a difficulty captured by the Nobel Prize-winning quantum physicist Niels Bohr, who famously remarked, “It is very difficult to predict, especially the future” (Mencher, 1971, p. 37). Moreover, both formal and informal institutional legacies establish specific patterns that prove challenging to alter, as suggested by the **historical institutionalism approach** (Steinmo, 2008). Thus, it is useful to briefly examine the historical context of media freedom in the Western Balkans by exploring its three evolutionary stages: the socialist era, the authoritarian period and the phase following the second democratic revolution in 2000 (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015).

3.3.1 The Socialist Ballast

The analysis of the media landscape during socialist Yugoslavia³ shows that it reflected the country's structural decentralization and the principle of self-governance. Since Yugoslavia was composed of six federal republics, each with its own television broadcaster, central censorship was somewhat mitigated. Radojković (1994) describes it as a unique socialist model which was the least totalitarian of all European socialist regimes, but still quite capable of concealing many negative features of a one-party rule. Yugoslavia had a total of eight national public broadcasters (*Table 1*), corresponding to the capital cities of six federal republics and two autonomous provinces. Thus, the communist party's control on media was limited as the broadcasters were allowed to transmit their programs independently of Yugoslav Radio Television⁴, which was a coordinating network that lacked any official executive power (Radojković, 1994).

The system's complexity can be ascribed to the specific form of socialism which was promoted at that time – self-managing socialism. Stemming from it as an integral part of self-management, the newly gained autonomy enabled media outlets to “fully realize their potential” and “allow the society to even more directly influence the work of self-managing organs” (Mihelj, 2013).

³ The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia

⁴ Jugoslovenska radiotelevizija (JRT)

Hence, the new state ideology compelled the Communist Party to search for other means of control, ultimately making it captive to the very system it had been promoting. A “solution” was found in the form of self-censorship, which proved itself to be particularly useful. The responsibility was imposed on journalists, who were regarded as “socio-political workers” by the party (Veljanovski, 2024). Veljanovski (2024) further elaborates that journalists were expected not to question the ruling political model, as questioning the authorities could lead to sowing dissent among the populace.

Despite the lack of formal censorship mechanisms seen in other European communist nations, Yugoslav political authorities effectively exerted control over media content. This was achieved through strategies such as managing key editorial positions, publication censorship by the State Prosecutor’s Office and restrictions imposed by the State Secretariat for Information (Jović, 2009). While the League of Communists maintained a tight grip on media, actual censorship predominantly targeted mainstream mass media. This led to a media environment where much of the oversight was pre-emptively self-imposed and facilitated through state ownership, officially known as ‘social ownership’ due to self-managing socialism, rather than direct interference (Veljanovski, 2024).

Tito’s⁵ passing in 1980 created a wave of increased media liberties. Unfortunately, this trend was reversed by the rise of nationalist and authoritarian parties in the late 1980s, which did not hesitate to (mis)use the pre-existing control methods (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015; Gallagher, 2012).

⁵ Josip Broz Tito – Former President of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia

Federal unit	HQ	Established as	TV launch (year)	Present-day broadcaster
SR Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sarajevo	RTV Sarajevo	1961	Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BHRT)
SR Croatia	Zagreb	RTV Zagreb	1956	Croatian Radio-television (HRT)
SR Macedonia	Skopje	RTV Skopje	1964	Macedonian Radio-Television (MRT)
SR Montenegro	Titograd	RTV Titograd	1971	Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG)
SR Serbia	Belgrade	RTV Belgrade	1958	Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)
SR Slovenia	Ljubljana	RTV Ljubljana	1958	Radio-Television Slovenia (RTVSLO)
SAP Kosovo	Pristina	RTV Pristina	1975	Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK)
SAP Vojvodina	Novi Sad	RTV Novi Sad	1975	Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)

Table 1 - Yugoslav Radio Television (Rajković, 1994)⁶

3.3.2 Infamous 1990s

During the twilight of the 20th century, the socialist Balkan states experienced a significant political shift which brought the single-party dominance to its abrupt end. The transition to a multiparty system and the eventual dissolution of the SFRY⁷ removed the singular control of the media by one party, but it did not eliminate political meddling. In fact, there was an observable increase in political control. The new authorities quickly moved to assert their influence over the media by replacing the editors of the Public Television Broadcasters⁸ and prominent newspapers such as *Politika*, *Politika Ekspres*, *Start*, *Duga*, *Intervju* and various smaller outlets. This led to the authorities

⁶ SR – *Socialist Republic* & SAP – *Socialist Autonomous Province*

⁷ The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia

⁸ Radio Television of Serbia & Radio Television of Montenegro

attaining a degree of media compliance and uniformity in perspective (Thompson, 1996). By leveraging the media's ability to influence public opinion, the leaders who assumed power in the newly formed Federal Republic of Yugoslavia employed the press as a key instrument to ignite and sustain the wars during the 1990s. Throughout the entire decade, journalists faced both physical and economic threats, with most notorious cases being the murders of Slavko Ćuruvija, Dada Vujasinović and Milan Pantić (Stankov, 2023).

A prominent journalist and critic of the regime, Ćuruvija, was assassinated in 1999. The crime highlighted the extreme risks faced by media professionals in the region (Mostafa, 1999). Many consider the murder tied to the current Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, who at that time served as Minister of Information (1998–2000). For instance, the former Serbian prime minister Zoran Živković stated that Vučić directly ordered the murder of Ćuruvija, as he had threatened to "take revenge on Ćuruvija sooner or later" (Bednar, 2020).

These tragic events illustrated the perilous environment in which journalists operated, where criticism of the government could result in fatal consequences. The atmosphere of intimidation and violence not only impaired the freedom of expression but also served as a grim reminder of the stakes involved in upholding journalistic integrity in the face of authoritarian repression. The privatization of media assets to allies and the creation of government-friendly private channels, regimes in the region ensured their influence over and favourable coverage in the media. This setup, although ostensibly pluralistic, remained under government control. In the period leading up to the 'second democratic revolution' that saw the fall of leaders like Milošević in Serbia and Tuđman in Croatia, despite significant international support for independent media, the only sources of unbiased information were a handful of print and electronic outlets with limited urban reach and a few emerging online platforms (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015).

3.3.3 Incomplete Democratization

The democratization efforts of the late 1990s and early 2000s initially promised enhanced media freedoms, but many of these changes were only partially realized and remained incomplete. Despite apparent advancements over the authoritarian past, crucial reforms in media policies were not enacted. Even under democratically elected governments during 2000's, the media sector in the Western Balkans continued to be

shaped by the influence of its new political elite. While these governments were more committed to political reforms and did not exert extensive control of their authoritarian predecessors, they still employed similar control mechanisms. Moreover, the economic precariousness of independent journalists opened the door for business and foreign capital interference in the media. This complexity made it challenging to identify clear instances of political influence, such as the censorship faced by the critical radio show Peščanik. Veran Matić, the former director of B92, noted that "the methods of applying pressure and restricting freedom have become more sophisticated and less noticeable" (Matić, 2009). Media outlets often amplified nationalist views and sometimes played a role in stirring violence, as seen in the mass violence in Kosovo in 2004.

In summary, the media culture of the past, though just formally disconnected from the previous political regime, persists and continues to affect the media landscape in the Western Balkans. As Ramet pointed out, during the communist era, journalists were "expected to act as agents of societal influence and were crucial in combating counter-revolutionary ideologies" (Ramet, 1996). Having been conditioned to propagate party lines, media outlets were swiftly repurposed by authoritarian governments to abandon the 'brotherhood and unity' narrative in favor of promoting nationalist myths, which contributed to the surge of violent conflicts in the 1990s. Ultimately, the anticipated transformation through the second democratic revolution did not alter the entrenched patterns of political interference. Today, aligning media practices with EU standards remains a formidable challenge in the region, despite the establishment of formal structures (Tunnard, 2003).

4. Controlling the Narrative – The Portrayal of Media Capture

In order to better comprehend the context in which media capture was taking effect, the following six chapters present an overview of the decline in media freedoms in Serbia over the past decade, along with the pre-existing toolkit of media capture methods that made this possible. Likewise, as Krstić (2024) and Veljanovski (2024) conclude, REM was unable to protect objective, accurate and factual reporting, as well as to prevent government officials' attempts to control the media, particularly the public broadcasters (*RTS* and *RTV*). This shortcoming was due to the entrenched institutional patterns and power structures that have persisted over time, making it difficult for REM to assert its independence and effectively resist political influence. Furthermore, this

chapter will discuss the issue of current media ownership, highlighting how the majority of private media owners have been proven to closely cooperate with the ruling party, further consolidating the government's control over the media landscape (Milojević & Kleut, 2023). The events presented are based on reports published by Freedom House, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, Reporters Without Borders, key EU institutions such as the European Commission and European Parliament and the EUI's Center for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom. These five sources were selected to ensure consistency and objectivity, as they have been closely monitoring the Serbian media landscape for over a decade and are well-regarded for their thorough and impartial analyses.

4.1 The Pre-existing Media Manipulation Toolkit

The end of the Democratic Party's rule in 2012 marked a silent end of the democratic transition in Serbia. Although it did not seem that way, the rising Serbian Progressive Party quickly gained the voters' trust by promising to tackle corruption, ensure social justice, and swiftly complete the process of EU accession (Atlagić, 2012). As general elections took place on the same day in 2012, both presidential and parliamentary, Tomislav Nikolić was directly elected as the new president while his party, SNS⁹, received the most votes at the parliamentary elections (Kojić, 2020). However, the most deserving man for this success was the vice president of SNS and Nikolić's chief campaign manager, Aleksandar Vučić. Neither Vučić nor Nikolić were newcomers to the Serbian political scene. Both held prominent positions within the Serbian Radical Party during the Milošević-led government in 1990s.

Namely, from 1998 until 2000, Vučić even served as Minister of Information. At the beginning of his mandate, he enacted the Law on Public Informing. Such a restrictive media law forbade electronic media from broadcasting foreign channels and imposed financial penalties on journalists who criticized the Milošević regime. This marked the onset of what some of Serbia's remaining independent journalists call "Šešelji's or Vučić's law", a deliberate and systematic effort to undermine independent media (Malešić, 2020). Additionally, during the NATO bombing and the Kosovo conflict, all media outlets in Serbia were subject to Vučić's censorship.

⁹ Srpska Napredna Stranka [Serbian Progressive Party]

Although the 2000's are considered to be a democratic peak in Serbia's recent history, media outlets at the time did not experience the level of freedom they had initially anticipated. Mass media were systematically controlled by higher authorities, with journalists often subjected to personal intimidation (Sotiropoulos, 2023).

During the period from 2008 to 2012, when the Democratic Party¹⁰ led by Boris Tadić was in power, the government made attempts to exert control over private media. As noted in Sotiropoulos interviews, "There was media spinning already under Tadić" (p. 257). His administration strategically directed state-funded advertisements towards favored newspapers and media outlets, thereby exerting influence over the media landscape. However, it is reported that the control over media became even more pronounced after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012. One of Sotiropoulos's (2023) interviewees even stated that the "media control existed under Tadić and the DS party, but after the 2012 government turnover, the SNS exerted even greater control" (p. 257).

4.2 Establishing the Groundworks (2013 – 2016)

Having previously secured electoral victories in 2012 and in 2014 during snap elections, SNS formed its first government led by Aleksandar Vučić as Prime Minister (Kisić, 2015).

After the inauguration, the media's inability to resist the ruling party's pressure became increasingly evident. Almost overnight, the influence of the defeated Democratic Party was significantly suppressed, while the new regime took control. According to the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, all political elites began to actively hinder the development of professional and independent journalism by treating the media as mere propaganda tools (Belić, 2016). Consequently, whoever holds political power in Serbia gains complete control over the media sphere. From the beginning of Vučić's rule, the media strongly supported his, rather sensational, "war on corruption", which subsequently accumulated widespread public support (Belić, 2016). However, as time passed, the populist nature of campaign became increasingly apparent, revealing partisan interests instead of systemic solutions for long-term progress. Hence, any public criticism of Vučić was perceived as hostile or even traitorous (Kisić, 2015).

¹⁰ Demokratska Stranka (abbr. DS)

Ever since 2013, the Media Freedom Index, which illustrates the state of media freedoms within the ‘Nations in Transit’, measured by Freedom House has been steadily declining. According to their 2014 report, referring to the year prior, the government failed to sell out its remaining shares in media companies that are not classified as public services. Additionally, concerns emerged about the public broadcaster's¹¹ independence by proposing a bill for state budget funding. On the other hand, despite the privatization of most media outlets in Serbia, they continue to face political bias, external pressures and a lack of professionalism. The number of libel suits¹² increased, along with regulatory efforts to eradicate profanity and other offensive content on television (Freedom House, 2014).

The following 2015 report outlines the deterioration of freedom of speech and media independence, despite the regime's enacting legislation aimed at increasing transparency in media ownership and financing. In its annual progress report, the EU noted “concerns about deteriorating conditions for the full exercise of freedom of expression” (European Commission, 2014). Additionally, reports indicated that on at least two occasions, a local cable provider controlled by an SNS party member abruptly suspended service to viewers in southeastern Serbia during scheduled television appearances by the chairman of an opposition party. The party condemned the actions as "censorship exceeding even the darkest times we believed were long past" (Freedom House, 2015).

Furthermore, the most popular political talk show, “*Utisak Nedelje*” [Impression of the Week], was cancelled in September 2014, seemingly due to government pressure on its broadcaster, B92 Television. Although B92 claimed it wanted to change the show's time slot and move it to a different frequency, the show's host, Olja Bećković, accused Prime Minister Vučić of orchestrating the cancellation. Reports suggest that Vučić was displeased with his opponents' frequent appearances on the weekly show (Freedom House, 2015).

Subsequently, in both 2016 and 2017, Freedom House reports that the government made significant efforts in reducing state ownership of media, but the process faced heavy criticism. According to the Media Strategy adopted in 2011, a total of 73 state-owned media outlets were selected for privatization. However, by the time of writing

¹¹ RTS – Radio Televizija Srbije (Radio Television of Serbia)

¹² Legal actions taken against individuals or organizations for making false and defamatory written statements that harm someone's reputation.

report, only 34 media outlets had been privatized and most of them seem to have been purchased by individuals with close ties to the ruling SNS. Many of these new owners later managed to recoup their costs through project financing grants from local authorities (Freedom House, 2016).

Evidence emerged indicating that prior privatization of state-owned media had led to a decrease, rather than an increase, in their independence. There were also numerous claims that most of these media outlets had been purchased by individuals who are closely tied to SNS. At certain outlets, such as *Radio Television Pančevo*, journalists reported that the new management had informally instructed them to join the SNS if they wanted to retain their jobs. Those who refused faced termination of their contracts (Freedom House, 2017).

The most notable example of undermining media independence was the ‘purge’ of editors and journalists from *Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)*. At least 14 editors and journalists were either removed or demoted, along with several crucial news programs being cancelled. The affected editors and journalists alleged that their removal was politically motivated, aimed at silencing critical news coverage at the station. This development was particularly troubling because many journalists, previously dismissed from various Belgrade television stations, had sought refuge at *RTV*, which remained one of the last stations with substantial regional and national influence (Freedom House, 2017; Beta, 2016; Danas Online, 2016).

By comparing the media independence sections presented in the aforementioned four reports, a clear decline in the independent media operation can be observed. Such a decline is optimally depicted by *Table 2*. Its ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of media independence and 7 the lowest. The fourth column, labelled ‘Independent Media’, shows a decrease in points, dropping from 4.00 in 2014 to 4.50 in 2017.

With this in mind, it is also important to mention that, although the media freedom was decline, all four reports still categorized Serbia as a semi-consolidated democracy during the entire period.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
National Democratic Governance	4.00	4.00	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.25
Electoral Process	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.50
Civil Society	2.75	2.75	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25
Independent Media	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.50	4.50
Local Democratic Governance	3.75	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50
Corruption	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
Democracy Score	3.79	3.79	3.71	3.64	3.64	3.64	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

Table 2 - Decreasing Media Independence (Freedom House, 2017)

4.3 Overtaking the Media (2017 – 2019)

The Serbian presidential elections in 2017 marked a turning point in the regime's approach towards the media (RTS, 2017). With Vučić winning in the first electoral round with 55% of the total vote, political pressure on the media became even more pronounced, as his victory emboldened the Serbian Progressive Party. Freedom House (2018) reports that the media's independence remained under government pressure throughout the reporting year. Attacks on journalists and political pressure on media outlets have been part of a continuing trend that has been accelerating since 2014.

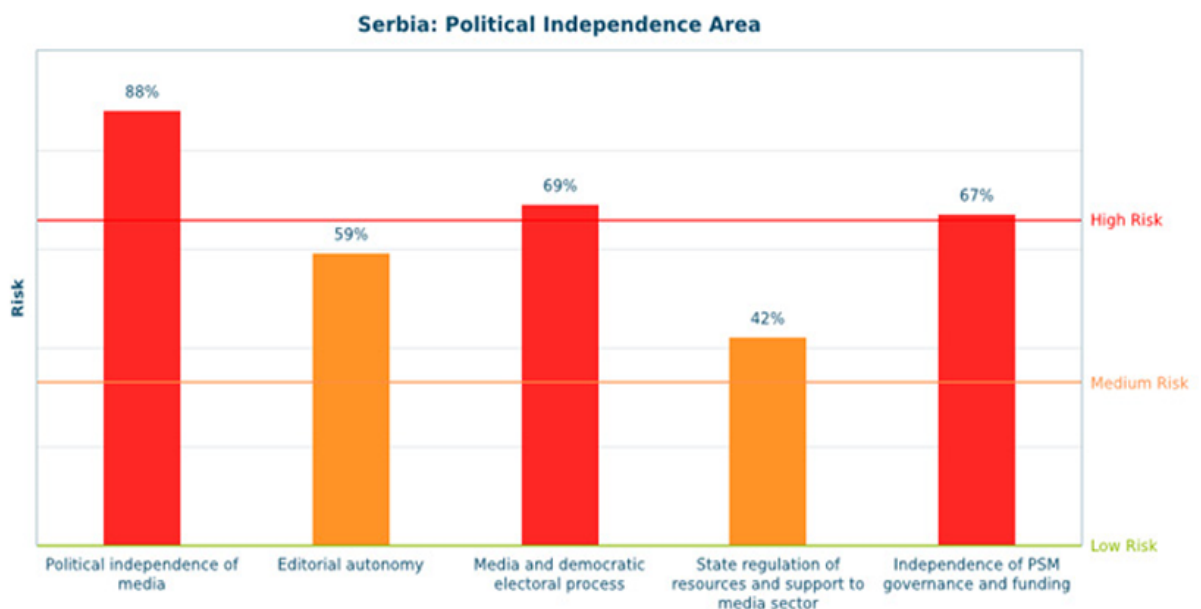
The government exerted strong pressure in order to control the media and obstruct objective reporting. While many outlets, such as *TV Pink* and *TV Happy* served as propaganda tools for the government, others, like the *O2.TV* (traditionally known *B92 TV*) and *Radio Television of Serbia*, attempted to maintain the appearance of balanced reporting while still openly favouring the regime and applying internal self-censorship. Only number of media outlets in 2017, such as the cable news network N1¹³, continued to operate independently (Freedom House, 2018).

Further details are outlined in the Media Pluralism Monitor, where Surčulija Milojević (2017) argues that the media landscape in Serbia suffers from a lack of transparency in media ownership and cross-media concentration. Moreover, journalists and editors face significant political and economic pressures, as they are challenged by the ab-

¹³ A member of the CNN's network group in the Western Balkans.

sence of proper labour contracts, low salaries and lack of protection following changes in management or editorial policy. These professional difficulties are compounded by life-threatening situations such as physical and verbal attacks, while the institutions responsible for their protection seem generally disinterested.

Most Serbian media are not independent and generally support the ruling party. Public service media (PSM) also lack independence, leading to frequent complaints of unequal treatment from the opposition, especially during election campaigns (Surčulija Milojević, 2017). The bar chart (*Bar Chart 1*) below indicates a significant concern regarding the media's ability to operate free from political influence in Serbia, placing the risk factor at 88%. The data suggests that the media is highly susceptible to political pressure and interference, compromising its independence and objectivity. (Surčulija Milojević, 2017).



Bar Chart 1 - Political Independence of Media at Risk (Surčulija Milojević, 2017)

Regarding such a tense political environment, the following year leads us to the 5-year anniversary of SNS rule. In 2018, Freedom House classified Serbia as both a hybrid regime and a partly free state for the first time after the fall of Milošević (Freedom House, 2019a; 2019b)¹⁴.

The downward trend has likewise been noticed by the European Commission. Their report (2018) states that both political and financial pressure on media resulted in widespread self-censorship. It critiques the lack of progress made during the reporting

¹⁴ Every Freedom House report evaluates the situation in the country for the year before its publication.

period, which became a matter of serious concern. Statements from high-ranking state officials regarding journalists' investigative work have hindered the creation of an adequate environment regarding free expression. It is noted (2018) as well that the Serbian authorities ought to actively support independent bodies, human rights defenders and journalists as well as promptly and publicly condemn hate speech and threats.

Kmezić (2018) has distinguished two types of pressures against the Serbian media so far. The first being '**informal**', while second '**direct**'. The **first mode** of informal media pressure is conducted by "political actors or party communication officers who directly contact the editors-in-chief and thus control reporting". Furthermore, political pressures on editors-in-chief are more powerful than any other legal pressure. In such cases, the editors serve as brokers in the clientelist network. Their dependency stems from a well-established pattern of politically motivated appointments of chief editors in the state-owned media, coupled with their low incomes under private ownership. The **second mode** of informal pressure is more personal, executed by political actors. It is directed at journalists who do not adhere to political instructions and become overly critical of the government. Such pressure can even escalate to direct intimidation and personal attacks.

Another significant attempt to obstruct independent journalists can be viewed through their financial situation. The data shows RTS employees earn an average net salary of around 400 euros per month, with only 7% earning over 600 euros. Many journalists even report not receiving salaries regularly (Mihajlović, 2016). Economic vulnerability, heightened by the economic crisis, allows business and political interference in media through selective and non-transparent state funding, subsidies, direct contracting, public procurements and advertising (Kmezić, 2018).

In addition to the indirect pressures described, Serbian media have also faced direct constraints. Though not as prevalent, these direct methods of pressure on independent media have been significant in their impact. In spite of legal security guarantees, journalists are often victims of threats, intimidation and physical assault. Several journalists continue to live under 24-hour police protection as they have been facing death threats due to the results of their findings. While the police offer protection to journalists facing serious threats, their efforts in prosecuting those responsible for these threats remain, in most cases, insufficient (Kmezić, 2018).

As 2018 drew to an end, one event set the scene for the upcoming 2019. Just before the start of an opposition meeting in Kruševac¹⁵, a leader of the opposition coalition Alliance for Serbia [Savez za Srbiju], Borko Stefanović, was attacked and beaten, leaving him covered in blood (Freedom House, 2020). However, such an incident did not serve as a warning to the regime to deescalate the tensions; on the contrary, it only intensified them. Instead of loosening its grip on the public broadcaster and the other four television outlets with national frequency¹⁶, the regime further divided the Serbian society by promoting political intolerance and declaring opposition leaders as ‘foreign-paid mercenaries’ (European Western Balkans, 2019; Mirilović, 2022). Such negligence led to a series of protests labelled “Stop the Bloody Shirts”, referring to the bloodied white shirt that Borko Stefanović showed to the press after being attacked by a group of hooded men with iron crowbars (Jovanović, 2019).

Consequently, roughly 10,000 people initially took to the streets, with expectations that their numbers would gradually increase due to the tense political atmosphere consciously created by the regime. By the second protest, reports indicated between 20,000 and 25,000 participants and subsequent protests saw numbers rise to as many as 45,000 (Jovanović, 2019). Very soon after the initiation of the protests, Aleksandar Vučić brushed them off: “You can walk as much as you want, I will not fulfil a single demand of yours, even if there were five million of you” (Beta, 2018a). The statement, in turn, led the protest organizers to rename the protests to “One out of five million”.

The new wave of protests, prompted by Vučić’s controversial statement, was not only distinguished by the substantial turnout, but also for its demands, which for the first time included the defence of media freedoms as well as holding free and fair elections (Beta, 2018b). **Firstly**, the protesters demanded the formation of a joint commission of the government and opposition to define fair electoral conditions. **Secondly**, the selection of a new composition for REM¹⁷ ought to be implemented. **Thirdly**, it was requested that a technical management and editorial board for RTS¹⁸ be appointed, consisting of non-partisan individuals during the transitional period [before the following elections] as well as objective reporting by *RTS* about the protest throughout their duration. **Finally**, the last demands emphasized five minutes on the public broadcaster for protest organizers alongside equal representation of political actors on the public broad-

¹⁵ A town in central Serbia.

¹⁶ Private TV channels broadcasted nationally.

¹⁷ Regulatory Body for Electronic Media

¹⁸ Radio Television of Serbia

caster (1od5milionara, 2019). Though the protesters' request had been communicated quite clearly, the ruling party showed little willingness to acknowledge them.

In the aftermath of such events, during the 2019 European Parliament's panel on electoral conditions in Serbia, Tanja Fajon¹⁹ argued that "Serbia is in a delicate situation, not to say a political crisis. Before the inter-party dialogue began, media freedom was, and continues to be, at a very low level, there is no equal reporting, especially at the national level" (European Western Balkans, 2019). The opposition's frustration grew as the main public broadcaster (*RTS*) showed little interest in airing the protests and their demands live. This growing discontent culminated in the storming of the *RTS* building, with protesters requesting an immediate broadcast featuring a representative of the protest organizers, rather than politicians (BIRN, 2019; IFJ, 2019). Their requests were not taking into account, as the police rushed to clear the parameter and forcefully escort the protesters out of the building. Although the protests endured for over a year, until January 2020, none of the listed demands were officially accepted by the regime.



📷 Opposition leaders, including Alliance for Serbia founder Dragan Djilas and far-right Dveri movement leader Bosko Obradović, addressing media at the RTS building. Photo: BIRN.

Figure 1 - Opposition Leaders Storming the *RTS* Building (BIRN, 2019)

¹⁹ The former Chairwoman of the EP Delegation to Serbia and the Slovenian Foreign Minister at the time of writing.



Protester and police at the RTS building. Photo: BIRN.

Figure 2 - Protesters in front of the *RTS* building (*BIRN*, 2019)

As the protests left the autocratic structure virtually unphased, the Serbian media continued operating under significant pressure from the government and the ruling SNS party. While a few independent outlets remained relatively stable, many journalists and media organizations faced political and financial pressures, along with verbal and occasional, albeit more frequent than usual, physical attacks. Despite several protests by Serbian journalists demanding protection and an end to these threats, their efforts rarely yielded success (Freedom House, 2020). The political environment in Serbia seemed quite unpromising as it approached an event that would change its condition from bad to worse – the COVID-19 crisis.

4.4 Dominating the Media (2020 – 2023)

Prior to discussing the period indicated in the subtitle above, it is important to note that the following overviews are significantly more extensive and detailed compared to their predecessors. Consequently, considering the substantial political events that transpired in Serbia during this timeframe, the disparity in the length and depth of these summaries, in contrast to the previous ones, should not be unexpected. It is also worth noting that, in comparison with the prior periods, the role Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) shall be discussed significantly more, as the regime's control over it significantly increases after the COVID-19 pandemic (Cendic & Gosztanyi, 2020; Milutinović, 2022b)

At the start of 2020, regular parliamentary elections in Serbia were originally scheduled for April. Nevertheless, the emerging global pandemic had different intentions, not only for Serbia, but for the entire region. Although the formal election campaign was announced on March 4 and elections were scheduled for April 26, the sudden declaration of a state of emergency on March 15 brought significant changes to Serbia's political landscape (BBC News na srpskom, 2020; Office of the President of the Republic of Serbia, 2020).

Within the first month alone, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans, reversing two decades' worth of reforms. Semi-authoritarian regimes in the region have exploited the crisis to consolidate their power. During the coronavirus pandemic, two notable government actions sparked considerable concern. Specifically, in the case of Serbia, the first involved the government's "Conclusions" issued on March 28, which centralized COVID-19 reporting (Filipova, 2020). According to such a decision, only the Crisis Headquarters for Tackling the COVID-19 Pandemic, chaired by the Prime Minister, could provide verified and accurate information. Any information shared by **unauthorized individuals** was deemed unverified where its authors **could face legal consequences for spreading misinformation**.

The first concerning instance was on March 29, when the Clinical Center of Vojvodina, situated in Novi Sad, accused journalist Ana Lalić of *Nova.rs* of harassment and damaging the institution's reputation after she reported on chaotic conditions and shortages of medicine, supplies and equipment. Police arrested Lalić within hours, searched her apartment and seized her computer. Public outrage erupted on social media, journalists' associations accused the government of undermining constitutional and international protections for freedom of expression (Filipova, 2020). Fortunately, the decision was withdrawn a few days later, which was welcomed by international organizations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE²⁰, while reporter Lalić was ultimately cleared of all charges (Filipova, 2020).

Another concerning government action involved direct clashes between officials and independent media during pandemic-related press conferences. The Crisis Headquarters held daily briefings featuring expert members, occasionally joined by the President and Prime Minister. Public officials often used these press conferences to voice their dissatisfaction with questions and remarks from independent media outlets. On

²⁰ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

April 10, citing "safety concerns," the government announced that starting the next day, **journalists would no longer be allowed to attend press conferences in person and would instead have to submit questions online.** This decision was widely criticized as an attempt to prevent professional media from posing critical questions to the Crisis Headquarters. Both media associations and the OSCE Mission to Serbia condemned the move (Filipova, 2020).

In a similar manner, in terms of political pressure on the media, it is mostly associated with former prime minister and current president Aleksandar Vučić, who has faced intense domestic as well as international criticism for his hostile approach toward critical journalism. His administration's actions have signalled a broader intolerance for investigative reporting. As one journalist described, the shift in media content has been stark: "a news programme used to be politics, politics, sport and weather and now it is Vučić, Vučić, Vučić, sport and weather" (as cited in Stojarová, 2021, p. 172). Pro-government media frequently launch smear campaigns against independent outlets and NGOs that express criticism of the government. Additionally, state officials often refrain from condemning threats and hate speech targeting journalists, sometimes even using such rhetoric themselves, thereby implicitly endorsing hostility toward the press. Vučić has been notably vocal, referring to journalists as liars, traitors, enemies and foreign spies (Stojarová, 2021).

Tensions between independent media and certain politicians also escalated during the pandemic. Numerous outlets and civil society organizations accused leading politicians, President Vučić and his closest associates, of abusing their positions and state resources for pre-election purposes. Critics argued that government officials used public appearances to exaggerate their role in managing the coronavirus crisis, thereby boosting their popularity ahead of the elections. President Vučić faced fierce criticism for his highly publicized visits to cities across Serbia during the pandemic. These visits, extensively covered by the media, were seemingly to oversee the medical equipment delivery, including respirators, which the President personally presented to hospitals alongside others medical institutions (Filipova, 2020).

Furthermore, President Vučić's tendencies toward increasing the personalization of his political power could, to a certain degree, be anticipated. According to CRTA's findings (2020), the most prominent individual actor in the media with national frequency during the campaign was the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. This was further confirmed by the monitoring of central news programs conducted by the Bureau

for Social Research for the period of June 8–18. Vučić's name was also featured in the Serbian Progressive Party's electoral list accompanied by their slogan “Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children”, and he played the most prominent role in almost all of its political advertisements. Although Vučić was not a candidate in these elections, there is no doubt that the ruling party aimed to politically capitalize on his personal popularity (Burazer et al, 2020).

It is due to Vučić's prominent role that makes it important to examine media coverage during the COVID state of emergency (March 15 – May 6, 2020). Although it was expected that the government would have some advantage over the opposition due to the crisis the country was facing, the disparity between them was undeniably vast. Monitoring by the Bureau for Social Research revealed (BIRODI, 2020a) that between March 16 and April 30, 2020, during the state of emergency, President Aleksandar Vučić had a total of 18 hours, 14 minutes and 42 seconds of airtime in central news programs on national frequency television channels and the cable network N1. The most prominent opposition figure at the time, Dragan Đilas²¹, had only 7 minutes and 26 seconds. This means Vučić received 147 times more coverage than Đilas. CRTA's monitoring (2020) also indicated that members of the ruling parties accounted for **91% of air-time on national frequency television during the state of emergency**. Further evidence regarding media capture is provided by the European Commission in their yearly report regarding the candidate's progress in the field of EU integrations. The report explicitly emphasizes that, according to the OSCE/ODIHR²² political criteria, “voter choice was limited by the governing party's overwhelming advantage and the promotion of government policies by most major media outlets” (European Commission, 2020, p. 4).

The state of emergency proved itself as fertile ground for further empowering the regime, which has consistently (ab)used opportunities to weaken independent democratic institutions. The ruling elites have been tightening their grip on power, with no clear end in sight. Emergency measures enacted by the government to combat the pandemic must remain temporary, proportional and in line with democratic principles and the rule of law. Yet, in the Western Balkans, where the rule of law is weak even in normal times, political elites have used the pandemic to undermine democratic standards fur-

²¹ President of the Freedom and Justice Party

²² Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

ther. Governments have imposed human rights restrictions, bypassed constitutional and legal safeguards, pushed legislative changes through fast-track procedures, altered election rules, enacted severe measures and imprisoned individuals for social media posts. These actions aim to intimidate citizens and the media, testing the limits of their power and expanding it further (Bieber et al., 2020).

Consequently, a state of emergency has been declared to address the crisis. Serbia's state of emergency was unilaterally declared by President Vučić, concentrating power in his hands and sidelining the legislature. Other countries in Western Balkans, aside from North Macedonia, have avoided formal states of emergency but implemented equally severe measures, continuing the troubling trend of eroding democratic norms (Bieber et al., 2020).

Elections scheduled for April 26 have been postponed, though their significance was already diminished by the **opposition's boycott** (European Western Balkans, 2020a). The opposition in Serbia boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections primarily due to concerns over an undemocratic electoral environment. Opposition leaders argued that **pervasive media capture**, biased allocation of state resources, such as disproportionate state advertising to pro-government outlets and widespread political interference had created an unfair playing field that favored the ruling party (Bursać & Vučićević, 2021; Kralj et al, 2024). They assessed that the dominance of pro-government media and the selective enforcement of regulatory standards effectively silenced independent voices, making it impossible for any meaningful opposition to compete fairly. As a result, the opposition decided that participating in such a flawed electoral process would only legitimize a system that undermined democratic pluralism.

In addition to the media-related issues, international observers also noted systemic problems in the electoral framework itself. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2020a; OSCE, 2020b) reported that the electoral conditions were marked by a **lack of transparency and impartiality**, which further eroded public trust in the process. Freedom House reports (2021a; 2021b) similarly highlighted the continuous erosion of democratic standards in Serbia, emphasizing that these conditions left little hope for fair competition. Consequently, the opposition's boycott was not merely a protest against a single incident but a broader rejection of an environment they believed was fundamentally rigged in favor of the ruling establishment.

The ultimate state of media freedoms in Serbia, or lack thereof, is assessed by the Freedom House (2021b) report, which finds that, in spite of the constitutional guaran-

tees for freedom of the press and the exclusion of libel as a criminal offense in the penal code, media freedom is severely undermined by multiple factors. These include the threat of lawsuits or criminal charges for other offenses, lack of transparency in media ownership, editorial interference from politicians and politically affiliated media owners, direct pressure and threats against journalists and widespread self-censorship. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has faced criticism for its lack of independence, while journalists have been subjected to physical attacks, smear campaigns, targeted financial audits and other forms of harassment. The state and ruling party exert significant influence over private media through paid advertising contracts, granting privileged access to media channels and providing indirect subsidies. Many private outlets are owned by individuals aligned with the SNS. Some privately owned national broadcasters and popular tabloids actively engage in smear campaigns against the political opposition and other perceived critics of the government. Public broadcasters also disproportionately favor incumbent political parties in their media coverage (Freedom House, 2021b).

The end of 2020 marked the establishment of a new national parliament composed exclusively of representatives from the ruling coalition, a direct consequence of the opposition's decision to boycott the elections. Freedom House (2021a) reported that the noncompetitive parliamentary elections resulted in a **de facto one-party parliament**, since only the ruling coalition took part in its formation. In the aftermath of such events, while the following 2021 was gradually bringing an end to the COVID crisis, it left a lasting impact on global economies, social structures and political systems. In Serbia, the consequences of the pandemic continued to shape the media landscape, political dynamics and public (dis)trust. The government's crisis handling, which involved significant centralization of power and control over information, had already set precedents for how authority could be exercised in moments of national emergency. Despite the easing of restrictions, concerns over media freedom, transparency and democratic backsliding remained prevalent, as the pre-pandemic trends of media capture and political influence showed no signs of reversing. The official European Commission report (2022b) records no progress regarding freedom of expression. Likewise, the report identifies multiple threats and acts of violence against journalists as a pressing issue, emphasizing the need to strengthen the practical implementation of freedom of expression. Delays in executing the media strategy have hindered critical reforms, including amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic

Media. These amendments are essential for establishing transparent and fair co-funding of public interest media content, enhancing transparency in media ownership and advertising and reinforcing the independence of the media regulator.

Although Serbia's constitution guarantees press freedom and slander is not considered a criminal offense, media freedom faces significant challenges (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, Art. 46). Journalists are often threatened with lawsuits or criminal charges for other alleged offenses and there is limited transparency in media ownership. Political figures and media owners with political ties exert editorial pressure, while journalists face direct threats, harassment and high levels of self-censorship. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has been criticized for lacking independence and public broadcasters generally provide disproportionate media coverage to the ruling parties (Freedom House, 2022b).

The government, and therefore the ruling party, influence private media through advertising contracts and other indirect subsidies. Many private outlets are owned by supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Additionally, several broadcasters with national frequency and popular tabloids engage in smear campaigns targeting political opposition and other critics of the government. Independent investigative journalists and outlets increasingly face harassment, intimidation and violence from authorities and progovernment groups. Prominent members of the ruling party have openly threatened journalists, while President Vučić frequently disparages independent media. Journalists have endured physical assaults, smear campaigns and retaliatory tax inspections (Freedom House, 2022b).

As for the media landscape in Serbia during 2021, the European University Institute media monitoring report (2022) depicts that it was deeply polarized, with a stark divide between pro-government and critical media outlets, mirroring the country's broader political divisions. Pro-government tabloids dominate one side, while critical media outlets are often viewed as political adversaries. By March 2021, independent media organizations and journalists' associations had withdrawn from the government's "Working Group on Security and Protection of Journalists", citing smear campaigns and verbal attacks by senior officials and members of the ruling party in the National Assembly. Despite high hopes for the 2020 Media Strategy (Paragraf Lex, 2020) to enhance media pluralism and freedom, implementation deadlines outlined in the Action Plan were missed. In line with the Media Strategy, another working group was formed in July 2021 to propose amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media.

While the group completed its work, many proposals lacked consensus, with several alternative solutions from pro-government representatives conflicting with the Media Strategy's original objectives. The Ministry was expected to publish the final draft which should have mended the Law on Public Information and Media by the end of 2021, however, that did not occur (Stjepić, 2022).

Likewise, the media landscape in Serbia faced significant challenges with political independence scoring as high-risk 83%. Media outlets were divided between pro-government and independent organizations, with the former being larger, wealthier and more influential, while independent outlets had limited public reach and influence. Media concentration increased as Telekom Serbia, a state-owned telecommunications provider, **expanded its market share** to 46.6% by the third quarter of 2021. Such ownership portion is deemed **illegal** under Serbian legal system, as explicitly stated in Article 15 of the Law on Protection of Competition (Commission for Protection of Competition, 2009, Art. 15). According to this provision, any legal entity that controls more than 40% of the market is classified as holding a dominant position, which inherently limits competition. Similarly, as a candidate for EU membership, Serbia is obligated to **safeguard fair competition**, aligning its policies with the **EU *acquis communautaire*** in the fields of **competition protection and market regulation** (European Commission, 2008).

Although the other half of private ownership is diverse, the ruling party exerted substantial influence over the media through control of advertising, allocation of state funds and direct pressure on owners. This influence led to editorial policies favoring the government, homogenous news programming and limited criticism of those in power. Legal safeguards to prevent political interference in the media were inadequate, as conflicts of interest between media owners and political actors were not well-regulated. Editorial autonomy scored a high-risk 75%, as political influence on media content and management persisted, exacerbated by unfulfilled aspects of the Media Strategy Action Plan meant to ensure greater editorial independence. Self-censorship remained widespread due to internal pressures from management and politically motivated editorial appointments, as well as a lack of effective self-regulatory measures (Milutinović, 2022a). The bar chart (*Figure 3*) illustrates the assessed risk levels to which media outlets are exposed. Higher risk percentage implies that media independence is increasingly compromised, with greater political or economic influence affecting editorial decisions, regulatory frameworks and journalistic freedom.

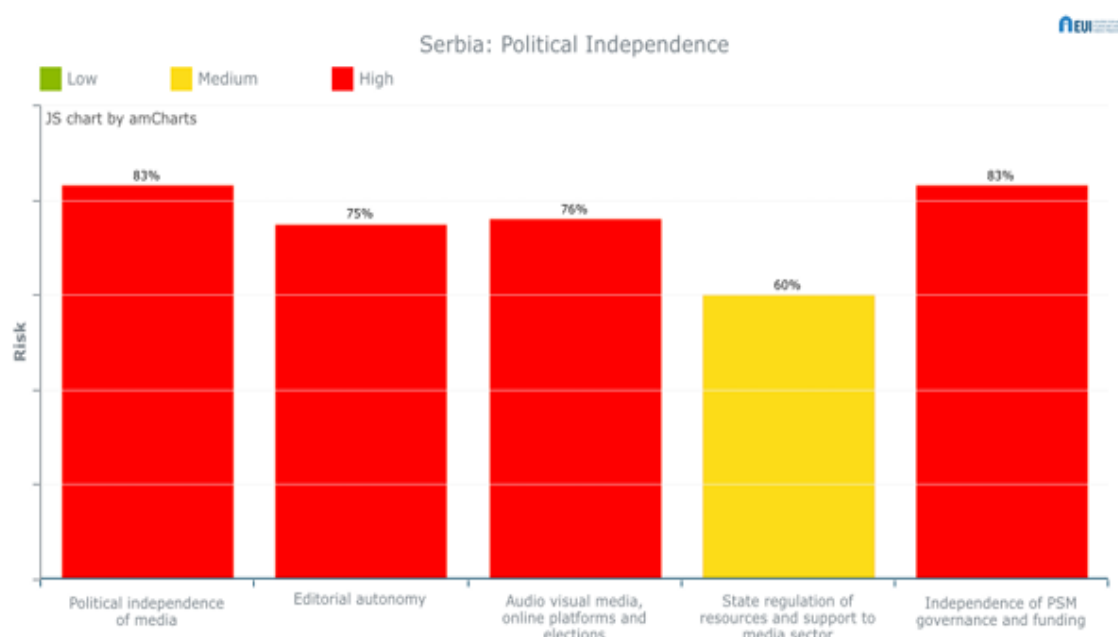


Figure 3 - Media Losing Political Independence (Milutinović, 2022a)

The audio-visual media sector also received a high-risk score of 76% (*Figure 3*), reflecting a lack of comprehensive legal provisions to ensure fair and equal representation of political parties in the media. During the 2021 pre-election period, pro-government media outlets such as *TV Pink* and newly launched channels like *Kurir TV* and *Tanjug's* news channel **significantly amplified the ruling party's narrative**, presenting government officials in positive tones over 90% of the time. Meanwhile, opposition parties faced limited and disproportionately negative coverage. Investments in the media sector were often politically motivated, as seen with the launch of pro-opposition *Nova S* and pro-government outlets like Euronews Serbia, affiliated with state-controlled Telekom Serbia. Despite attempts to promote fair coverage, such as the Temporary Supervisory Body for Media Monitoring's guidelines for the 2022 election campaign, these efforts failed to address entrenched imbalances in media representation. Overall, the media environment remained heavily influenced by political interests, with little progress toward achieving greater pluralism, independence and fairness measures (Milutinović, 2022a).

Moreover, the **Independence of Public Service Media (PSM) Governance and Funding** indicator (*Figure 3*) was assessed as being at high risk (83%). While the Law on Public Service Media outlines the process for appointing management and board members, the legal criteria lack clarity and precision. The REM Council plays a direct role in selecting members of PSM management boards and holds indirect influence over

the appointments of the Director General and Programme Council. Given ongoing concerns about REM's political independence, there is a persistent fear that political influence extends to PSM board appointments, undermining trust in the selection of PSM leadership.

In July 2021, new management boards were appointed for *RTS* and *RTV*, three months after the previous members' terms had expired. However, the process was marred by controversy, similar to the reappointment of the *RTS* Director, where two prior vacancy announcements were cancelled (Cenzolovka, 2020). There are no safeguards ensuring editorial independence from management while the Programme Council, responsible for maintaining content quality, lacks autonomy since its members are appointed by the PSM Management Board. The Programme Council operates with **limited transparency**, which negatively impacts PSM operations, as it is common for unqualified individuals with questionable integrity to be appointed (Babić, 2021).

Regarding financial independence, media laws fail to ensure stable, multi-annual funding for public broadcasters. The Law on Public Service Media states that funding should come from a subscription fee, budget allocations, revenue from commercial activities and other sources. However, since January 1, 2017, PSMs have been primarily reliant on the state budget, significantly weakening their independence. The government first abolished the subscription fee, later setting a fee too low to sustain PSM operations, effectively making *RTS* and *RTV* financially dependent on the state and susceptible to political influence (Babić, 2021). Following a European Commission recommendation in its 2020 Report on Serbia, *RTS* was excluded from the state budget for 2021, and Parliament instead increased the subscription fee through amendments to the law on temporary regulation of public media service funding. However, the law still allows state co-financing, when necessary, which raises concerns about continued political leverage over public broadcasters.

As a result of these irregularities, public service media have failed to fulfil their fundamental task of serving citizens (Babić, 2021). Public debate and critical discourse have been largely eliminated from *RTS* and *RTV*, with decision-making boards dominated by individuals affiliated with the ruling SNS party. Although pressures are rarely explicit, journalists and editors operate with an implicit understanding of which topics are permissible and which should be avoided (Babić, 2021)

Despite legal provisions in PSM statutes ensuring editorial independence and prohibiting censorship or unlawful influence, in recent years, there has been a notable rise

in unprofessional reporting, covert advertising and ethical violations (CRTA, 2020b; BIRODI, 2020b).

In a similar pattern, a 74% risk level (*Figure 4*) was assigned to the “**Political Independence**” category throughout the reporting period, according to the subsequent report for the following year, 2022 (Milutinović et al., 2023). Legal protections against direct and indirect political influence of the media were deemed insufficient and ineffective. There are no laws or self-regulation systems that guarantee editors-in-chief appointments and terminations are not influenced by politics. Therefore, politically motivated demands on journalists are usually applied from inside the media organizations themselves and are frequently linked to the financial viability of media outlets. The main method used for this is soft censorship, which is enforced by editors or management, who are usually chosen based on their political affiliation. The majority of TV media outlets owned or managed by organizations closely associated with the ruling SNS party hold a substantial percentage of the audience share for TV and print media (Milutinović et al., 2023; Stojšavljević, 2024).

Furthermore, the “**Political Independence of Media**” indicator recorded a high-risk score of 75% (*Figure 4*), reflecting the persistent division within Serbia’s media landscape between pro-government and independent outlets. There is no comprehensive legal framework addressing conflicts of interest between media owners and political entities, including the ruling party and affiliated groups. The most influential media outlets remain private broadcasters with national coverage, *TV Pink*, *TV Prva*, *TV B92* and *TV Happy*, which have long been recognized as strong supporters of the political regime. Despite repeated violations of legal regulations, delegated legislation and the Code of Journalists of Serbia, these broadcasters were reissued national frequencies in 2022, raising concerns over regulatory integrity and media fairness (Milutinović et al., 2023).

Political and economic influence over the media remained a significant concern (European Commission, 2022b). **State control of the media landscape expanded in 2021**, largely through **Telekom Serbia**, a state-owned telecommunications company, which in 2022 continued to serve as **the primary instrument of political influence in the media market**. Most of the television, radio and print media remain under the ownership or control of entities closely aligned with the ruling party. This has sustained a strong political and ideological bias, influencing both the selection of interlocutors and the framing of topics and genres. As a result, media pluralism remains limited, with a

highly concentrated audience exposed to a narrow range of perspectives. In 2022, the Anti-Corruption Council submitted a report on Tanjug News Agency to the Government of Serbia, highlighting numerous unresolved issues and calling for further review and action on certain matters, alongside recommendations for government intervention.

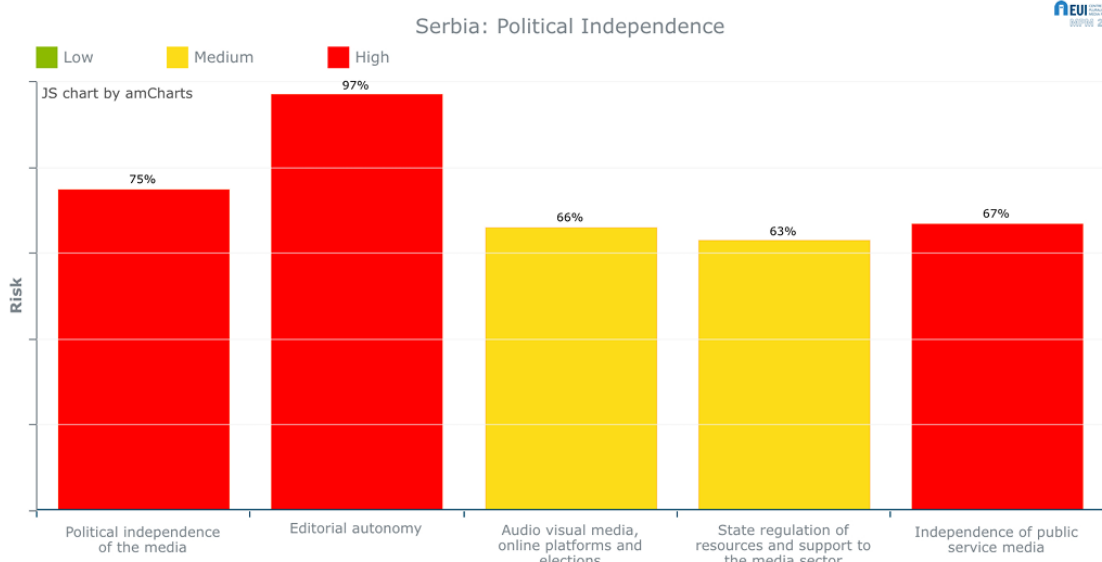


Figure 4 - High Risk of Political Dependence (Milutinović et al., 2023)

The **Editorial Autonomy indicator** recorded an alarming risk level of 97% (Figure 4), highlighting the lack of safeguards protecting editorial independence from political influence. In Serbia, self-regulatory mechanisms fail to prevent political interference in the appointment and dismissal of editors-in-chief. Although the Media Strategy Action Plan aimed to improve legislation and practices to strengthen editorial independence, these reforms have yet to be implemented.

Editors in public broadcasters remain under significant political pressure and true editorial independence has never been fully realized. As a result, **public broadcasters continue to operate as state-controlled entities**, effectively placing them within the category of **captured media** (Đurić, 2022). The pressures exerted on media professionals are primarily political and financial, with editorial decisions often linked to profit motives in private media.

The evidence strongly suggests that **political influence plays a decisive role** in the appointment and dismissal of **editors-in-chief** across Serbian news media. State funding, allocated through public procurement contracts and direct subsidies, has been a key financial lifeline for numerous media outlets. However, this funding also serves as a tool of influence, enabling ‘soft’ censorship over editorial policies.

For years, editorial independence has also been undermined by politically connected media owners, who exert direct pressure on journalists. Additionally, intimidation tactics, threats and editorial interference have fuelled a climate of self-censorship. Journalists and editors continued to face harassment and smear campaigns in 2022, often instigated or endorsed by politicians and public officials through targeted public attacks on the press.

Additionally, the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) renewed broadcasting licenses for the same four television channels, despite their **repeated violations of legal regulations, delegated legislation and the Code of Journalists of Serbia**. REM's decision disregarded even the minimum requirements for providing media services, allowing these channels to maintain their privileged status despite documented breaches (Babić, 2022).

The ODIHR's final report on the April 2022 elections noted that while national public broadcasters equitably covered all campaign participants, they disproportionately provided uncritical coverage of public officials who were also candidates (OSCE, 2022). Additionally, private national broadcasters lacked meaningful editorial oversight, focusing their news coverage on state officials. ODIHR also criticized REM for its passive role during the election campaign, failing to fulfill its oversight mandate effectively. Before and after the 2022 electoral campaign, **media pluralism was virtually non-existent** (OSCE, 2022; CRTA, 2022). However, with the start of the campaign, a slight shift occurred, as the introduction of a bylaw mandating electoral blocs on television channels with national coverage led to reduced negative framing of opposition representatives.

During the campaign period itself, the national public broadcasters, *Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)* and *Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)*, provided equitable and professional coverage of all election participants (CRTA, 2022). However, despite this temporary improvement, an overall high-risk assessment of media bias persists. This is due to the predominantly favorable coverage of government representatives and public officials, many of whom were also electoral candidates (CRTA, 2022).

Freedom House depicts Serbian media landscape in a light adjacent to that of the EU. As part of the Nations in Transit report (2022a), Serbia's media independence received a rating of 3, which is considered low on a scale where 7 represents the highest level of independence. What is more, that year was the 7th consecutive year in which media independence rating has been decreasing rapidly since 2015, according to Free-

dom House (2015a) as well as Reporters without Borders (SELDI, 2022). The decrease, regarding the latter, being illustrated in **Figure 5** below.

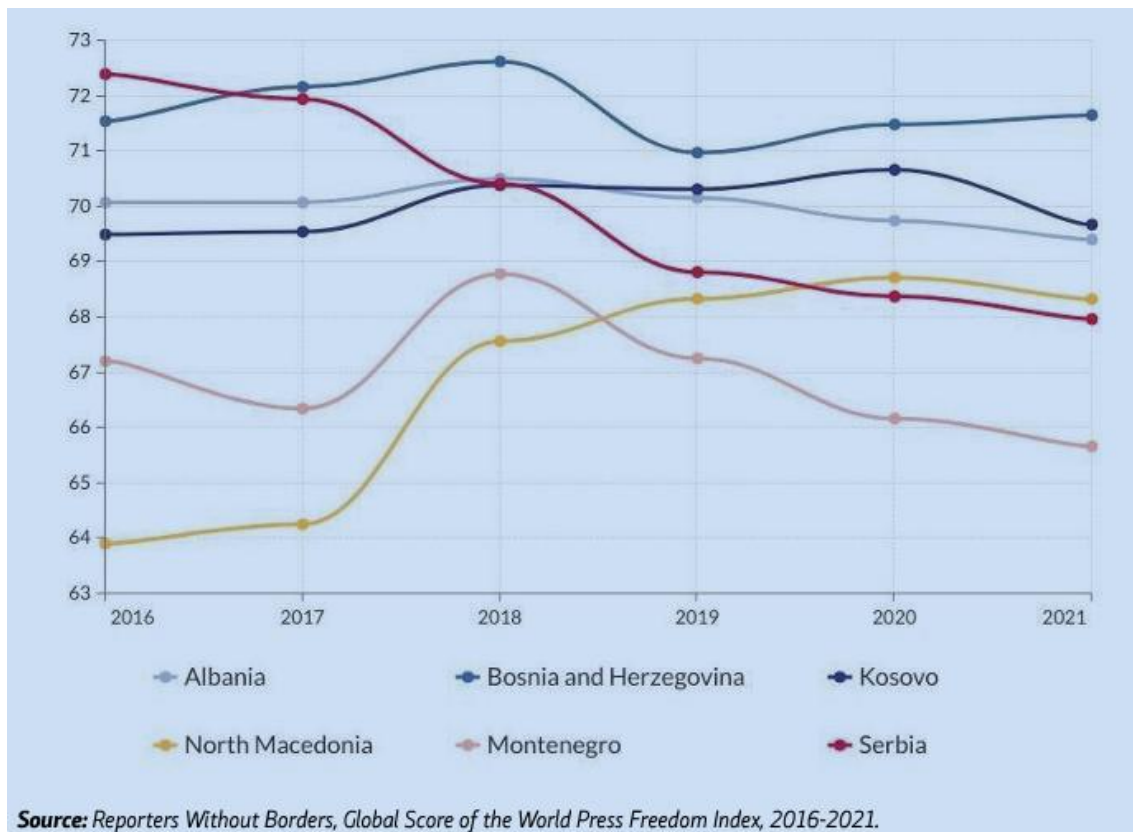


Figure 5 - Decreasing World Press Freedom Index (SELDI, 2022)

In reference to the report itself (Freedom House, 2022a), the state's controversial role once again recognized in media financing, with funds predominantly allocated to pro-government media at both local and national levels. Likewise in **2021**, media funding through state and municipal co-funding schemes persisted, alongside government ministry contracts that provided additional financial support to pro-government media.

Telekom Serbia, the main national telecommunications company, remained a key instrument of political influence in the media sector. Despite the 2014 Law on Media and Information (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 2014), which mandated the privatization of all state-owned media, Telekom Serbia continued to own and establish new media outlets, further expanding its influence as a cable television provider (Maksimović, 2021). Within this context, the competition between Telekom Serbia and United Group, its privately owned main rival, carries strong political implications. United Group owns two major independent TV news channels, N1 and Nova, along with their cable provider, SBB. Since Telekom Serbia's network excludes United Group

channels, its aggressive market expansion has had a direct impact on media freedom in Serbia.

In an interview with the European Western Balkans portal, Vukašin Obradović, a prominent independent journalist, emphasized that this move is just one in a series of actions by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) aimed at establishing absolute control over the media landscape:

President Aleksandar **Vučić's desire for media dominance grows** in direct proportion to the challenges his government faces now or may encounter in the future. This includes not only the increasing number of corruption scandals within the ruling party but also the Kosovo issue, which the **government seeks to resolve in complete media silence**, without any dissenting voices. (Maksimović, 2021)

He further explained that after securing control over all national commercial television stations and exerting significant influence over public broadcasters, the government is now working to eliminate critical media from cable networks. Telekom Serbia has played a key role in this effort by acquiring *Kopernikus* and several smaller cable operators, which has already shifted the media balance in the government's favor. The only remaining opposition in this space is SBB, or United Group, which still holds 53 percent of the cable market. The planned merger between Telekom and Telenor is intended to disrupt this balance further. If they fail to push United Group and SBB out, the strategy is to establish dominance in cable broadcasting by promoting only pro-government media outlets (Maksimović, 2021). This consolidation of media control set the stage for the 2022 elections, where the ruling party leveraged its media dominance to influence public perception and electoral outcomes.

While 2021 was a year in which president Vučić was focused on strengthening his control over media, the following 2022 was quite politically active since it was rendered, yet again, as an electoral year. However, instead of it being directed towards only one institution, as per European democratic tradition (Council of Europe, 2022), the regime decided to declare general elections which would take place on the same day, April 3. These elections consisted out of presidential, parliamentary and local. Alt-

hough, local elections were to be held only in the capital city, Belgrade, as well as in 12 other municipalities²³ across Serbia (Anđelković, 2022).

In the months preceding 2022 general elections, media capture emerged as a critical factor that reinforced the dominance of pro-government narratives while marginalizing independent voices. The ruling media outlets, both state-owned and those affiliated with the ruling coalition, consistently provided extensive coverage that favored the incumbent Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić. This environment was marked by an uneven distribution of state resources, such as **preferential state advertising** and regulatory practices that further constrained independent media's ability to provide balanced reporting. As a result, the information available to voters was overwhelmingly skewed toward pro-government perspectives, leaving little room for alternative viewpoints that might have fostered more meaningful political debate (Ilić & Draško, 2022).

Gavrilović (2022), in BIRODI's media monitoring, that the coverage of executive branch representatives during election periods closely mirrors that of non-election times, with consistently favorable portrayals. Notably, President Aleksandar Vučić received predominantly positive media attention, accounting for 72.1% of the coverage and exhibited a significant presence, occupying 80% of the executive branch's media representation. This suggests a consolidation of executive functions around the presidency.

Furthermore, several state officials were frequently featured in a positive light, often in contexts aligning with the "**campaign of officials**" phenomenon. This term refers to the **use of state resources and official events for promotional activities**, a practice addressed in Article 2 of Serbia's Anti-Corruption Law (Agency for Prevention of Corruption, 2020). Such media practices raise concerns about the blurring of lines between state functions and political campaigning, potentially undermining the integrity of the electoral process. This is best illustrated in case of the 2022 Serbian presidential election, where President Aleksandar Vučić, serving simultaneously as head of state and leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), dominated media coverage. According to the Freedom House report (2023b) Vučić received approximately 74% of the total airtime allocated to all presidential candidates on national television. This extensive exposure, often presented in a neutral or positive light, stood in stark contrast to the limited and frequently negative portrayal of opposition candidates. Such discrepancies

²³ Out of 174 municipalities in total.

underscore concerns about media bias and the equitable representation of candidates during the electoral process (Barać-Savić, 2022).

Another piece of data, which additionally confirms media capture, is that among the television outlets monitored, only *N1*²⁴ TV stood out by diverging from the prevalent trend of promotional coverage of the executive branch. Instead, its reporting adopted a neutral to critical tone. Although President Aleksandar Vučić remained the most prominently featured figure on N1 TV, the portrayal was predominantly negative (50.4%) or neutral (45.1%). In contrast, the then Prime Minister Ana Brnabić received entirely neutral coverage (Gavrilović, 2022). This approach by N1 TV contrasts with the broader media landscape in Serbia, where many outlets have been criticized for favoring government narratives and limiting critical perspectives. N1 TV's editorial stance has led to it being recognized as one of the few major independent broadcasters in the country, often facing pressures and threats due to its critical reporting.

An additional important issue regarding the 2022 general elections, BIRODI has also highlighted the appearance of "**party cameras**" phenomenon, referring to the unlawful practice where marketing materials provided by PR teams of electoral headquarters are broadcast as news segments with minimal journalistic editing during central news programs (Beta, 2022a). BIRODI further emphasized that this collaborative behavior between electoral lists and media service providers contradicts the role of media in the electoral process. Instead of offering voters relevant information about programs and candidates to make informed decisions on election day, media outlets are airing these materials as news content, effectively turning into propaganda tools for electoral lists. The organization further noted that this practice results in a "plurality of covert advertising," where both ruling and opposition electoral lists are presented positively, undermining the media's duty to provide unbiased information. BIRODI pointed out that "party cameras" circumvent laws regulating campaign financing by providing electoral lists with free (covert) advertising in news programs (Beta, 2022a). They called on media service providers to abandon this practice and instead pose questions that will assist voters in making informed choices in upcoming elections, in accordance with laws and journalistic codes of ethics (BIRODI, 2022).

During the election campaign, the effects of media capture became even more conspicuous. The pro-government media's extensive airtime and editorial bias not only shaped public discourse but also directly influenced electoral dynamics by reinforcing

²⁴ The main CNN affiliate TV in the Western Balkans.

the prevailing power structures. Opposition parties, re-entering a political arena that had been largely inaccessible during the boycotted 2020 elections, found themselves competing in a space where critical and independent reporting was severely limited. The captured media landscape contributed to a public perception of an uneven playing field, thereby consolidating SNS's electoral advantage and impeding the opposition's efforts to challenge the incumbent regime effectively. This persistent bias in media representation, observed before, during and after the elections, underscores the broader implications of media capture for democratic accountability and pluralism in Serbia (Ilić & Draško, 2022).

Serbia's media environment remained highly polarized and dominated by pro-government narratives, with critical and independent outlets continuing to operate on the margins. *Freedom House* retained Serbia's "partly free" status, citing the continuing erosion of democratic standards and pluralism in media (Freedom House, 2023b), while their *Nations in Transit* (Freedom House, 2023a) report classified it as "transitional or hybrid regime". The year was particularly shaped by the April 2022 general elections, during which media coverage was heavily skewed in favor of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić (Freedom House, 2023a).

According to multiple watchdog organizations, public broadcasters such as *RTS* failed to provide balanced political coverage, while private broadcasters aligned with the ruling party received a disproportionate amount of positive airtime. The European Commission noted in its report (2022) that media ownership transparency remained poor as well as that political pressure on editorial policy was prevalent. Despite formal obligations, the *Regulatory Body for Electronic Media* (REM) once again refrained from sanctioning outlets that violated standards of impartiality (European Commission, 2022).

Moreover, four very pro-government TV stations who, according to REM's own reports, failed to meet their licensing requirements and pledges were granted an extension of their national broadcasting licenses for an additional eight years. REM delayed granting the fifth national broadcasting license indefinitely without credible justification, despite the fact that the deadline for issuing the license expired on November 26, 2022 (European Commission, 2023; Beta, 2022b). This development further supports the assessment of **REM as a captured institution**, even though it represents yet another regression in Serbia's issues with media plurality and balanced portrayal of political players (Freedom House, 2023a).

Disinformation and smear campaigns, particularly through private TV media outlets, were widespread during the election period, further marginalizing the opposition and undermining informed public debate. Both credible journalists and members of academia often refer to *RTS* as a "mouthpiece of the ruling elite" and *REM* as a "regulator only in name and a nightmare for Serbian media" (Petković, 2025). For instance, media theorist and dramatic arts professor at the University of Belgrade, Ana Martinoli describes REM as an institution that, despite its legally defined independence, operates under political influence, undermining its regulatory responsibilities (Jorgačević, 2022). Similarly, former REM Council member Slobodan Cvejić characterizes the body as “**captured**” by political and media interests, rendering it ineffective in managing Serbia's electronic media landscape (European Western Balkans, 2020b). These perspectives underscore a broader consensus regarding REM's compromised autonomy and its impact on media pluralism and democratic processes in Serbia.

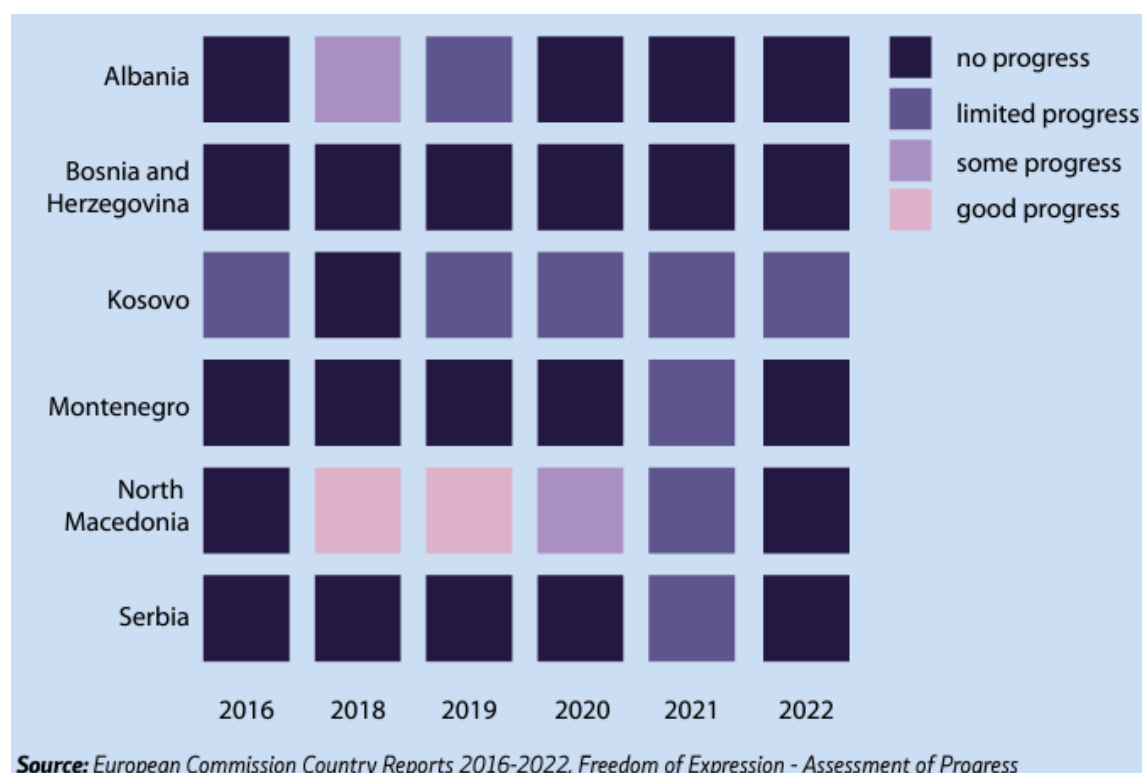


Figure 6 - European Commission Reports Regarding Freedom of Expression (SELDI, 2022)

Figure 6 above (SELDI, 2022) presents an overview of the European Commission's assessment of progress in the area of freedom of expression in Serbia from 2016 to 2022. According to the reports, Serbia has demonstrated a consistent lack of progress, with five out of the seven years rated as “**no progress.**” The only exception was 2021,

when “limited progress” was recorded. However, this brief improvement was not sustained, as the country reverted to the “no progress” category in 2022.

Serbia's noticeable stagnation in media freedom cannot be attributable to broader process of "balkanization"²⁵, but rather to the Serbian leadership's reluctance to implement substantive reforms. This is evident when compared to neighboring countries in the Western Balkans that have demonstrated more proactive approaches to enhancing media freedom. For instance, North Macedonia has shown "good progress" in multiple consecutive years (2017–2019), indicating a more committed effort toward improving freedom of expression. Similarly, Kosovo*²⁶ and Montenegro, despite facing their own challenges, have at least intermittently achieved assessments of "limited" or "some progress," whereas Serbia has largely remained static or even regressive (SELDI, 2022). These comparisons underscore that Serbia's lag in media freedom advancements is not due to regional constraints but rather a lack of political will within its leadership to pursue necessary reforms.

The onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, which became a central theme during Serbia's general elections that year (Nedić & Mandić, 2023), further intensified concerns regarding political and economic pressures on the media. This period saw a proliferation of anti-EU narratives across various media outlets, many of which are closely aligned with the ruling majority. Such developments underscore the urgent need for Serbia to address foreign information manipulation and interference, particularly in the context of Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine (European Commission, 2023). However, since this conflict falls outside the scope of this thesis, it will not be addressed further.

The data indicate a troubling and persistent pattern in Serbia, **where systemic issues related to media freedom remain unresolved** despite formal commitments to democratic reform. Serbia is identified as one of the most prominent examples of media capture in the Western Balkans, with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vučić exercising tight control over the domestic media landscape. This control is maintained through politically affiliated media ownership, influence over regulatory bodies and preferential allocation of public funding. Such mechanisms have

²⁵ Process involving the fragmentation of an area, country, or region into multiple smaller and hostile units. It is usually caused by differences in ethnicity, culture, religion and geopolitical interests.

²⁶ Since 2012, following the Brussels Agreement on regional representation, Kosovo has been marked with an asterisk (*) to allow its participation in international events without implying recognition of its status.

resulted in biased reporting and weakened political pluralism, ultimately undermining democratic standards. The absence of sustained improvements in media freedom underscores the entrenched nature of media capture in Serbia and reflects a limited political will to implement substantial reforms that would foster a free and pluralistic media environment (SELDI, 2022, p. 9).

Due to the results of the 2022 general elections being highly contested throughout the year, it took the ruling majority nearly seven months to form a new government, which was the longest in Serbian modern history (Reuters, 2022). Therefore, the political environment in which media outlets operated stayed largely unchanged, neither improving nor deteriorating. The only notable development was a small decline in Market Plurality, indicating increased risks in that area. Other risk levels stayed relatively stable. The absence of improvements during the reporting period means that high risks to media pluralism and freedom persist across multiple indicators. These enduring challenges continue to undermine the rule of law and erode the democratic capacity of the media, thereby weakening democratic political processes overall (Milutinović et al., 2023).

With such critical evaluations, the following 2023 brought no structural reforms regarding media pluralism or regulatory independence. Both international observers and local watchdogs emphasized that political influence over public and private broadcasters had become further entrenched. The European Commission's report (2024a) again highlighted Serbia's failure to implement key media reforms, including changes to the REM appointment process, transparency in state advertising and ensuring equal treatment of all media outlets. It is also stated that **no progress** was made in reference to freedom of expression (European Commission, 2024a).

The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) once more failed to fully exercise its mandate to uphold media pluralism and professional standards as its independence remains a **significant concern** (European Commission, 2024b). REM oversees the issuance of television and radio broadcasting licenses and ensures that media service providers comply with the Law on Electronic Media. According to the 2024 Media Pluralism Monitor, the risk associated with the independence and effectiveness of REM is assessed as medium (65%) (Milutinović, 2024). Despite previous warnings issued for legal violations, REM renewed the licenses of all four national television broadcasters in 2022. Some of these channels continued to breach regulations in 2023. Moreover, REM announced a call in August 2022 for a fifth national broadcasting license, yet the

license has not been awarded within the announced timeframe and no clear justification for this delay has been provided (European Commission, 2024a; 2024b).

Concerns persist regarding the editorial autonomy and pluralism of Serbia's public service media, particularly considering ongoing allegations of biased reporting favouring the government. Civil society organizations monitoring democracy and the rule of law have highlighted these issues, supported by aggregated data indicating a lack of balanced coverage. The most credible source is the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA, 2023b), which conducted extensive media monitoring from June 2022 to May 2023. Their analysis revealed that government representatives dominated central news programs, accounting for an average of 95% of coverage. This imbalance underscores concerns about media pluralism and editorial autonomy in Serbia. The appointment and dismissal procedures for public broadcasters, *Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)* and *Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)*, are defined in the Law on Public Service Media. However, since the REM Council, whose independence is itself under scrutiny, appoints and dismisses members of *RTS* and *RTV* management boards by a two-thirds majority, concerns about REM's autonomy directly impact the perceived independence of these public broadcasters (European Commission, 2024b).

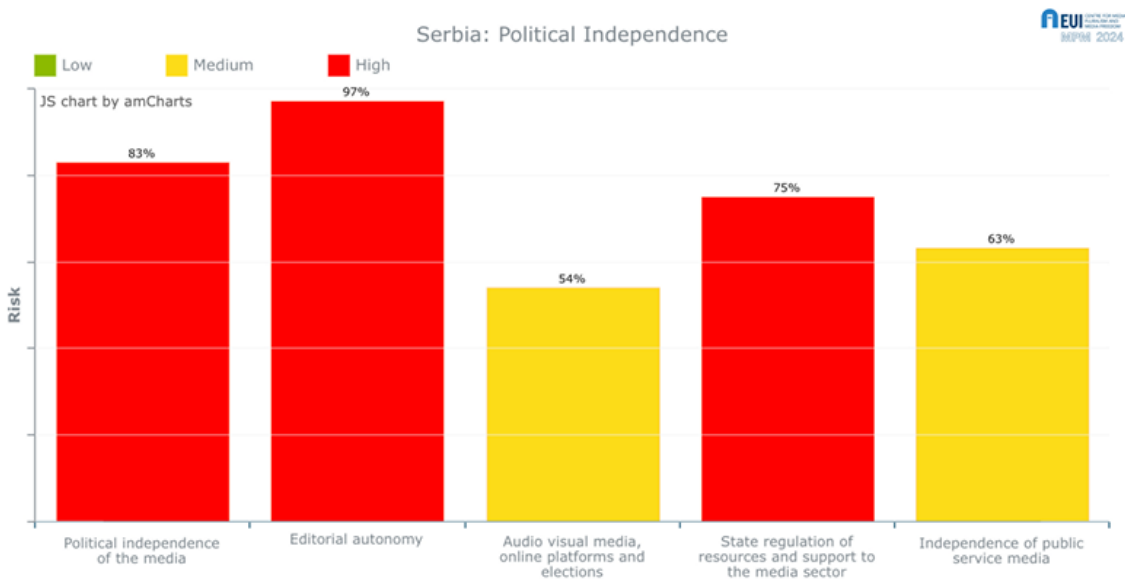


Figure 7 - High Risk of Political Dependence in Serbian Media (Milutinović, 2024)

What was particularly concerning was Milutinović's (2024) assessment that the “**Political Independence**” (*Figure 7*) sector in Serbia recorded the **highest** overall risk score among all media pluralism areas, reaching **74%**. This is significantly higher than the average risk level of 48% across the EU and candidate countries. Based on her re-

port commissioned by the European University Institute (2024), the risks to the political independence of the media and the state regulation of resources and support for the media sector have increased. The primary reasons for this are intensified, long-term pressures on critical media and the misuse of public funds allocated to the media by the current political regime.

The indicator for “**Editorial Autonomy**” remains at a **very high 97% risk**, as there are no firm legal guarantees ensuring editorial independence, despite new media regulations. While the 2023 Law on Public Information and Media allows journalists to refuse editorial orders violating professional ethics, it fails to provide sanctions for breaches and does not protect editors from political or ownership pressures. Media outlets lack self-regulatory mechanisms aligned with EU standards and the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics offers weak safeguards (Council of Europe, 2024). Consequently, **editors** are often appointed for **loyalty**, leading to self-censorship and internal pressures, with 68.7% of journalists reporting that self-censorship impacts their work (Đurić, 2023). Economic and political pressures, including government interference, contribute to this issue. The European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (2024a) reiterates the need for stronger safeguards to protect media pluralism and editorial independence.

Another concerning indicator is the “**Political Independence of Media**” indicator in Serbia reached a high-risk score of 83%, reflecting a worsening situation compared to the previous year. A major contributor to this increase was a new legal provision allowing state-owned companies to establish and purchase media outlets, contradicting Serbia’s Media Strategy. Specifically, Article 39 of the new Law on Public Information and Media (LPIM) created an exception permitting certain state-founded entities engaged in electronic communications to own media, thereby formalizing a path for state influence over media ownership (ZJIM, 2023; Đurić, 2023; Stojanović & Jeremić, 2023). Despite long-standing laws prohibiting state ownership in media, companies like Telekom Serbia continue to exert influence. Furthermore, the new legal framework has not curtailed proxy ownership or hidden political affiliations of media owners, many of whom are publicly aligned with the ruling regime and have vested business interests across various industries (MOMS, 2023a).

This entanglement of political and media interests poses a serious threat to media pluralism and democracy. Media owners' clientelist relationships with political elites, both at national and local levels, remain opaque due to institutional capture in Serbia’s

hybrid regime (Đurić, 2023; Freedom House, 2023b). The 2024 Media Pluralism Monitor assesses the risk to the independence of public service media in Serbia as medium (63%), bordering on high risk (Milutinović, 2024). The Serbian media strategy has acknowledged shortcomings in the existing legislation and has committed to revising it by the end of 2024. The proposed revisions aim to establish a long-term and stable funding mechanism, strengthen procedures for electing management board members, guarantee editorial autonomy, especially for news program editorial boards, and introduce the role of a commissioner for professional standards and user relations in public broadcasting services (Freedom House, 2024a).

Furthermore, the Media Pluralism Monitor found Serbia at “high risk” in multiple categories: editorial independence, political independence of media authorities and access to media for diverse voices (Milutinović, 2024). Independent outlets like *NI* and *Nova S* continued to face systematic exclusion from public tenders and limited access to press events. Meanwhile, pro-government media received the majority of state contracts and political interview opportunities. The *2023 World Press Freedom Index* by *Reporters Without Borders* showed Serbia stagnating in the global rankings, citing the continued harassment of journalists, impunity for threats and the use of legal pressure to suppress critical reporting (Reporters Without Borders, 2023a).

The snap elections in December 2023 served as a definitive indication of media capture in Serbia, confirming the issues highlighted in numerous reports over the past decade. These elections were preceded, and to an extent driven, by the tragic incidents that occurred in Belgrade and its surrounding areas on May 3 and 4 of that year (Gec & Stojanović, 2023a). The swift announcement of snap parliamentary elections occurred amid significant social polarization and unrest in Serbian society. The tensions and divisions that emerged after the tragic shootings in May 2023 became a persistent manifestation of political instability in Serbia. In response to these events, citizens mobilized, leading to weekly protests under the slogan “Serbia Against Violence,” which drew tens of thousands of participants (Gec & Stojanović, 2023b). While these protests were presented as civic and non-partisan, the slogan later became the name of the main opposition list. This political instability was further exacerbated by economic difficulties, rising inflation, increasing social inequality and intensified conflicts throughout the electoral campaign (Gajić, Vlainić, & Jakšić, 2024).

The public discontent with the existing media landscape culminated when a substantial number of protesters identified a link between the surge in violence and the in-

fluence of certain television reality programs, which, in their view, implicitly promoted aggressive behaviour. Broadcasters such as *TV Pink* and *TV Happy* faced criticism for airing reality shows containing explicit depictions of physical and verbal violence, as well as sexual content. As a result of such broadcasts, the protesters directed most of their demands toward media-related issues. Namely, they demanded the **revocation of national broadcasting licenses** for both stations *TV Pink* and *Happy*, citing their role in manipulating the public and promoting violence (*Figure 8*). Secondly, they called for the resignations of all members of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) Council, whom they hold responsible for allowing the dissemination of violence, aggression and immorality on national television (Serbia Against Violence, 2023). Moreover, they demanded the shutdown of printed tabloids that consistently spread falsehoods and violate journalistic ethics, as well as the **immediate cancellation** of violent and immoral programming, including reality shows aired on national television. Finally, the replacement of the Governing Board of *RTS* was demanded, reflecting dissatisfaction with the public broadcaster's failure to uphold standards of professionalism and impartiality (Serbia Against Violence, 2023). Alongside these, other channels like *B92*, *TV Prva* and *RTS* were also criticized for providing insufficient coverage of opposition activities, particularly the mass protests that followed the tragic events of May 2023 (Pavlović, 2024).



Figure 8 - Serbia Against Violence: Demand to cancel regime's media (M.S., 2023)

These media outlets, widely perceived to operate under the influence of Aleksandar Vučić, held national broadcasting licenses issued by the REM. This institution faced

widespread public criticism for not effectively overseeing broadcast content or enforcing media laws. This perceived inaction has contributed to an imbalance in media representation, favouring the ruling party and limiting exposure for opposition voices. (Pavlović, 2024). Since the first electoral victory of SNS in 2012, REM has played a crucial role in sustaining Vučić's political dominance, given its responsibility for granting national broadcasting licenses only to those broadcasters that comply with legal media standards. Under the leadership of Olivera Zekić, this institution selectively granted licenses to outlets frequently breaching these standards while denying them to channels such as *NI* and *Nova S*, which consistently complied with state media regulations. Such selective behaviour is typical for electoral manipulation in hybrid regimes (Pavlović, 2024).

It is important to note that the subsequent snap elections were conducted within the same media environment previously described. This election campaign was accompanied by numerous irregularities. During this period, civil society organisations who were monitoring democracy and rule of law issues, complained about biased reporting in favour of the government. The OSCE/ODIHR report on this matter highlights pro-government “bias in the media during the campaign” (2024, as cited in European Commission, 2024b), while it points out that this bias is a lot more present during non-electoral periods. Evidence of media bias favouring the government is substantiated by aggregated data. The OSCE/ODIHR reported (2024a) that during the December 2023 election campaign, approximately 64% of non-election-related news on *RTS* and 52% on *RTV* featured President Vučić, despite his not being a candidate. Research conducted by BIRODI, presented in the European Commission's report (2024a), revealed that from January 2023 to June 2024, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) received 92% of the airtime in RTS's central news broadcasts, increasing to 94% during the Belgrade election campaign, while opposition parties were allocated only 8%.

The procedures that manage the appointment and dismissal of leadership within Serbia's public broadcasters, *Radio Television of Serbia* (RTS) and *Radio Television of Vojvodina* (RTV), are defined in the Law on Public Service Media. As previously mentioned, these positions are filled and/or vacated through a two-thirds majority vote by the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), Serbia's media regulatory body. Consequently, concerns regarding REM's independence have **direct implications for the autonomy** of *RTS* and *RTV*. The Media Pluralism Monitor assessed the independence of Serbia's public service media at a medium risk level, assigning a score

of 63%, which approaches the threshold for high risk (Milutinović, 2024). Acknowledging deficiencies in the existing public service media legislation, Serbia's media strategy has identified the need for comprehensive reforms. In response, the Serbian authorities have committed to revising the legislation by the end of 2024 (European Commission, 2024a). The proposed amendments aimed to establish a sustainable and stable funding model for public media, enhance the procedures for selecting members of management boards, enshrine guarantees for editorial independence, particularly concerning news programming, and institute the role of a commissioner responsible for upholding professional standards and facilitating engagement with the public (European Commission, 2024b). Nevertheless, due to the subsequent regular local elections and the repeat election for the Belgrade City Assembly held on 2 June 2024, none of the proposed reforms or legislative amendments were fully implemented (European Commission, 2024a). However, as the Serbian media landscape in 2024 exceeds the scope of this thesis, these local elections will not be examined.

Civil society organisations which closely monitored the 2023 parliamentary elections provided detailed insights into the unequal access to television media outlets experienced by both ruling and opposition parties throughout the campaign. CRTA states in its monitoring report (2024) that **the media imbalance favouring the ruling party was more pronounced than in previous electoral cycles**. Instead of providing impartial and comprehensive coverage of the electoral process, major media outlets, including the public broadcaster *RTS*, predominantly disseminated content that aligned with the government's narrative. Even though he was not a formal candidate, President Aleksandar Vučić appeared in nearly a **third of prime-time coverage and held two-thirds of the airtime in news programs of TV channels with national broadcasting licences**.

The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), tasked with ensuring equal media representation during elections, displayed a notably passive approach. Despite its mandate, REM failed to publish monitoring results or address complaints during the campaign period, thereby undermining its role in safeguarding media pluralism and fairness (CRTA, 2024).

The report (2024) further highlights significant deviations from international democratic standards in the treatment of election observers by Serbian government officials. Rather than addressing documented electoral irregularities and engaging in constructive dialogue about systemic issues, high-ranking officials, including President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, publicly criticized and discredited

both international observers and domestic monitoring organizations, such as CRTA's Observation Mission. These actions included unfounded accusations and derogatory remarks, disseminated through pro-government media outlets. Such conduct not only undermines the credibility of election observation missions but also raises concerns about the regime's commitment to democratic principles and transparency. What is particularly concerning is that, on election day, CRTA observers were **physically assaulted** for the first time while on their way to report an incident of circular voting. Their vehicle was vandalized by unidentified individuals in the **courtyard of the local police station**, in full view of **police officers**. This unprecedented act of violence against election observers underscores the deteriorating conditions for civil society actors in Serbia (CRTA, 2023c, 2023d; N1, 2023). Evidence of the attack was documented and posted on CRTA's X account on the same day. It is presented by *Figure 9* on the following page.

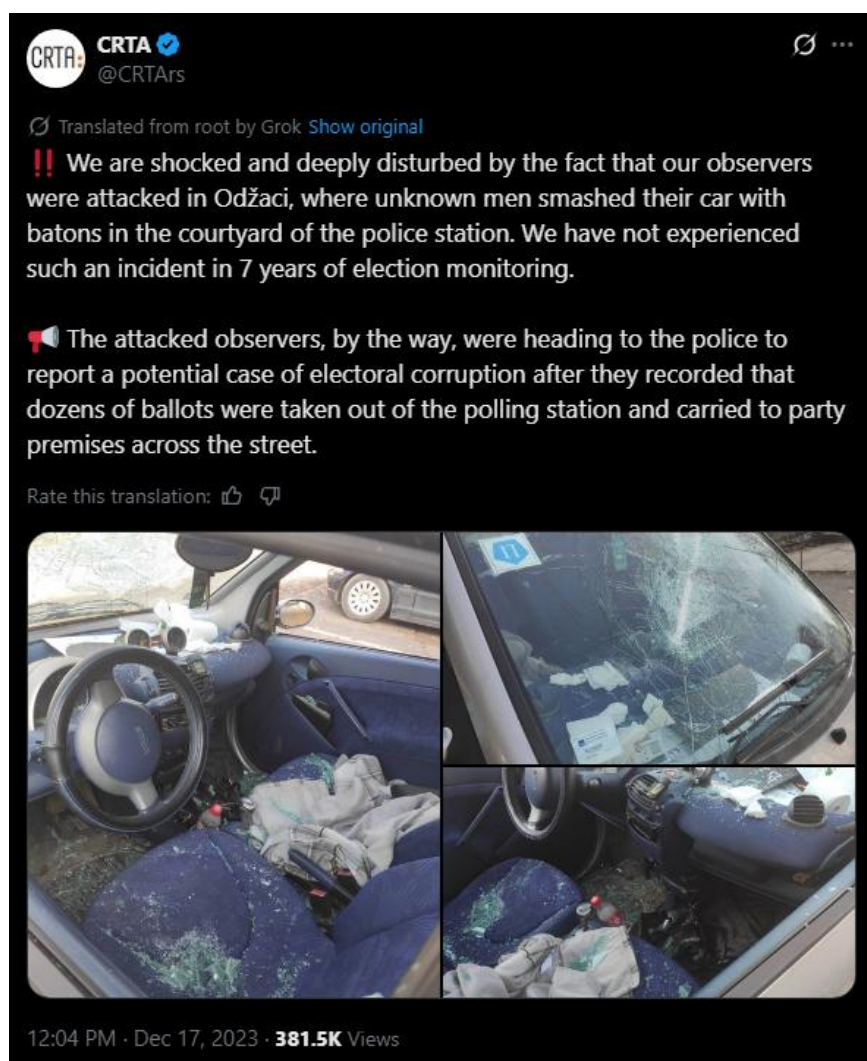


Figure 9 - Attack on CRTA's observers (CRTA, 2023d)

Given that 2023 marks the final year examined in this thesis, it is important to review the European Parliament's resolution concerning the elections held during that year and the surrounding media landscape. In the post-electoral resolution, the European Parliament outlines that “over the past decade, since President Vučić came to power, there has been a **continuous erosion of media freedom in Serbia**, characterised by **political pressure, threats and even physical attacks against journalists**; whereas Reporters Without Borders has placed Serbia among the lowest in Europe in its World Press Freedom Index, with the country dropping 12 places to 91 in 2023” (European Parliament, 2024). Furthermore, it condemns the absence of media pluralism during the election campaign, noting that **many media outlets are influenced or controlled by the government**. This control resulted in unequal conditions for opposition candidates, with unethical and biased media coverage favouring the incumbents. President Vučić's overwhelming public exposure before and during the campaign blurred the line between the state and the ruling party (European Parliament, 2024; European Western Balkans, 2024; CRTA 2024). The Parliament's resolution also (2024) intensified its stance on Serbia by explicitly linking the suspension of pre-accession funding to the government's failure to address electoral irregularities and uphold fundamental democratic standards. This development underscores growing concerns over Serbia's media freedom and democratic principles amid the government's autocratic tendencies (European Western Balkans, 2024; Ahmatović, 2024).

Based on the comprehensive analysis presented throughout this thesis, it can be conclusively stated that Serbia's media landscape has been subject to a process of systemic media capture, predominantly orchestrated by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vučić. Since the party's rise to power in 2012, the media sector has undergone increasing political appropriation, implemented through a multifaceted strategy encompassing both formal and informal means. These include the politicization of regulatory bodies such as the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), the preferential allocation of public advertising and funding to regime-aligned outlets, the use of state-owned enterprises such as Telekom Serbia for media acquisitions, as well as the manipulation of editorial appointments and the intimidation of critical journalists.

The findings of multiple independent monitoring institutions as well as organisations, including Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, several EU institutions, CRTA and BIRODI, reveal persistently high-risk assessments concerning editorial au-

tonomy, media pluralism and political independence. Particularly during election cycles, the dominance of pro-government narratives, disproportionate airtime given to ruling party representatives and the marginalization of opposition actors depict the extent to which Serbia's media environment fails to provide conditions for free and fair democratic competition. The failure to reform REM, renewal of licenses to unethical broadcasters and the ruling party's use of public service media illustrate the systemic entrenchment of media capture. Therefore, this thesis affirms that the notion of media capture in Serbia is not speculative but rather reflects a deeply enrooted pattern that has effectively eroded the democratic integrity of the country's public and media sphere from 2013 through 2023.

4.5 Concentration of Media Ownership – Current Situation

Although media ownership was only briefly addressed in earlier chapters, since the thesis primarily focuses on political rather than financial capture, understanding the current state of media ownership remains essential. A selected group of individuals with close ties to the regime controls a significant share of media outlets. Across the Balkans, it is often the case that governments apply pressure through state subsidies and advertising, influencing editorial policies and compromising media independence (SELDI, 2022). The lack of comprehensive legislation on media ownership transparency, media concentration, advertising regulations, or subsidy distribution criteria creates conditions ripe for political influence. Serbia exemplifies this type of media landscape. Although the country's Media Strategy includes measures intended to improve transparency in ownership structures and ensure fair financing of media content and advertising with state resources, implementation is still pending. Notably, those benefiting most from public funding competitions for co-financing are often media outlets with connections to the government (Beta, 2021). Serbia's media environment is heavily dominated by the ruling party, with many domestic media owners having ties to President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party, impacting political pluralism and contributing to biased reporting (MOMS, 2023a).

According to BIRN's analysis (MOMS, 2023a), almost 56% of TV stations in Serbia demonstrate either **direct or indirect political affiliations**, with 8 out of 10 station owners having close connections to the ruling party or showing clear bias in their editorial policies and reporting. The main public broadcaster, RTS, through its primary

channels, frequently avoids critical coverage of pressing social issues, including high-level corruption, the rule of law and human rights, often steering clear of potentially controversial topics. This lack of critical reporting is further influenced by indirect government intervention through the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), which holds power over the appointment of RTS's Director and Managing Board. Private media entities, such as the *Pink Group*, illustrate similar patterns; **Željko Mitrović**, the owner of *TV Pink* and *Vesti*, has longstanding ties to authoritarian officials from the 1990s, such as Slobodan Milošević, and has maintained close relationships with successive governments, including the current ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). These TV channels frequently produce propagandistic content supporting the SNS and even conduct public attacks on opposition figures, independent media and critics of President Aleksandar Vučić's regime. Other stations, such as *Prva TV* and *B92*, are owned by **Srdan Milovanović**, whose brother, **Zvezdan Milovanović** (MOMS, 2023b; Istinomer, 2021), was until recently the chief representative of SNS in Niš²⁷, indicating additional political affiliations. On similar note, *Happy TV*, owned by **Predrag Ranković Peconi**, is linked to various governments and criminal networks dating back to the 1990s. Lastly, *Kurir TV*, a cable network owned by *Mondo* and **Igor Žeželj**, actively supports the ruling party, frequently serving as a platform for government propaganda and smear campaigns against its critics.

BIRN's latest analysis (MOMS, 2023a) shows that Serbia's media market is highly concentrated, 55% of the audience share was held by the four largest owners across television, radio, print and online media. The audience is sharply divided between pro-government and critical outlets. This fragmentation exemplifies what Dragomir (2024a, p. 169) classifies as the “**captured private media model**,” in which privately owned, commercially funded outlets operate under the editorial control of state authorities, a phenomenon observed in Serbia and other contexts marked by intensive state intervention in the media. This description neatly encapsulates the *Pink group*, *Prva TV*, *B92* and other oligarch-linked channels in Serbia, whose editorial lines track government narratives without formal state ownership.

In recent years, media concentration has increased, particularly in favour of Telekom Serbia, where the state is the largest shareholder. As of Q3 2023, Telekom Serbia held a 53.2% market share, surpassing its privately owned competitor, SBB, which held 40.5% (RATEL, 2023).

²⁷ Third most populous city in Serbia.

A significant shift occurred in October 2023 with the new Law on Information and Media, which reintroduced state ownership of media. This law permits state-founded entities engaged in electronic communications to establish or acquire media outlets (Milutinović, 2024). Consequently, the government effectively legalized its previous violations of media laws through Telekom Serbia, solidifying state influence over the media. Notably, Telekom Serbia's control over five private television stations, previously concealed through third-party legal entities, has now been formally acknowledged, despite being prohibited under previous media regulations (Babić, 2024; IREX, 2023). This development is particularly controversial as it directly contradicts Serbia's 2011 Media Strategy, in which the state committed to withdrawing from media ownership. The policy shift has raised concerns that it will further strengthen state control over public information and the media market. The growing dominance of Telekom Serbia over United Group is also **politically significant**, as United Group owns some of Serbia's most critical media outlets, including TV news channels *NI* and *Nova S*, cable provider SBB, daily newspaper *Danas* and the newly established weekly Radar.

This highlighted evidence indicates that the Serbian media landscape is characterized by **high concentration, political polarization and strong state influence**. A small group of politically connected individuals controls a significant share of media outlets, using state subsidies, advertising funds and regulatory bodies to exert influence over editorial policies. The lack of comprehensive legislation on media ownership, transparency and media concentration enables further political interference.

Despite Media Strategy's intent to improve transparency and ensure fair financing, its implementation remains incomplete. The ruling party's dominance over the media is evident, with state-affiliated broadcasters and private media owners with government ties shaping the narrative in favour of the government while marginalizing independent voices. The main public broadcaster, *RTS*, avoids critical coverage of key issues, while private media outlets such as *TV Pink*, *Happy TV* and *Kurir TV* actively promote government propaganda.

The reintroduction of state ownership in media through the 2023 Law on Information and Media **has further entrenched government control over public discourse**. The growing **dominance of Telekom Serbia, which now holds a majority market share and controls multiple private television stations**, raises serious concerns about media pluralism and state influence over information dissemination. These

developments contradict Serbia's 2011 commitment to withdraw from media ownership and highlight the ongoing deterioration of media independence in the country.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Limitations & Confidentiality

Before elaborating on the interviewee selection criteria in the following chapter, it is important to first outline the process of contacting potential participants. This process unfolded in two phases.

In the first phase, the aim was to interview ten journalists and media professionals representing both independent and government-aligned television outlets, in order to provide a balanced and comprehensive view of Serbia's media landscape. While contacting journalists from independent media presented few obstacles, reaching individuals affiliated with pro-government outlets proved considerably more difficult.

Over a three-month period, multiple outreach attempts were made via email and phone to journalists known for their work in pro-government media. However, none responded or agreed to participate. Consequently, in the second phase, alternative participants with relevant experience in pro-government media were contacted to help maintain sectoral balance. These individuals, although less publicly visible, agreed to take part under the condition of full anonymity due to concerns about job security and potential repercussions.

To ensure their safety and encourage open expression, participants' identities and affiliations have been anonymized in all transcripts and references. This approach was taken to uphold ethical standards and protect participants' confidentiality throughout the research process.

5.2 Sample Selection

To answer the research questions stated at the introduction, the qualitative method was recognized as the most insightful method which would provide the most objective and credible answers. As part of the specified research approach, semi-structured interviews with journalists and media experts were determined to be most suitable, as open-ended questions provide the flexibility to explore complex topics while allowing partic-

ipants to express their insights in detail, fostering richer data collection (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Therefore, a set of eleven questions was developed to guide the interviews and ensure a comprehensive exploration of the research topic (see *Appendix A*). These questions were carefully designed to cover multiple dimensions of media capture, including its causes, manifestations and consequences. Starting with participants' professional backgrounds (*Q1*), the questions then delve into their perspectives on the overall media landscape in Serbia over the past decade (*Q2*). The inquiry further examines the factors contributing to media capture (*Q3*), specific instances of its occurrence (*Q4*) and the key actors and institutions involved (*Q5* and *Q7*). Questions also address the impact of political pressures (*Q6*) and the broader implications for journalistic autonomy, editorial freedom and democracy (*Q8* and *Q9*). Finally, participants are invited to propose actionable recommendations (*Q10*) and identify the roles of various stakeholders in protecting and promoting media freedom in Serbia (*Q11*). The full list of these interview questions can be found in *Appendix A* for reference at the end of this thesis.

A total of eight media experts and journalists ($N = 8$) were selected in order to provide credible overviews and perspectives on the state of Serbian media. To maintain an unbiased approach to the issue, four independent media experts and journalists who have criticized the government over the past decade were selected **on one side**. One interviewee received the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur²⁸ in 2016 for contributions to media freedom in Serbia and is widely recognized as a leading journalist and editor-in-chief. **On the other side**, four journalists working for pro-government TV media outlets were selected to offer alternative perspectives and opinions on the state of Serbian media during the Serbian Progressive Party's rule.

5.3 Research Design & Data Collection

The representatives of the following TV media outlets were chosen to provide a comprehensive overview of the media landscape in Serbia. *Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)*, the second public broadcaster and a state-owned TV outlet, under the direct influence of the government and the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), was included to analyze perspectives from a media outlet operating under significant state influence (Milojević & Kleut, 2023; Spasojević, 2021). In that regard, Ljubica Gojgić, a

²⁸ The Knight of the Legion of Honour Medal

journalist with valuable experience, provided a perspective from within the public broadcaster. Furthermore, another journalist from *Istinomer* [Truth-O-Meter], a fact-checking website known for its commitment to accurate reporting, also participated in the research, contributing a key perspective on combating misinformation in Serbia's television media landscape (Kleut & Spasojević, 2015; Boždar & Slijepčević, 2021). Likewise, a journalist from *Insajder TV* [Insider], a media outlet whose impartiality and investigative journalism is widely acknowledged (Petković, 2016), agreed to participate in this research. Additionally, a journalist from *Euronews Serbia TV*, then recognized for its objective reporting despite being predominantly owned by the state-run **Telekom Serbia**, was included to offer a nuanced view of balancing independence and state influence (Oxford Analytica, 2021). However, it must be noted that Euronews Serbia was reporting impartially at the time of this research but has since come under the regime's influence. This was evident when twelve media employees, including seven journalists, were fired after publicly distancing themselves from an unsigned statement, issued by the outlet, condemning a student blockade of RTS in inflammatory terms (Mitkovski, 2025). Conversely, representatives from *TV Pink*, *TV Happy* and *TV Kurir*, media outlets known for their strong pro-government stance, were selected to capture viewpoints aligned with the ruling party's narrative (Gajić, Vlainić, & Jakšić, 2024). This diverse selection aims to provide a balanced understanding of how Serbian media functions across various political affiliations. Regarding media experts, Zoran Gavrilović from the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) was interviewed as a distinguished authority who has been consistently analyzing the Serbian media landscape since 2012.

The majority of interviewees opted to remain anonymous, citing fears of severe repercussions from their employers, government officials or their associates. This reaction to public criticism strongly reflects the current state of the media system in Serbia. Hence, when citing their responses in the 'Analysis' section the interviewees' names will be pseudonymized by assigning codes in a numbered order to safeguard their identities. As for the interviewees who opted to speak publicly, their names shall appear under the citation. There are eight interviewees in total, therefore also eight codes "I1 – I8", where the capital letter "I" stands for *Interviewee*.

The interviews were conducted between September and November 2024 and lasted 41 minutes on average. The shortest taking 25 minutes while the longest lasts 65 minutes. In total almost 6 hours of interview material and 104 transcript pages have been produced. Descriptive features of the interviews are presented in *Table 3, Appen-*

dix A. Every interview commenced with an inquiry into the interviewee's professional background, their current roles and perceptions of the media landscape. This was followed by an exploration of the interviewee's insights on media capture in Serbia, identifying the actors, factors and institutions involved. Moreover, the effects of media capture on journalistic autonomy, editorial freedom and democratic processes were examined. To obtain more in-depth perspectives, participants were invited to offer suggestions to protect media freedom in Serbia and describe the responsibilities of different stakeholders in maintaining this freedom.

All eight interviews were conducted in Serbian as to ensure clarity and accuracy of the interviewees' statements. It was done in accordance with a joint decision by the study owner and participants and all interview responses were digitally recorded.

The interviews were conducted online via *Zoom* platform and were recorded to facilitate full transcripts of the interviews, which could then be re-evaluated after the interviews. All participants were informed about this prior to the interviews. During the interviews, full transcripts of the completed interviews were made by listening to audio recordings on a computer. The interviewees were also thoroughly briefed on the purpose, process and confidentiality of the study prior to the interviews, after which they signed the consent form, indicating their voluntary participation and understanding of the procedures involved, including the use of audio recordings and the eventual translation of their responses from Serbian to English.

5.4 Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. All eight interviews were first transcribed verbatim while the transcripts were imported into MAXQDA 24 to enable systematic coding and documentation. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase iterative approach: data familiarization, initial code generation, theme development, theme review, defining themes and report production. Throughout these phases, detailed analytic memos were maintained to capture initial impressions, coding decisions and connections to the research questions. This process created a tangible trail for the analysis, ensuring traceability and enhancing transparency. The following sections detail how each of the six phases was applied in practice, illustrating the step-by-step progression of the analysis:

1. **Data Familiarization:** Each transcript was read multiple times to become fully acquainted with the content and context. During this “immersion phase”, preliminary observations were noted in analytic memos, highlighting emerging ideas and potential patterns related to the research questions. For example, recurring mentions of political influence on editorial decisions were noted for further exploration. This step ensured a comprehensive understanding of the data and formed the foundation for systematic coding.
2. **Generating Codes:** All transcripts were then coded inductively using MAXQDA 24. This involved systematically identifying and labeling meaningful segments of text with concise descriptive codes. Coding was semantic and data-driven: each excerpt that captured a single idea or phenomenon was assigned a code reflecting its essence. For instance, a statement about journalists self-censoring under pressure was coded “*Self-censorship*”. Each code entry was accompanied by an analytic memo explaining its interpretation and noting which research question(s) it related to. This systematic coding approach ensured that every relevant data segment could be linked back to specific points in the transcripts.
3. **Searching for Themes:** After completing the coding, all codes were examined for conceptual similarities. Related codes were grouped together to form candidate themes that reflected broader patterns of meaning. This grouping was guided by the code memos and by consideration of the research questions. For example, codes such as “*Media system unsustainability*”, “*State funding bias*” and “*Ownership influence*” were grouped under a provisional theme of “*Financial Capture*”, as these codes collectively reflected how financial factors enable media control, addressing *RQ1* and *RQ2*. This step ensured that the emerging themes were directly tied to the thesis research objectives.
4. **Revising Themes:** The candidate themes were then reviewed and refined through a cyclical process. All coded data extracts were re-examined to ensure internal coherence within each theme and clear distinctions between themes. Themes that appeared too broad or overlapping were adjusted accordingly, either merged or divided to better capture the underlying patterns. For instance, earlier themes labeled “*Media Pluralism Facade*” and “*Polarization* (‘Trenches’)” were merged when it became clear they represented the same dynamic of enforced partisanship. Throughout this process, the code memos were consulted

to confirm theme boundaries and verify that each theme was fully supported by the data.

5. **Defining Themes:** Each final theme was given a concise, descriptive name and a clear definition capturing its essence and relevance to the research questions. The theme definitions explicitly noted which RQs they addressed. For example, the theme “*Structures of Capture*” was defined to encompass the economic and regulatory mechanisms, such as media privatization or frequency licensing control, through which political and business elites exert influence over television content, which addresses *RQ1*. These definitions were drawn on the coded data and analytic memos and were linked to the thesis theoretical framework of media capture.
6. **Producing the Report:** In the final phase, the refined themes were organized to directly answer *RQ1–RQ4* in the *Analysis and Interpretation* chapter. The writing integrated verbatim excerpts from the interviews to illustrate each theme and its subthemes. Throughout the write-up, analytic memos continued to inform interpretation. For example, a memo labeled “*Media laws vs reality*” explicitly highlighted a gap between formal media legislation and actual practice, which guided the discussion of legal protections (pertaining to *RQ4*). By documenting how each theme was derived from the coded data, this step made the analytic process fully transparent.

In summary, Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis was applied, with each phase carefully documented. Using MAXQDA 24 for systematic coding and memoing helped create a transparent and traceable path from the raw interview data to the final themes. This ensured that the analysis could be revisited, reviewed and controlled at every stage. All codes and themes were directly connected to the research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring that the analysis stayed aligned with the study’s core objectives. Each step in the analysis was carefully documented through memos, supporting transparency and academic rigor. As a result of this process, **six major themes** emerged from the data. These themes form the structure of the following Chapter 6, where they are examined in detail based on the interview findings. This systematic approach guarantees that the findings presented in Chapter 6 are firmly based on the data and grounded in relevant theory.

6. Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis, organized around the research questions. The qualitative interviews reveal distinct patterns of media capture across Serbia's television sector. Six major themes emerged from the data: **Financial Capture, Institutional Capture, Political Influence and Propaganda, Effects on Journalism, Effects on Democracy and Recommendations**. They are depicted, alongside the code system, in *Table 4, Appendix A*. The following sections present a thematic analysis of the interview responses, illustrating how each form of capture manifests in practice. Analysis is supported by direct quotations from the interviewees (coded by interview number and date), which ground the interpretations in their own words.

6.1 Financial Capture

Financial capture emerged as a fundamental mechanism by which political interests gain control over media. As Dragomir (2024a) outlines, “state funding has become an extremely effective instrument used by governments to control media outlets. ... Media outlets blocked from accessing state advertising funds, especially smaller ones, face deep financial crises, which often lead to their demise” (p. 166).

Interviewees consistently described a media market in which funding largely comes from state-influenced sources or politically aligned advertisers, rather than from a truly competitive market. As Zoran Gavrilović emphasized, political actors have actively manipulated media funding channels:

As one [of our] interviewee[s] explained, political actors, through advertising agencies and public companies, e.g. through public funding, gained control over an unsustainable media system in Serbia. ... media are controlled by those who have the money – those who control the funding. (I2, 2024, 1921–1930)

This quote highlights that media outlets depend on money from the government or its allies. Several interviewees noted that Serbia's media market is “unsustainable” and “unregulated”, meaning that there are many outlets fighting for limited budgets. In such an environment, an overwhelming supply of channels is maintained on purpose, but the total advertising and subscription revenues are small. As one media expert put it:

From a budgetary perspective, our market is small, but in terms of the number of media outlets it's too large. This is deliberately maintained that way. (I2, 2024, 137–138)

The consequence is that most media must ensure political funding to survive. Interviewees also highlighted that much of this funding is tied to propaganda. Rather than supporting independent journalism, money is directed to outlets that produce content favourable to the ruling party. In the view of the same media expert, the current system treats media as extensions of political communication:

As it stands, the government wants to preserve this lawless, unsustainable state by capturing, first of all, the public broadcaster on one side, and the regulator on the other. (I2, 2024, 221–223)

In practice, media organizations remain viable only so long as they serve political goals. He also noted that:

As a result, the media continue to serve as propaganda tools and remain sustainable because they receive funding for propaganda, not for serving the public. (I2, 2024, 227–229)

This indicates that an outlet serving as a mouthpiece for the government is rewarded with funding, whereas genuinely independent outlets are left without support. Such dynamic is especially evident in the public service broadcasters. A veteran journalist described the ruling atmosphere of state finance as a form of control:

The message is: 'We pay you, you're ours.' That's the message the editorial staff accepts. (I1, 2024, 398–399)

Since public broadcasters are funded by the state budget, their staff understand that their employers consider them part of the government's apparatus. The interviewee added that people even resist paying broadcast fees by saying "it's too much" because the public stations have long ceased to serve citizens independently. She concluded that the problem is not lack of revenue but the atmosphere of state dominance: public media are "treated as state television" rather than true public services (I1, 2024, 63–65).

Therefore, the financial theme is one of dependency and politicization. Serbia's media sector lacks a robust commercial market or strong independent funding. Instead,

political and oligarchic capital flows determine which outlets survive and what content they produce. As one interviewee carefully outlined:

...media capture fundamentally relies on the distribution of money... this financial conditioning wouldn't exist if there were a sustainable market and if REM did its job. Or rather, not a sustainable market, but a regulated market that guarantees media sustainability. (I2, 2024, 128–132)

Under these conditions, editorial and financial media independence is compromised as outlets alter their news agendas to please financiers. Journalists reported that non-government-aligned stations often find themselves starved of advertising or subsidies, effectively forcing them to conform or disappear.

6.2 Institutional Capture

Closely linked to financial mechanisms is the capture of media-regulating institutions. Regulatory capture often stems from the same mechanisms that allow governments to staff decision-making bodies with loyalists. As Dragomir (2024a) explains, “achieving regulatory capture is a relatively effortless task for authorities, especially in countries with low accountability standards and a weak civil society. ... Because these institutions are in one way or another subordinated to the authorities, depend on funding from the government to operate and their decision-making bodies are staffed with people appointed by government institutions, regulatory capture has been a perennial challenge in media ecosystems in many nations all around the world” (p. 165).

In Serbia, REM’s financial dependence on state budgets and appointment processes thus creates structural vulnerabilities to political influence. Interviewees illustrated how the regulatory body and public institutions have been either co-opted or rendered ineffective, thereby facilitating political control over the media. A recurring observation was that the media regulator and public broadcaster, institutions that should protect media pluralism, have themselves been politicized. As media expert Gavrilović summarized, Serbia’s media landscape today is characterized by an “*unsustainable media system*” featuring:

...a regulator that doesn’t do its job, a public broadcaster that still acts like a party TV, and political power that prevents the implementation of media laws. (I2, 2024, 34–38)

Meaning that formal rules and institutions exist on paper, but in practice they are subservient to the ruling elite. Multiple interviewees described how the governing party systematically filled key positions with so-called loyalists. One journalist described the post-2012 period in the following manner:

The government at that time, which remains in power today, those two years to infiltrate all layers of the media. Like an octopus, it extended its tentacles into every newsroom – absolutely every one of them. So, the single biggest factor affecting media freedom, or rather its lack, is the government, the ruling party and its coalition. (I5, 2024, 40–44)

She emphasized as well that media freedom's decline is directly tied to the weakening of independent institutions:

Institutional roles have essentially been absorbed by one individual or the ruling coalition which has extended its influence into every facet of the social, political and economic system. (I5, 2024, 45–46).

In practical terms, this meant that bodies like the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) would no longer enforce legal standards on outlets friendly to the party. According to the interviewed media expert, this allowed the government to preserve a “lawless, unsustainable state” by capturing “the public broadcaster on one side, and the regulator on the other” (I2, 2024, 221–223).

The consequence of institutional capture is that checks and balances on media content disappear. He also argued that although the constitution guarantees the right to “true, complete and timely information,” in reality that has been hollowed out (I2, 2024, 38–42).

The failure of institutions is reflected in the widespread impunity enjoyed by a group of selected media outlets. Public broadcasters and media outlets with national frequencies routinely violate legal standards, such as spreading hate speech or publishing unverified information, yet face no consequences, provided their content supports the ruling party's narrative. This selective enforcement reveals a system where laws exist in form but not in function, as regulatory bodies consistently turn a blind eye to infractions committed by pro-government outlets.

Interviews assess that Serbia's media system is supported by a network of institutions that have been effectively subordinated to political power. Media laws exist, but

without an independent regulator or judiciary to enforce them, their protection of the public interest is largely ineffective.

6.3 Political Influence and Propaganda

A unifying theme from the interviews is that political influence in Serbian TV media has almost reached an all-encompassing level, blurring the line between news and propaganda. The practice of political control extends beyond funding and institutions into editorial decision-making and agenda-setting. Numerous interviewees emphasized that President Aleksandar Vučić, along with his ruling party, are at the center of this system. One expert captured this concisely:

Serbia's media environment is under a "Vučić-centric" control of the media, where he [the President] is the main actor and the media are subordinate to him. (I2, 2024, 31–33)

Therefore, coverage is overwhelmingly centered on the president's viewpoint, with little room for alternative perspectives.

This centralization has manifested as one-sided reporting and marginalization of opposition voices. The sociologist Zoran Gavrilović described how media monitoring revealed that President Vučić consistently received overwhelmingly positive coverage across both state-owned and commercial television, while even relatively moderate opposition parties were excluded or delegitimized. As he explained:

The opposition does appear on *Pink*, but it is portrayed in an extremely negative light—over 90%. And what's important here is the trend we've noticed since 2022–2023. The part of the opposition that could take votes from Vučić, the far-right groups like Dveri, Zavetnici, DSS, are even censored on some commercial channels like *Prva*, *Happy* and *B92*. From this, you can see that the media function to support his control. I'll send you the data from 2021, where it's clear that on these same channels, Vučić received overwhelmingly positive coverage, around 90%. Before the negotiations in 2022, this dropped to 40% and 30%, which is normal positive coverage. But after the negotiations on election conditions ended, by September, it went back to 90%. So, while we don't have financial evidence or proof of direct orders, our monitoring clearly shows what's happening. (I2, 2024, 194–203)

Journalists in the interviews confirmed that overt criticism of the government is almost unheard of in national media. One reporter from a pro-government outlet elaborated that newsroom expectations are implicitly understood:

When you work in a pro-government media outlet—and most are, though some might lean toward the opposition or claim to be neutral, it’s understood that you’re expected to report in a specific way. In pro-government media, for instance, you’re expected to cover the ruling coalition and their projects in a positive and affirming light. Criticism is not allowed, at least not in the outlet I work for. In other outlets, there might be room for mild criticism, but it’s always watered down. (I5, 2024, 52–57)

The common experience seems to be that, even when outlets claim some independence, journalists stated that any negative remarks about the government are strictly edited or rephrased to neutralize them.

This has given rise to a pervasive propaganda ecosystem. In the interviews, interviewees used strong language to describe how journalism has been transformed into a tool for political messaging. For example, Zoran Gavrilović (2020) discussed the concept of a “*populism industry*” in which media are turned into tools of propaganda that serve to establish personal rule of the leader. In practice, many news broadcasts no longer seek to inform or question; they simply echo official talking points. While being interviewed for this thesis, he likewise remarked that:

In Serbia, there is an imbalance because we have too many media outlets, a small budget and a low demand for political information from the public. This imbalance has led to a situation where media, instead of informing, questioning and analyzing, increasingly resemble propaganda tools. (I2, 2024, 90–93)

The public receives a flood of politicized content from morning to night, often repeating the same narratives across channels. Several journalists noted that a misleading appearance of pluralism is maintained. Television shows may feature a token “opposition” guest or pundit, but that person is often carefully chosen to reinforce the regime’s narrative. An independent journalist explained that:

On many TV programs the role of the “other side” is given to “someone who only engages in propaganda or someone who isn’t really the other side but is presented as one. It creates a façade of pluralism in the studio, among experts, who might

not necessarily be fake but hold official roles of some sort. That's something I often see on television, when there are a few guests discussing various issues, and a similar agenda seems to be mirrored across programs, on different channels, in the news, etc. (I3, 2024, 72–77)

In practice, even outlets considered “opposition” tend to shadow-box minor issues while the big-picture messaging remains uniform:

Most national channels, whether state-owned or private, the majority of channels with national frequencies, whether private or public, reflect very similar phrases, sometimes even the exact same news, headlines, figures and personalities that move from one channel to another. That's what I mean when I say many channels, which appear to offer diversity, actually support a single, cohesive system of thought. (I3, 2024, 89–93)

The interviews illustrate a picture of relentless political influence through which the media is saturated with government propaganda and personalities, creating a homogenized news environment. Independent or critical reporting has become an “oasis” on the fringes, acknowledged by a few interviewees as comprising perhaps only 20–25% of all coverage (I2, 2024). The practical effect is that citizens who rely on television hear the ruling party's perspective overwhelmingly, reinforcing the political status quo.

6.4 Effects on Journalism

The capture of media has profoundly affected journalists themselves. Interviewees described a demoralized profession struggling with low pay, censorship and self-censorship. Expert journalist, Ljubica Gojgić, summarized the bleak mood:

When I speak of media capture, I'm referring to the atmosphere. Above all, it's about the atmosphere in which we work. There's a loss of respect, \[a sense of] importance in society, and a very poor financial situation... 60% of people working in journalism wanted to change jobs. (I1, 2024, 137–140)

In other words, most journalists feel undervalued and overworked, largely because the industry can no longer sustain professional livelihoods. The same interviewee remarked that this is “completely at odds with the reasons people become journalists”

(I1, 2024, 141–142), implying that many are staying out of inertia rather than passion for the craft.

Even those who remain in the field find themselves cornered. Some interviewees pointed out that genuine professional journalists have become a tiny minority. Despite the large number of outlets, as an independent media editor observed:

“No, there aren’t [many journalists left]. If I tried, I could probably count the number of professionals in this country who still do this job, adhering to journalistic codes, both internal and international. So, yes, going back to the initial statement: the media are captive. Some are under financial and political influence and control, while others are independent, doing their jobs, but we have it extremely hard. We’re cornered, isolated; we don’t get statements, we don’t get information, they push us aside and make us redundant, which is an additional risk to our work. So, we don’t face the same problems, but in a way, we’re all abused under the same circumstances. (I3, 2024, 43–49).

This comment reflects a sense that most newsroom staff either lack training or have been co-opted. Indeed, another journalist noted that entry into the profession has widened dramatically in recent years, but at the cost of quality. Many new hires are young and inexperienced and thus more willing to follow editorial orders. She shared the experience in her newsroom:

If someone lacks higher education, one of my colleagues previously worked at a gas station before entering the media, they are more likely to follow orders without question. They might ask pre-approved questions or remain silent during editorial meetings about policies. (I6, 2024, 51–54).

Over time this has normalized practices like sensationalism or unverified reporting – behaviors that true journalistic codes would normally prevent. Interviewees further linked the media’s decline in standards to the ease of entry and weak oversight. An interviewed reporter put it:

The media has become much easier to enter. However, this has led to a decline in quality... People now enter the media very easily and it seems like they are themselves contributing to the decline of the media image. They are more susceptible to pressures and compromises, normalizing things that should not be normal. (I6, 2024, 48–51).

Internal censorship is another pervasive effect. Journalists told of a newsroom culture where certain topics are considered off-limits and criticism is watered down by

editors. A pro-regime journalist admitted, during the interview, that even without anyone speaking deliberately:

It's understood that you're expected to report in a specific way. In pro-government media, you're expected to cover the ruling coalition and their projects in a positive and affirming light. Criticism is not allowed, at least not in the outlet I work for. In other outlets, there might be room for mild criticism, but it's always watered down. (I5, 2024, 54–57)

Similarly, an independent reporter recounted how her editors routinely edit interviews to soften any negative assessment. In her experience, the most common form of censorship was:

Many editors tend to dilute criticism, taking statements from analysts and critics and presenting them in a way that neutralizes their sharpness. If someone is a harsh critic, they're turned into a mild, neutral commentator. (I6, 2024, 84–90)

In practice, this means that bold questions or opinions are often edited out before broadcast, leaving only a cautious middle ground. The net effect on journalism is bleak. Investigative stories are scarce and the notion of holding power accountable has faded. Instead, many outlets participate in a cycle of “gaslighting” where citizens are told multiple conflicting or bland narratives to mask the lack of real pluralism. One interviewee noted that citizens themselves have become confused, unable to distinguish real journalists from manipulators. Journalists described feeling frustrated that their hard work is often ignored and undervalued. Nonetheless, a few spoke of the need for perseverance. An independent journalist pointed out that, no matter how hard it is, “we mustn't give up” the professional ideals, because abandoning them simply cedes the field entirely to propaganda (I4, 2024, 302–305).

6.5 Effects on Democracy

The capture of media in Serbia has taken a heavy toll on democratic life. Interviewees linked the deterioration of journalism directly to a decline in democratic norms and citizen engagement. Many interviewees argued that as media voices have become uniform, public discourse has polarized or even atrophied. One of the interviewed journalists deduced that the media's decline has “coincided with the decline of democracy” in Serbia. She further explained that over the last decade, as independent coverage fad-

ed, “traditional media have lost the race for professionalism,” leaving an echo chamber that mirrors the political decline (I3, 2024, 31–34).

Citizens’ attitudes reflect this trend. A sociologist who studies public opinion reported, in the interview, that many Serbs have become surprisingly complacent. According to his research, a large segment of the population now assumes one-sided news is normal. He described the situation as:

The public is generally apathetic toward democracy, leaning towards authoritarianism and anomie, so there is no public pressure for change. (I2, 2024, 38–40)

In other words, even though quality information is constitutionally guaranteed, many people have grown indifferent to the deficit in reporting. They do not demand better media because they have internalized the idea that dissenting voices are dangerous or irrelevant. He even pointed to survey data showing that around 43% of people believe they don’t need debates between different actors on television, indicating an “*authoritarian mindset*” among a significant portion of viewers (I2, 2024, 250–253).

This reflects a broader chilling effect on society. Without reliable news, public debate has become shallow. Interviewees noted that when one group of citizens turns on the TV, they hear virtually no alternative narratives. As one reporter explained:

Even outlets that label themselves as independent often merely nitpick the ruling party’s opponents without a real platform for opposition; meanwhile, the majority of channels with national frequencies reflect very similar phrases, sometimes even the exact same news. (I3, 2024, 89–93)

The result is a forced uniformity of opinion that makes open democratic discussion difficult. People who look for different viewpoints must turn to the internet or smaller, marginal media outlets, but these are often quickly dismissed as unreliable or biased.

Over time, this environment can erode citizens’ belief in democratic institutions. Several interviewees noted that public trust in the media has declined, and by extension trust in democracy itself has weakened. Indeed, an expert journalist stated that the only time media and government align is when the government claims to act in the public interest. Reflecting on the fragile relationship between the media and the government, Gojgić emphasized that any alignment between the two is conditional and easily broken once public interest is no longer the shared priority:

That was the government's attitude not just toward *B92*, but toward criticism in general. While we are on the same path, media and government can be aligned, provided the government works in the public interest and the media report on that. Only then. The moment either the government or the media diverge from the public interest, our paths split. Once the paths of the media and the government diverge, the government starts to resent the media. (I1, 2024, 164–169)

This antagonistic dynamic, where journalists are increasingly seen as enemies or scapegoats, feeds public cynicism. The data from the interviews suggests that Serbian democracy has been weakened by media capture. The homogenization of TV news means most citizens rarely encounter critical information about their government. With media acting as propaganda outlets, the political playing field is skewed. Many citizens have adapted to this situation, showing little demand for true press freedom. A climate of apathy and authoritarian norms has taken root, making meaningful democratic participation more difficult. In such a context, reviving democratic debate would require not just new voices, but a whole shift in how citizens view and consume media.

6.6 Recommendations

Interviewees offered several recommendations to counter media capture, though they acknowledged no simple fixes. The common denominator was the urgent need to restore independent institutions and enforce existing laws, an example best illustrated by the response of sociologist Gavrilović:

If I could dream, I would dream of a normal public broadcaster, *RTS*, where their professional integrity would be restored. The same applies to the regulator. If they [REM] did their job, then everything we've talked about, this disorganized media market, would be easily and quickly resolved by simply enforcing the law. (I2, 2024, 218–221).

Returning *RTS* to genuine public-service broadcasting and empowering REM to sanction violators could break the cycle of impunity that allows propaganda to flourish. He noted that with political will and proper oversight, the structural problem of unsustainability could in theory be solved.

Other interviewees focused on practical steps within the newsroom and civil society. One experienced journalist argued for legal deterrents to disinformation:

My recommendation, unfortunately considering the country we live in, is stricter penalties. Sensationalist and false reporting that distorts public perception should be punished more severely. Fines should be more substantial. The penalties should be harsher, including broadcast bans or similar measures. (I6, 2024, 176–180)

In her view, only more forceful consequences for propagandistic lies can slow the spread of fake news and hate speech. She also suggested that addressing labour conditions could reduce capture:

The second recommendation, albeit idealistic, is to reduce political pressures. However, to achieve media work and employee conditions must be better organized. That would also foster greater satisfaction among employees. (I6, 2024, 182–184)

Improving journalists' job security and pay might make them less vulnerable to political coercion. In sum, her ideas were a mixture of media-regulatory reform and newsroom management reforms.

Several interviewees pointed out the importance of long-term educational efforts. An independent media editor argued that change must begin with the next generation of journalists and citizens:

The only solution I see... is to work with younger, new people and teach them that this situation is not normal... [and to run] media literacy projects for high school students and younger generations. These new generations need to know what's acceptable and what isn't. (I4, 2024, 281–293)

Her advice was to instil professional values in young journalists, so they do not take the status quo for granted. By training students to critically evaluate information, civil society can sow the seeds of a more media-literate populace. She also emphasized that journalists themselves must continue to uphold ethical standards wherever possible, urging them not to “give up” in the face of adversity (I4, 2024, 294–305).

Lastly, a few respondents noted that broader political change is ultimately needed. One interviewee pointed out that a fundamental solution would come if Serbia reestablished regular and competitive elections:

It's crucial to have power turnover every four years so we can all live and work normally. That's fundamental; without it, things won't improve. (I4, 2024, 294–296)

Ensuring that no single party can dominate indefinitely would help reset the media landscape. While such a change is beyond the media sector alone, it reflects the view that media capture is intertwined with Serbia's overall political balance of power.

Each of these recommendations reflects a different aspect of the same underlying problem. The suggestions outlined in the interviews led to the deduction of a three-speed solution that could be implemented in the coming years. In the short term, stronger enforcement of existing media laws and penalties for abuses could raise the cost of propaganda. In the medium term, investing in media education and professionalization could strengthen journalistic resilience. In the long term, only a broader return to democratic competition might fundamentally dismantle the “*media cartel*” (I1, 2024). Interviewees generally agreed there are no quick fixes, but they stressed that persistent effort, by journalists, educators and citizens alike, is necessary to gradually reverse the decade-long decline in media freedom.

6.7 Chapter Summary

A complete thematic analysis of interviews reveals a deeply **captured media landscape** in Serbia's television sector. Respondents consistently found that **political funding dominates** the industry: virtually all outlets depend on state-linked budgets or allied advertisers, so “those who control the funding” effectively control content. In this **financial capture** regime, media survive only by catering to financiers. Equally, formal institutions meant to safeguard pluralism have been **co-opted** by the ruling party. Public broadcasters, funded by the state, are treated as government mouthpieces (“*We pay for you, and you must align with us*”) and the media regulator likewise “doesn't do its job” independently. In practice, then, media laws exist largely on paper: editorial appointments and licensing serve partisan ends while nearly **all TV channels** end up echoing the incumbent government's line.

The interviews further paint a picture of a **propaganda-saturated** news environment. Coverage is overwhelmingly “*Vučić-centric*”, with President Vučić portrayed as the dominant actor and genuine criticism largely suppressed. Even outlets that appear pluralistic tend to repeat the same narratives, creating only a “façade of pluralism.” Be-

hind the scenes, editors routinely dilute or omit critical voices. Journalists report that criticism of the ruling coalition is simply not allowed in pro-regime newsrooms. These pressures have **demoralized the profession**. Low pay and insecure jobs drive many experienced reporters out of the field, journalism is now often described as “an underpaid profession”, while those who remain (often very young or inexperienced) are more likely to follow orders uncritically. The overall result is a weakened news media environment, where self-censorship has become routine, investigative reporting is increasingly rare and professional standards have significantly declined.

This captured media system has clear consequences for Serbia’s democracy. With television delivering a uniform, pro-government narrative, many citizens have grown **apathetic or accepting of authoritarian norms**. Interviewees noted that a large share of the public now assumes one-sided news is normal and sees little value in hearing opposing views. Trust in domestic TV journalism has plummeted. Citizens no longer trust what is reported on television and voters increasingly rely on foreign or online sources. Crucially, without an independent press, elections and accountability suffer. Voters lack unbiased information, and public debate is shallow or polarized. To combat media capture, experts offered a multi-faceted strategy: enforce existing media laws with **stricter sanctions** for disinformation, improve journalists’ pay and working conditions to reduce political pressure and rebuild truly independent institutions (e.g. a professional public broadcaster and an impartial regulator). Education and media-literacy efforts were also stressed to prepare the next generation for critical consumption. In sum, the chapter concludes that Serbia’s television media operate under a **“capture regime”** driven by financial and institutional ties to power, and that only broad legal, institutional and civic reforms can gradually restore media freedom.

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although this thesis addresses a wide range of issues, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that shaped its scope and outcomes. These limitations, mostly contextual in nature, stemmed from constraints in time, resources and limited access to certain participants, as some journalists were reluctant to respond to interview requests, reflecting a lack of transparency. Recognizing them is essential not only for the credibility of this work, but also for guiding future research in this field.

Firstly, the most significant limitation is its exclusive focus on television media. Due to limited time and resources, the research was confined to national television channels. While influential, these channels represent only one segment of Serbia's broader media ecosystem. Other formats, including online platforms, radio stations, print newspapers and social media-based news outlets, were not covered, despite their growing relevance in shaping public opinion and political discourse. As such, the analysis may overlook key dynamics present in those sectors, such as digital propaganda, online harassment of journalists or rising misinformation through non-televised formats.

Secondly, the research design relied on semi-structured interviews conducted under conditions of anonymity and time-bound fieldwork. While the interviews yielded rich and detailed testimony, they were conducted in a climate of political pressure and professional risk. As a result, some interviewees may have chosen not to disclose certain experiences or offered more cautious reflections than they might have in other contexts. This limitation is particularly relevant for pro-government journalists, who may have felt greater pressure to withhold information or avoid criticism. Moreover, all notable pro-government journalists who were contacted for participation remained unavailable until the completion of this thesis. This represents an inherent limitation in qualitative research on sensitive political topics, although care was taken to ensure trust and confidentiality, it cannot be fully ruled out.

Lastly, a **unique limitation** arose after the interviews had already been concluded. Several interviewed journalists informally remarked, off the record, that certain opposition politicians have also attempted to influence editorial decisions at independent television stations such as *NI* and *Nova S*. These efforts reportedly involved pressuring editors to book sympathetic guests or refusing to appear on programs where they anticipated difficult questions. Although this issue lies outside the formal scope of the present study, it is noteworthy as an emerging and underexplored phenomenon. It may suggest the possibility of media capture attempts by opposition actors, which could complicate the dominant narrative that only government and ruling-party officials exert pressure on the media.

In summary, while this thesis provides an extensive account of political and institutional capture in the Serbian media landscape, it represents only a starting point. The challenges to media freedom in Serbia are complex, evolving and increasingly multi-dimensional. Broader and more inclusive research is essential to fully understand the

dynamics of media capture and to support the development of more resilient and democratic media systems in Serbia and the wider region.

8. Conclusion

This thesis investigated media capture in Serbian television from 2013 to 2023 by conducting qualitative interviews with journalists and media experts. Its purpose was to uncover how the Serbian media system has been influenced and controlled over the past decade. It aimed to identify the main forms of capture at work, to explain the mechanisms by which political actors exert influence, to assess the consequences for journalists and democracy as well as and to propose ways to strengthen media freedom. In addressing these questions, the research drew on the theoretical framework of media capture outlined in *Chapter 2*, the literature review contextualizing the development of Serbian media in *Chapter 3*, a chronological account of key political events over the past decade in *Chapter 4* and the empirical analysis of interview data in *Chapter 6*, which yielded the most insightful findings. These findings paint a detailed picture of a media environment marked by systemic control and decline.

The following sections address each research question in turn, synthesizing the empirical findings to provide a structured analysis of the forms, mechanisms, consequences and potential remedies of media capture in Serbian television.

Research Question 1: What are the predominant forms and instances of media capture observed in Serbian television media between 2013 and 2023?

The empirical analysis identified two predominant forms of media capture in Serbian television - **financial capture** and **institutional capture**. Financial capture emerged as a fundamental mechanism. Journalists and experts consistently described a media market devoid of independent, competitive funding. Instead, most outlets depend on money from state sources or political allies. For example, one interviewee noted bluntly that “media are controlled by those who have the money,” meaning that outlets survive only by courting government funding and pro-regime advertisers (I1, 2024). The market is deliberately “unsustainable” and oversaturated with TV channels, but overall advertising revenues remain small. This forces stations to rely on political patrons. Television outlets that produce pro-government content are rewarded with public advertising and subsidies, while independent stations find themselves financially strug-

gling. In practice, these outlets remain economically viable only so long as they serve ruling-party interests. A media expert summarized that “media capture fundamentally relies on the distribution of money” (I2, 2024). In short, financial capture takes the form of a clientelist funding system, in which economic dependence on the state or ruling coalition effectively trades editorial obedience for survival.

Closely linked to financial mechanisms is **institutional capture** of the media’s formal oversight bodies. The data show that institutions meant to protect media pluralism, notably the public broadcaster (*RTS*) and the media regulatory agency (*REM*), have themselves been co-opted. Interviewees reported that key positions in these institutions were filled with ruling-party loyalists, so that the constitutional guarantees of “true, complete and timely information” are hollow. Gavrilović also described the media landscape as featuring “a regulator that doesn’t do its job, a public broadcaster that still acts like a party TV, and political power that prevents the implementation of media laws” (I2, 2024). In effect, the public broadcaster is treated like a state television. Journalists understand that “the message is: ‘We pay you, you’re ours.’” (I1, 2024). The regulatory authority operates under the government’s thumb and routinely refrains from sanctioning pro-regime outlets that break rules, e.g. by spreading hate speech or false claims. Thus, the formal system of checks and balances has been neutralized. Media laws remain on paper, but no independent agency enforces them (Babić, 2024). Media institutions are subservient to political power, meaning that legal protections for press freedom do not translate into actual autonomy. In summary, the interviews identified financial dependency and the subversion of media institutions as the key forms of capture. These two forms together create an environment where virtually all television outlets are constrained to follow the ruling coalition’s agenda or face economic strangulation.

Research Question 2: How did political actors influence television media outlets in Serbia during this period?

Political actors, especially the President and his ruling party, were found to exercise near-total control over television content. Interviews revealed that the majority of TV media outlets have been placed under a “‘Vučić-centric control’”, in which the President dominates coverage and alternative viewpoints are usually marginalized. In practice, this influence operates through several channels. First, the content and editorial line of national stations are directly managed. Editors and journalists internalize that they are

expected to portray the ruling coalition and its projects in “a positive and affirming light”, and that criticism is not allowed. Journalists from pro-government outlets confirmed that it is virtually understood in the newsroom how to report, negative remarks about the government are routinely edited out or softened. Even journalists in nominally independent outlets described how their editors insist on diluting any criticism and neutralizing harsh commentary. In effect, the government sets the narrative, and the media follow it. This pattern aligns with documented studies of Serbian media bias in favour of the ruling party (Barać-Savić, 2022).

Second, this control extends to who gets on screen. Monitoring data and interviewees agreed that President Vučić and his associates receive overwhelmingly positive coverage across state-owned and private stations alike. In contrast, opposition parties, even moderate ones, are effectively marginalized or “censored” on the main channels. Talk shows or news programs might occasionally feature someone portrayed as an opposition voice, but these guests are typically hand-picked to reinforce the regime’s view. The appearance of alternative voices is usually described as a mere façade. Token “opposition” figures serve only to echo propaganda, not to challenge it (I4, 2024). In practice, most national channels, both public and private, “reflect very similar phrases” and often literally the same news story, all aligning with the ruling party’s line.

Third, the majority media system functions as a propaganda machine. Interviewees depicted television news as saturated with content aligned to a preset ruling-party agenda, repeated day and night. Content across stations is homogenized while the Serbian TV increasingly “resembles propaganda tools” rather than fulfilling any public-service role (I2, 2024). Journalists reported that news bulletins simply repeat government narratives and the ruling leader’s talking points. The sociologist Zoran Gavrilović spoke of a “populism industry” in which the media are literally “turned into tools of propaganda” to establish the leader’s personal rule (BIRODI, 2020b). This pro-government saturation means the average viewer hears a single, cohesive message. Any real plurality of perspectives has shrunk to a fringe. Interviewees estimated that genuinely independent or critical reporting makes up only about 20–25% of what the public sees. For most citizens who rely on television, the president’s viewpoint is presented as the only reality.

In sum, the interviews make clear that political actors influence television by controlling both the content and the conditions of content production. Through the distribution of funding, the placement of loyalists in key institutions and the enforcement of

editorial directives, the ruling party has effectively turned Serbian TV into an echo chamber for its own agenda. Journalists describe the expectation that every news story “supports a single, cohesive system of thought” (I3, 2024). Even when media outlets are formally independent, they operate under pressure to follow the official script or risk losing access to funds, licenses, or even their jobs. This pervasive influence of political actors over editorial decisions has fundamentally reshaped how information reaches the Serbian public.

Research Question 3: What implications does media capture have for journalistic autonomy, media freedom and the democratic process in Serbia?

The consequences of this captured media environment have been profound for both journalists and the functioning of democracy. Journalistic autonomy and media freedom have been severely curtailed. Interviewees described the newsroom atmosphere as demoralized: most journalists feel undervalued, poorly paid and fearful. One interviewee noted that many of her colleagues are considering leaving the profession, citing a “loss of respect” for journalistic work and a “very poor financial situation” as primary reasons (I7, 2024). These personal observations are substantiated by available data on working conditions in the public broadcasting sector. According to Mihajlović and his research (2016), employees at *RTS* earn an average net salary of approximately 400 euros per month, with only 7% earning above 600 euros. Moreover, there have been reports of irregular salary payments, further contributing to job insecurity and dissatisfaction. This correlation between low and unstable wages and professional disillusionment underscores the systemic challenges faced by journalists in Serbia.

In other words, the industry does not reward independent, professional journalism anymore. As a result, many of those who remain are either co-opted into the system or lack the experience or security to resist pressure. A media editor noted that the number of true, professionally-trained journalists in Serbia has shrunk to a handful (I3, 2024). Many new hires are young, inexperienced, and thus easier to instruct. This influx of underqualified staff has normalized sensationalism and unverified reporting, thereby eroding professional journalistic standards (I4, 2024).

Internal censorship has become routine. Journalists reported that entire topics are considered off-limits unless framed in pro-government terms. One reporter from a regime-aligned station candidly admitted that without anyone explicitly ordering it, “it’s

understood” that negative coverage of the ruling coalition will not air (I6, 2024). Independent journalists recounted how their own critical interviews are edited by editors who reduce harsh analysis into mild commentary. In practice, investigative reporting is scarce. Many interviewees talked about a cycle of “*gaslighting*” in which the public is inundated with bland, official narratives designed to obscure reality. Citizens become confused about what is trustworthy news and what is manipulation. A few resilient journalists insisted that professional ideals must be upheld despite the pressure, warning that otherwise the field is ceded entirely to propaganda.

Such conditions present a sharp decline in media freedom itself. Journalistic freedom now exists largely on paper. The combination of financial dependencies and overt editorial controls means that the right to report freely is frequently violated. Journalists may legally have the right to cover any story, but doing so risks losing their livelihood. Without independent funding or supportive institutions, media outlets functionally lack the ability to challenge the government. The expert consensus is that truly independent television reporting has virtually vanished from the mainstream spectrum (Babić, 2024). This erosion of media freedom has also bled into the broader political culture.

The democratic process has suffered as a result. In the interviews, the decline of media pluralism was directly linked to the decline of democracy in Serbia. With television news now an echo chamber of the ruling party, citizens receive a one-sided political narrative. Public debate has become shallow and polarized. The interviewed sociologist reported that many citizens have come to accept one-sided news as normal (I2, 2024). A significant portion of the population now views debate and dissent with suspicion. Nearly half reportedly believe that televised political debates between opposing figures are unnecessary. In other words, an “*authoritarian mindset*” (I2, 2024) has taken root among viewers. The public majority now sees dissenting voices as dangerous or irrelevant, weakening grassroots pressure for media reform.

This apathy and control of information undermine accountability and citizen engagement. When most channels repeat the same government-aligned phrases, anyone seeking real alternatives must turn to fringe sources or social media, which mainstream society often distrusts. Many interviewees noted that public trust in traditional media has collapsed, and with it trust in democratic institutions. In daily life, this means that fewer citizens receive reliable information about government performance. Gojgić (I1, 2024) gave a thoughtful account of the situation by stating that the only time media and

government appear aligned is when both claim to serve the public interest. As soon as their interests diverge, the government begins portraying journalists as enemies.

In short, media capture has undermined the watchdog function of the press and, by extension, weakened the country's democracy. The homogenization of news and the elevation of propaganda have skewed the political playing field heavily in favour of the incumbents. Democratic participation has become more difficult when the citizens are poorly informed and apathetic. The interviews suggest that for Serbian democracy to recover, not only do new independent media voices need to emerge, but citizens must also relearn to expect and demand pluralistic discourse.

Research Question 4: Which recommendations can be proposed to safeguard media freedom in Serbia?

Interviewees offered a range of remedies, emphasizing that no single quick fix exists, but that coordinated actions could begin to reverse the decline. First and most immediate, they recommended restoring and enforcing independent media institutions. This means turning the public broadcaster (RTS) back into a genuine public service outlet and empowering the regulatory body (REM) to apply existing laws. As sociologist Gavrilović mentioned in the interview: “if REM were truly independent and willing to penalize violations, the disordered media market could be rapidly corrected simply through law enforcement” (I2, 2024). In practice, this calls for filling key positions with professional, non-partisan members and imposing consequences on outlets that spread disinformation or hate speech. Another interviewee argued that stronger legal deterrents are needed, such as higher fines, broadcast suspensions, or even license revocations for channels that systematically distort news or incite divisions. (I6, 2024). The idea is that harsher penalties would raise the cost of propaganda and reduce the prevalence of fake news in the short term.

Second, several respondents stressed improving work conditions for journalists. Better pay, job security and training could make media professionals less vulnerable to political coercion. One recommendation was to regularize contracts and living wages so that reporters are not forced into dependence on patronage for survival (I6, 2024). Such measures would support more independent journalism from within newsrooms. Third, interviewees highlighted the need for education and media literacy. Many saw that changing the next generation's attitudes is crucial. Initiatives could include media ethics

training for journalism students, as well as critical media literacy programs for high school and university students. An independent editor argued that teaching young people what balanced reporting should look like, and what is unacceptable, could lay the groundwork for future demand for pluralism (I3, 2024). By instilling professional values and equipping citizens to spot propaganda, such efforts can slowly rebuild the culture of an informed public. Journalists themselves also bear responsibility. The few who continue to work ethically should persevere and set examples, refusing to abandon their ideals even in adversity.

Lastly, many interviewees noted that broad political change is ultimately linked to media freedom. They pointed out that regular and competitive elections, ensuring that no one party maintains power indefinitely, are a fundamental condition. Without turnover of political leadership, structural media reforms will remain elusive. In other words, safeguarding media freedom is not purely a technical task within the media sector, it is interlinked with Serbia's entire democratic framework. Advocating for strong, independent institutions goes hand in hand with advocating for pluralistic politics.

To summarize the answer to the final research question, the recommendations fall into short-, medium-, and long-term strategies. Short-term measures involve strictly enforcing the law and sanctions on media violations. Medium-term actions focus on strengthening journalists and their work environments. Long-term change depends on educating society and ensuring democratic power shifts. While challenging, interviewees agreed that persistent effort across these areas is necessary to slowly restore a healthier media ecosystem.

Synthesis

The interview findings correspond closely with the theoretical concepts of media capture outlined in *Chapter 2*. In theoretical terms, Serbia's case exemplifies the kinds of capture first defined by Mungiu-Pippidi (2008): media that "never attain or lose their autonomy" remain in an "intermediate state" where outside groups use them for their own purposes (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008). The heavy reliance on state-connected funding fits this model. Serbia's television outlets lack an independent economic foundation while they operate under the influence of political and oligarchic interests. This situation mirrors the political-economic theories described by Besley and Prat (2006) and McChesney (2008), who warn that when media owners and powerful interests collude,

accountability is undermined. In practice, the interviews showed precisely this symbiotic relationship. Media owners and/or managers provide loyal coverage in exchange for favourable treatment or financial support from the government (Besley & Prat, 2006; McChesney, 2008). This dynamic is in line with the Center for International Media Assistance's definition of media capture as a "mutually corrupting relationship" between media and political leaders (CIMA, n.d.).

The phenomenon of tone bias, previously theorized in *Chapter 2*, is vividly confirmed by the data. Tone bias, the systematic positive framing of a regime and negative framing of opponents, was evident across the television landscape. President Vučić received near-unanimously positive coverage, while even mild criticism of the government was silenced. This observation is consistent with the idea that an authoritarian regime has a strong incentive to ensure favourable portrayals of itself and its leader. Indeed, the interviewees described a cult of personality, news coverage praised the leader's strength and projects so consistently that it built a carefully curated image of him. Hence, the actual media content matches the theory that autocratic regimes cultivate a personalistic narrative through captured media.

Historical institutionalism, another component of the theoretical framework, also helps explain the findings. Serbia's media institutions still bear the legacy of past regimes. The public broadcaster and the regulatory authority function more as remnants of a state-controlled system than as autonomous institutions. This echoes the thesis notion that established institutional patterns (e.g. socialist or earlier illiberal regimes) are hard to break, continuing to influence how new media operates. The enduring legacy of state-aligned public broadcasters enables the ruling party to treat RTS as its communication tool, an issue similarly observed by Milošavljević and Poler (2018) in their analysis of public service broadcasters across the Balkans. The interviews showed that despite formal reforms, old practices persist: the regulatory body has been effectively neutered and public trust in its fairness is virtually non-existent (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018).

Finally, the empirical consequences align with broader democratic theory. As predicted by the literature, a captive media leads to homogenized information and an ill-informed public, echoing Prat's argument that concentration yields less political information and more bias (Prat, 2015). The decline in trust and the rise of passive, even authoritarian-minded citizens were exactly the democratic threats outlined by media capture scholars. In short, the findings show how Serbia's experience concretely implements the models of financial dominance, symbiotic media-government relations, tone bias

and institutional legacies. The national experience thus serves as a practical validation of the media capture theories presented in *Chapter 2*.

Overall Argument and Contribution

This thesis has demonstrated that media capture in Serbia's television landscape is a systemic, multifaceted process that has intensively eroded both media freedom and the health of democracy over the last decade. The main argument is that the ruling party has, through financial leverage and institutional control, remade Serbian television media into a near-monolithic propaganda network. In this environment, independent journalism is marginalized and the pluralistic information environment essential to democratic accountability is severely weakened.

The contribution of this research is twofold. Empirically, it provides a detailed, up-to-date account of how media capture operates in Serbia. By grounding the analysis in the perspectives of journalists and experts, the thesis uncovers the specific mechanisms, such as advertising allocation, regulatory appointments and editorial directives, that have driven the decline. These insights enrich the existing literature by offering evidence from the field, filling a gap between broad theoretical claims and on-the-ground practice. The work also highlights the peculiarities of Serbia's case, such as the centrality of one political figure in media narratives, which adds nuance to general theories of capture.

Additionally, this thesis merges what previously has been discussed in theoretical research with concrete reality. It shows that the dynamics predicted by media capture theories are indeed at play in Serbia. At the same time, the findings underscore the urgency of these issues in a country at a critical stage of its democratic development and EU integration. By explicitly linking the interview data to the theoretical framework, the thesis clarifies how phenomena like tone bias and institutional subversion manifest in practice.

Finally, the contributions to the field of media studies lie not only in diagnosing the problems but also in proposing possible remedies. The recommendations synthesized from interviews can inform policymakers, media practitioners and civil society advocates about where to focus efforts. In doing so, the research moves beyond analysis to action, emphasizing that safeguarding media freedom is achievable through concerted institutional reforms and civic education.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that the decline of independent television media in Serbia is not merely a byproduct of broader political trends but an intentionally engineered outcome of media capture. By documenting the length and depth of this process, the thesis builds a comprehensive case study that contributes to the academic research on media control in transitional democracies. It underscores that without serious reforms, such as restoring independent oversight and fostering a culture of journalistic professionalism, Serbia's information environment will remain constrained. The knowledge gathered here thus provides both a warning and a roadmap, understanding how media capture has taken hold is a necessary first step toward reclaiming a free and pluralistic media system.

9. References

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10. Appendix A: Interview Guide & Tables

The interviews were conducted based on the following list of questions:

Q1: *Could you please start by telling us about your professional background and your current role?*

Q2: *How would you describe the TV media landscape in Serbia over the past ten years?*

Q3: *In your opinion, what are the main factors that have contributed to media capture in Serbia?*

Q4: *Could you share specific instances of TV media capture that you've witnessed or are aware of in Serbia?*

Q5: *In your experience, which actors and/or factors exert the most influence over media outlets in Serbia?*

Q6: *Were there instances of (in)direct political pressure on media outlets which you could share?*

Q7: *Could you identify the institutions that you perceive to have been most instrumental in the erosion of media freedom in Serbia?*

Q8: *What impact does media capture have on journalistic autonomy and editorial freedom in Serbia?*

Q9: *How does media capture in Serbia affect media freedom and the broader democratic processes (e.g. elections)?*

Q10: *Based on your experience and observations, what recommendations would you propose to safeguard media freedom in Serbia?*

Q11: *What roles can different stakeholders play in ensuring media freedom in Serbia?*

Table 3

Descriptive Features of the Interviews

Interviewees	Interview Length	Format	Transcript Pages
I1	01:05:40	online	18
I2	00:40:05	online	14
I3	00:59:54	online	19
I4	00:36:34	online	14
I5	00:25:17	online	8
I6	00:27:22	online	10
I7	00:44:14	online	12
I8	00:32:10	online	9

Table 4

Final Themes and Coding System

Themes	Codes System	Exemplary Data Extract
1. Financial Capture	Financial capture, State funding bias, Media system unsustainability, Pay-to-play principle, Oversaturated media market/offer, Ownership influence, Oligarchic backing, Subscription funding model	The main problem is that most media outlets, even private ones, rely heavily on state support. Just look at the capital behind the most-watched media outlets in Serbia—it's clear they couldn't generate such revenue from advertising alone. It's undoubtedly direct state support. (I5, 2024, 163-166)

2. Institutional Capture	Institutional capture, Political domination in oversight, Media Laws vs Reality, Regulatory failure, Press Council limitations, Judicial inaction, Inactive institutions, Government control over the state's telecommunications operator, Frequency licensing as control, Media takeover via privatization, Public broadcaster (RTS) as “state TV”	REM is entirely under state control, staffed by people, some of whom I know personally, like professors from my university. I’m not sure if they’re still involved, but it doesn’t matter in the end. They can issue reports or impose fines, but they change nothing. (I5, 2024, 97-100)
3. Political Influence and Propaganda	Direct political pressure, Subtle capture, Simultaneous capture, Populism industry, Cult of personality, Speech structure manipulation, Smear campaigns, Crisis spin management, Digital propaganda, Façade of pluralism, Negative opposition portrayal, Presidential dominance in air-time, Counter-narrative, Guest boycotts, Misuse of “other side” principle, Election coverage bias, Divergent news agendas, Polarized media “cartels”, Media Polarization (“Trenches”), Media capture atmosphere	We have surveys, Danilo. We conducted a survey in 2022, which showed that only 20% of people who currently vote for the SNS would vote for them without Vučić. His influence is incredible. (I2, 2024, 174-175)
4. Effects on Journalism	Decline of journalistic quality, Sensationalism & fake news, Self-censorship mechanisms, Conformity in newsrooms, Underqualified workforce, Editorial pressure, Working conditions, Daily pressure, Intensified pressure post-2012, Young reporters, Journalists’ vulnerability, Internal resilience, Upholding journalistic ethics code, Journalist safety issues, Subtle repression methods, Social intelligence	Another issue I see is the rise of unchecked sensationalism and fake news. This used to be associated with tabloids, but now those tabloids have migrated to TV, broadcasting unverified stories. These often incite hatred, target individuals, and contribute to a wave of sensationalism. I consider this a significant flaw in today’s media landscape. (I6, 2024, 57-60)
5. Effects on Democracy	Audience influence, Audience authoritarianism, News avoidance, Societal reconstruction, Parallel media realities, Distrust of international actors, Public/media literacy, Civil society failure, Erosion of state, Selective objectivity	A large part of Serbia’s population has developed an authoritarian mindset. According to our research, around 43% of people believe they don’t need debates between different actors on television. In other words, we’ve become an authoritarian society. (I2, 2024, 250-253)
6. Recommendations	Recommendations and safeguards, NGO & regulator role, Organizational reform, Stricter penalties, Broad responsibility, Networking & solidarity, Support for independent media, EU conditionality, Regional pluralism	We need to strengthen already independent newsrooms and ensure their survival. It’s a matter of survival, you know, with this silent suffocation of freedoms. (I3, 2024, 357-358)

11. Appendix B: English & German Abstracts

Abstract

This thesis investigates the capture of Serbian television between 2013 and 2023, a period marked by declining media freedom and increasing political and economic influence over news content. Drawing on the concept of media capture, it explores four main questions: (1) *What forms and instances of capture occurred during this decade?* (2) *How did political actors influence television media outlets?* (3) *What were the consequences for journalism and democratic processes?* and (4) *What recommendations do media experts and journalists propose to protect media freedom?*

To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was applied, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight participants ($N = 8$), including journalists from both independent and pro-government outlets as well as media experts. Thematic analysis was conducted using inductive coding in MAXQDA software to ensure analytic transparency and consistency across the data.

The findings reveal a dual structure of media capture. *Financial dependency* on state-controlled advertising and subsidies incentivizes editorial loyalty, while *institutional capture* is achieved through the politicization of regulators and public broadcasters. These mechanisms allow government-aligned narratives to dominate television content while silencing dissent. The resulting media landscape is characterized by widespread self-censorship, deteriorating working conditions for journalists, polarization of audiences and declining public trust in media institutions.

Interviewees propose a range of reforms, including restoring regulatory independence, transforming public service broadcasting, improving the material and professional conditions of journalists, expanding media literacy efforts and strengthening civil society engagement. The study concludes that reversing media capture in Serbia requires comprehensive and coordinated legal, institutional as well as civic reforms to restore pluralism, trust and journalistic autonomy.

Keywords: Media Capture, Serbia, Television, Journalism, Democracy, Thematic Analysis, Self-Censorship, Institutional Reform

Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Vereinnahmung des serbischen Fernsehens im Zeitraum von 2013 bis 2023 – einer Phase, die durch einen Rückgang der Medienfreiheit sowie einen zunehmenden politischen und wirtschaftlichen Einfluss auf redaktionelle Inhalte gekennzeichnet ist. Auf Grundlage des Konzepts der „Media Capture“ werden vier zentrale Forschungsfragen behandelt: (1) *Welche Formen und konkreten Ausprägungen der Medienvereinnahmung traten in diesem Jahrzehnt auf?* (2) *Wie beeinflussten politische Akteure Fernsehsender in Serbien?* (3) *Welche Auswirkungen hatte diese Entwicklung auf den Journalismus und demokratische Prozesse?* und (4) *Welche Empfehlungen schlagen Medienexpert:innen und Journalist:innen zum Schutz der Medienfreiheit vor?*

Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen wurde ein qualitatives Forschungsdesign gewählt. Es wurden leitfadengestützte, vertiefende Interviews mit acht Personen geführt ($N = 8$), darunter Journalistinnen aus unabhängigen sowie regierungsnahen Medien und weitere Medienexpertinnen. Die Auswertung erfolgte mittels thematischer Analyse und induktiver Codierung mit der Software MAXQDA, um analytische Nachvollziehbarkeit und Konsistenz zu gewährleisten.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine doppelte Struktur der Medienvereinnahmung. Einerseits führt die *finanzielle Abhängigkeit* von staatlich kontrollierter Werbung und Subventionen zu redaktioneller Loyalität. Andererseits wird *institutionelle Vereinnahmung* durch die Politisierung von Regulierungsbehörden und öffentlich-rechtlichen Sendern ermöglicht. Diese Mechanismen begünstigen eine mediale Dominanz regierungsnaher Narrative und unterdrücken kritische Berichterstattung. Die daraus resultierende Medienlandschaft ist geprägt von weit verbreiteter Selbstzensur, verschlechterten Arbeitsbedingungen für Journalist*innen, einer Polarisierung des Publikums sowie schwindendem Vertrauen in mediale Institutionen.

Die Befragten sprechen sich für umfassende Reformen aus, darunter die Wiederherstellung regulatorischer Unabhängigkeit, eine Reform des öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunks, bessere materielle und berufliche Rahmenbedingungen für Journalist*innen, eine Stärkung der Medienkompetenz sowie mehr zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement. Die Studie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass eine Umkehr der Medienvereinnahmung in Serbien nur durch koordinierte rechtliche, institutionelle und gesellschaftliche Reformen möglich ist, um Pluralismus, Vertrauen und journalistische Unabhängigkeit wiederherzustellen.

Schlagwörter: Mediengefangenschaft, Serbien, Fernsehen, Journalismus, Demokratie, Thematische Analyse, Selbstzensur, Einrichtungsreform