

Media capture: Toolkit for 21st century autocrats

Special dossier

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Introduction

After the Cold War, freedom of speech appeared to have emerged victorious in many places. But what if the powerful can use 'information abundance' to find new ways of stifling you, flipping the ideals of freedom of speech to crush dissent, while always leaving enough anonymity to be able to claim deniability?

Peter Pomerantsev (This Is Not Propaganda - Adventures in the War Against Reality)

In Alina Mungiu-Pippidi's definition, media capture is a situation in which the media are controlled "either directly by governments or by vested interests" which seek political influence rather than profit. The result is the creation of a hybrid regime, halfway between democracy and totalitarian state. Guriev and Treisman have labelled "informational autocrats" the new typology of political elites, whose main strategy to maintain power is to ensure the control of information flows through a series of mechanisms without directly attacking journalists.

"The Hungarian example is relevant", stated Centre for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) director Marius Dragomir in an interview with the Resource Centre team: "they don't need to beat or kill anybody because they created an environment where independent journalism is totally wrung out to the fringes of the accepted, accessed and trusted government propaganda (where it has no impact, more or less)".

The turning point that created the necessary preconditions for media capture to flourish, according to Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, was the [digital revolution](#): as a matter of fact this process, coupled with transitional factors and with the effects of the global financial crisis, allowed a new mixed rationale for owning an outlet to emerge, namely a mix of both power and profit, with an increasingly apparent tendency towards power.

The first symptoms of media capture began to be felt in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 2000s: a context in which already fragile media systems, freshly restructured and just launched into the market economy, were first destabilised by the digital revolution, then hit by the global financial crisis, and finally preyed upon by oligarchs who rushed, with the approval of their governments, to fill the void left by the forced exodus of the foreign media that had helped dismantle state monopolies in the difficult transition process following the collapse of socialist systems.

As confirmed by Dragomir, whose [four-component model](#) will serve as the theoretical basis for this dossier, "Eastern Europe stands out as a region much plagued by capture mostly because of a ripe culture of exchanges of bad practices (Poland getting inspired by Hungary, oligarchs in various countries

expanding abroad, etc.). We can't speak in Western Europe of the type of capture that we see in Eastern Europe. However, there are signs that such control mechanisms are emerging from time to time (attacks on public media in Austria and Denmark, capture of the media by the banks in Spain, expansion of the Czech oligarchy to France, etc.)”.

Regulatory Capture

One of the most worrying aspects of the media capture phenomenon concerns the functionality of the regulatory authorities, in charge of monitoring and sanctioning the actions that violate the laws in the media sphere. When they are not independent, we come across the so-called regulatory capture, a term that indicates the tendency of the regulator to be controlled by the political elites, thus advancing their agenda to the detriment of professional standards.

According to best international practices, regulators are meant to be functionally and financially independent from state bodies. However, interference often hampers the correct functioning of these institutions. Among others, interference can take the form of politicised composition of the management board, non-reaction in numerous cases of violation of the law, partisan licensing, and inadequate sanctioning of broadcasters for the violation of existing regulations.

As Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) director Mark Nelson pointed out in an interview conducted by the Resource Centre team, “independent regulatory institutions are as important to the media environment as independent central banks are to the monetary system. Yet, countries have more difficulty in establishing and sustaining independent media regulators. Politicians see independent regulators as a barrier to their ability to use the resources of the state to influence media coverage, and they often move quickly to make sure that the regulatory institutions are under their control”.

Regulatory capture, therefore, is symptomatic of harsh politicisation, negatively affecting public information and jeopardising democratic processes in a society. Since regulators are generally subjected to functional approval (on budget, annual reports, members' appointment) by either the parliament or the government, “it is usually the first step that governments take in [capturing media](#) simply because it's the easiest”.

Regulatory Capture in action

At European level, an example of how regulators can be captured despite appropriate legal backing is Romania: as stated in the [Media Pluralism Monitor 2016](#) report on the country, published by

the Centre for Media Pluralism and Freedom (CMPF), “although the independence and effectiveness of the media authority is at a low risk level (23%), the authority is not truly effective in its mission. This is partly because its interaction with a slow judiciary leads to delayed implementation of decisions and partly due to the lack of professionalism of council members, who act as enforcers of narrow party – and occasionally private – interests, rather than as guarantors of the law”.

A similar situation, detected by the same Centre, is found in [Bulgaria](#), where “although task and responsibilities of the media authorities are clearly defined in the law and the regulatory body is generally transparent about its activities (...), appointment procedures do not fully guarantee political independence in practice”. As we will see, more critical cases concern Serbia, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.

The Serbian Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) represents an example of politicisation of the board: [on the evidence](#) given by expert Gordana Suša with regards to the election of candidate Goran Peković to the REM’s board, “the competent Committee for culture and information of the Serbian Parliament annulled the competition and repeated it to the benefit of the ‘winner’ Goran Peković, who was supported by the ruling coalition”.

But it is the Hungarian case that causes the greatest concerns: as reported by Nelson to the research team, “media-regulatory takeover was an early and explicit policy of the Orban government when it took power in 2010”. As a matter of fact, according to [Medialandscapes](#): “in the 2010-2014 parliamentary cycle, Fidesz took control of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, the Hungarian Wireless Agency and the Public Service Foundation via its appointees”. After that, [confirms Freedom House](#), the regulator “has used its powers to selectively refuse licenses to independent or opposition-leaning outlets”.

Finally, in Poland, as highlighted by [Annabelle Chapman](#), the National Media Council “does not even pretend to be an independent body. Three of its five members are PiS lawmakers: Czabański, who serves as chairman, along with Elżbieta Kruk and Joanna Lichočka. The other two members, Juliusz Braun and Grzegorz Podzorny, were recommended by PO and Kukiz”.

From Public Service Media to Party Service Media

“Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting’s only raison d’etre is [public service](#)”

As a result of the latest technological developments, namely the digital convergence, the term

Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) is giving way to the more inclusive term **Public Service Media** (PSM), that besides radio and television includes the latest digital platforms and the Internet. In both cases, whether we use PSB or PSM, we are addressing the same institution as **the mission remains the same**: “to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain”.

Noel Curran, Director General of European Broadcasting Union (EBU), an alliance of public service media organisations, **describes PSM** as “the bedrock of democratic societies”. Furthermore, in a **report** from 2019, EBU highlighted that “countries with strong and popular Public Service Media have higher degrees of press freedom, lower levels of right-wing extremism and better control of corruption”. Putting aside the **dilemma** regarding the PSM’s future (is the model outdated, idealistic and expensive with no future in the digital age or, on the other hand, is it simply irreplaceable regarding the cultural heritage of the country?), at present one cannot underestimate the importance of PSM for the democratic society.

As **Karol Jakubowicz** highlights, “one of the most important factors in a functional PSB system is the quality of democracy in that particular country”. Indeed, it is safe to correlate the PSM status with the democratic consolidation of a country.

The majority of Eastern Europe and Balkan PSM are captured

In 2017, elaborating on the emerging trend of threats to the independence of public broadcasters, **Nils Muižnieks**, former Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, wrote that there is “a growing number of alerts concerning political interference in the editorial line of public broadcasters, insufficient safeguards in the legislation against political bias, or the lack of appropriate funding to guarantee the independence of the public broadcasters” among the Council’s member states.

Experts **agree** that governments in the region have maintained a tight grip on public service broadcasters thanks to their power to appoint the governance structures and funding. Dragomir, in an interview with the Resource Centre team, pointed out that there are various degrees of capture in public media: “The public service media in Romania, for example, is a politicised institution, but because of its really low audience share, it attracts less pressure. In contrast, in Hungary, the public service broadcaster has been purged of independent journalists and is run clearly as a lavishly funded state broadcaster”.

The situation is similar in the Balkan countries. **Milosavljević** notes that these countries during the democratic transition attempted to imitate Western European practices “without considering their own different historical legacies and contemporary circumstances”, hoping that PSMs would follow the socially responsible path. The newly imagined BBC-like public service media were supposed to step in

and change the paradigm of state-owned broadcasting.

One of the major issues was, and still is, the lack of political will to safeguard and promote PSMs independence and professionalism. While there was incentive to respect PSM's independence, during the EU accession process for example, the situation was better, but once the country joined the EU (Croatia, Hungary, Poland among others) or its EU path was put on hold (North Macedonia, Turkey) incentive vanished. Moreover, as can be seen in Serbia these days, the media are generally being captured at the very time when European conditionality should enable real change.

Capturing of PSM is not only an “Eastern” phenomenon, as there are threats against broadcasters' independence also in so-called established democracies. Namely, a recent [advocacy mission to Austria](#) concluded that the public broadcaster ORF is under “political influence” due to the “close structural links between politics and the public broadcaster”. The mission urged that “independent financing must be ensured”, for example through a “license fee charged to households and under no circumstances should the ORF's budget be covered by the Ministry of Finance” as in the long term “it may become a state media outlet instead of a public one”.

The case of Croatia

Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) is defined by law as a public service broadcaster, but in fact, during the rule of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), it was functioning as a state/party television, according to [Andrijašević and Car](#) who back the claim by citing data from 1990 up until 1999. During this period, all five general managers were influential members of the HDZ party. Also, a few of HRT's chief news editors were honorary members of HDZ. The situation began to change in 2000, during the ruling of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP). The transformation of HRT was initiated and politicians were not allowed to apply for HRT posts.

Further changes were introduced in 2010, strengthening the PSM's independence, but following the 2013 EU membership situation deteriorated again. A few months after the 2016 election, more than 70 media workers from HRT were demoted or fired and more than 10 TV and radio shows were terminated. [The Croatian Journalists' Association](#) (HND) strongly condemned the purge, calling it a [deliberate destruction of HRT](#) by the HDZ government.

Hrvoje Zovko, the new president of HND, who had worked at HRT for over twenty years, [got fired](#) because he denounced censorship within HRT and for becoming president of the association. In his words: “HRT became the government's spokesman. There is no longer any investigation, no more room for criticism. Finally, in the national public television programme there have also been cases of historical

revisionism related to the Independent State of Croatia [the puppet State allied to the Nazi-fascists and led by Ante Pavelić during the Second World War, ed.] and no one has taken responsibility for this". Following a [court procedure](#), PSM was obliged to return Zovko to his post at HRT.

State financing as media capture tool

"Circulation means advertising, and advertising means money, and money means independence".

Joseph Pulitzer

The [Internet](#), along with the development of the digital media environment, is undermining traditional business models of sales and advertising that for-profit news media have historically relied on. As Kleis Nielsen [points out](#), the rise of digital media is making news production less commercially attractive without decreasing its political and social significance, meaning news media are less profitable, but still powerful. Therefore, mass media are easy prey for media capture, and government subsidies have become a lifebuoy for many news media outlets.

More and more ruling elites, being fully aware of the business model disruption, misuse the state budget in order to secure favourable media coverage. The support comes in various forms - direct funding, tax alleviation, market measures, or similar policies. Citing a 2014 survey by the Open Society Foundations, Krisztian Simon points out that [28 out of 35 countries](#) have provided "significant" subsidies to media organisations. And in at least half of those 28 countries there was evidence that the state subsidy was used to manipulate the media outlet in question.

Governments, in order to subdue media outlets, as the following examples will show, predominantly use state advertising and market-disruption measures. Also, depending on several factors like local power relations, popularity of media, or other market characteristics, governments are pumping public money in one media segment (print, private broadcasters, radio, or news websites) or in all of them.

At the same time, in order to fully understand this segment of media capture, it is important to mention that the power relation between media and politics is not a one-way street. Namely, there are cases when news outlets are part of bigger business portfolios and owners use them as a bargaining tool to advance their core businesses. In such cases [media ownership](#) has become a significant tool for obtaining public tenders, or privatisation of public assets.

Budget money in action

State advertising is a weapon of choice among many authoritarian leaders. Due to several

factors, but predominantly a small advertising market and weak economy, the [revenue generated from the state advertising](#) makes the difference between survival and bankruptcy for many outlets - unless they are part of bigger business conglomerates. In those cases, state advertising does not play a crucial role in media sustainability.

In [Serbia](#), for example, it is estimated that state spending in the media sector amounts to approximately 25% of the total yearly advertising revenues, whereas in [North Macedonia](#) the state has been among the top five advertisers for several consecutive years. Between 2010 and 2017, [ruling parties](#) in North Macedonia spent more than 27 million Euros for government media campaigns. One [study](#) shows that the largest slice of the advertising buys were directed to pro-government media outlets, “creating even more robust political-clientelistic and corrupt links between the government and the media”.

Analysing the situation in Hungary, [Simon](#) argues that at times up to 80% of advertising revenues in the friendly news outlet was coming from the state budget. Also, many companies refrain from advertising in critical outlets for fear of repercussions from the government. The same trend can be seen, although to a much smaller extent, in Poland as well. Based on [available data](#), both the PiS and Fidesz governments are utilising state advertisement funds to promote their political agenda.

[ECPMF's fact finding mission in Bulgaria](#) found another significant aspect of the state advertising phenomenon. Namely, in the period between 2013 and 2015, municipalities in Bulgaria spent at least 1.5 million Euros of their own or EU funds on local newspapers, TV stations, and radio stations. Other [research](#) showed that during the 2007-2012 period 36.6 million Euros from EU funds were channelled to friendly media organisations, both public and private, for informing citizens about the results of the EU-funded Rural Development Programme.

Market-disruption measures

Having all state mechanisms under control, it is easy for any authoritarian government to take actions that will disrupt media market, from administrative harassment up to taking legal actions against media or imposing new media-related laws.

For example, in 2014 the Hungarian government pushed for an additional high level tax on media advertising revenue which mainly targeted the country's biggest and [most popular](#) private TV station, RTL Klub. Many [commentators](#) believe that the tax was imposed with the idea of pressuring the company into selling its outlet. The reason for doing so lies in the fact that broadcasters are still powerful actors in the country, as Hungarians are at or near the top in the EU [television-viewership rankings](#).

“The Hungarian Government does not want a neutral, foreign-owned broadcaster in Hungary; it is using an unfair tax to wipe out democratic safeguards, and see off a perceived challenge to its power”, wrote Neelie Kroes, then-vice president of the European Commission in a [blog post](#).

The [company responded](#) in full force by prolonging the newscast from 30 minutes to an hour and constantly reporting on alleged corruption within Orbán’s right-wing political party, Fidesz. Following [warnings](#) from Brussels, Orbán’s administration ultimately backed down and lowered the tax rate to 5.3%, later raised to 7.5% in 2017.

Ownership

Ownership takeover is one of the most common media capture tools, but it may be an even more daunting problem for struggling democracies and developing countries. What distinguishes a regular ownership takeover from a toxic one is the instrumentalisation of the medium - namely, intention to use the outlet as an instrument to obtain benefits, financial or political, whilst neglecting its core public service function.

Having in mind the above-mentioned rationale, we can distinguish two main motives behind media acquisition in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where media capture is most advanced - namely, to use it as a bargaining tool for advancement of business, as media are not the owner’s primary business, or to use it for promotion of owners’ political ambitions. In a situation like this there is no room for public service. This is also valid for some Western European countries.

[Media Ownership Project](#) shows that out of total 533 media outlets from 11 Eastern European and Balkan countries, 206 have non transparent ownership, 144 are connected to politics, and 54 to crime. In four out of the 11 countries there are connections between crime and media outlets ownership - 3 outlets in Serbia, 8 in Czech Republic, 21 in Bulgaria, and 22 in Romania.

The European experience

The key turning point in the ownership structure of Czech dailies occurred in 2013, coinciding with a major political change, and in the following two years the ownership structure changed completely. [Martina Vojtěchovská](#) argues that newspapers are owned by major business groups with political ties to prime minister Andrej Babiš. Also, the richest Czech, Petr Kellner, is taking over the country’s most popular TV station, Nova.

According to Josef Šlerka, director of the [Foundation for Independent Journalism](#), Kellner’s business is

strongly connected to the banking and the finance sector – and these areas are regulated by the state. “Now when Mr. Kellner starts to own a private media house, they will be able to influence state politics and state policies. And this is bad”, Šlerka said.

The Romanian case, according to Paul Radu, clearly illustrates how media across Eastern Europe have been captured by powerful business interests, often with ties to the political establishment. Dan Voiculescu, politician, oligarch, and media mogul sentenced to prison for fraud, owns 6 television stations, 5 print publications, and 2 radio stations, thus controlling the largest audiences in the country. Voiculescu, Radu argues, has used these outlets to promote his ideas and attack his political opponents.

[Hungary](#) is another example that illustrates this collusion. Since 2010, a [vast majority of media outlets](#), more than 400, ranging from Echo TV and Hir TV to the daily Magyar Idok to all the local newspapers in Hungary, was taken over by a group of oligarchs supportive of Prime Minister Orbán and his party, Fidesz. As proof of that, urgent recommendations have been made to both the member states of the European Union, relevant EU institutions, and the Hungarian government in the conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary. [As reported by the organisations](#) that conducted the mission, among others, the Hungarian government should “guarantee fair competition in media markets; limit ownership concentration; adopt measures to support market entry and the sustainability of the sector”, as well as “end the abuse of state resources, especially state-controlled advertising, to punish independent media outlets and reward pro-government media outlets”.

There are Western European examples as well. [Stiglitz](#) underlines how Italy is an example where the media proved not to be able to fulfill the watchdog role vis-à-vis the government. This happened during Silvio Berlusconi’s administration. Namely, he owned three of the seven broadcasters, and the government controlled another three. As for Spain, [Anya Schiffrin](#) argues that the purchase of El País by Spanish telecom giant Telefónica is an example of a media outlet being taken over by a big firm which is supportive of conservative government policies.

Finally, a [CMPF fact-sheet](#) highlights how only 5 EU member countries set limits to foreign capital in the media sector. Even where there is some kind of restriction (i.e. in Austria, Cyprus, France, Poland, and Spain), it does not apply to citizens or companies from EU countries. France has the most restrictive environment, with maximum limits for non-EU capital at 20% in all media sectors. Recently, Czech billionaire and energy and media tycoon Daniel Kretinsky [bought into Le Monde](#). Also, there was a huge scandal in Austria with then vice-chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, who was [filmed offering government contracts](#) in exchange for Russian oligarch support that included buying a 50 percent stake

in Austria's Kronen Zeitung newspaper, and switching its editorial position.

How to fight media capture

Media capture is a controversial and elusive phenomenon, which requires a mix of efforts at various levels and the commitment of all the parties involved: governments, civil society, international actors, and Internet giants. Most importantly, even though untangling the dense network of interconnections that the state (or whoever) has created in order to control the media is extremely challenging, it is important to understand that the phenomenon “is not inevitable”, [stated Nelson](#).

Consequently, according to the author, the primary solution should be recognising media capture as “a major strategic risk”, undertaking a long-term strategy able to coordinate the commitment of both political and non-political subjects. “In a sector undergoing massive change such as the news media, the precise regulations and policy reforms is less important than the process—the commitment and political will of people and political leaders to create a media that serves the public interest”, Nelson concludes.

For all these reasons, experts have begun to theorise new methods and strategies that could finally counter the problem, or at least alleviate it in the long run.

Independent and well functioning regulators

Despite the decline of traditional business models fostered by the technological earthquake, regulation still appears to be one of the most important remedies to resist media capture. In this context, well-functioning regulatory authorities are of primary importance: their role is vital not only in avoiding opacity of ownership and concentration of media in the hands of oligarchs, but also in guaranteeing the proper allocation of broadcasting licenses, fighting verbal harassment, fostering cultural diversity and minorities' tolerance, and safeguarding minors, as [stated by the Council of Europe](#).

To cite a positive example, in her forthcoming introduction to “Media Capture in the Digital Age” Columbia University Press, New York 2020, Anya Shiffrin reports the case of the UK Competition and Markets Authority, which “investigated the anticipated acquisition of Sky Plc by 21st Century Fox, Inc on the grounds of media plurality and genuine commitment to broadcasting standards”.

However, well-functioning regulatory authorities are not enough: [as Nelson argues](#), it is necessary to develop a “public interest legal system” which would envisage “anti-trust legislation, rules on government advertising, internet governance, independent publicly-funded media” as well as “laws that protect the public from false or otherwise harmful claims, and laws that require disclosure of who is paying for the

advertisements”.

Regulating the old forms of financing and finding new ones

Financing is then a second key issue to be addressed in tackling media capture. As Dragomir reported in the interview, “if allocated in a fair, transparent way, the government funding at this moment is more than sufficient to support a thriving journalism sector across Europe”.

Other models are being experimented: for example the Scandinavian one, [according to Mungiu Pippidi](#), could serve [as a flywheel](#): media are “financed by subscriptions (everybody is subscribed to a newspaper), commercial and state subsidies. Funding would not distinguish between public and private media as long as the objectives and performance specifications would be met”.

[At a talk at the International Journalism Festival held in Perugia](#) titled “Media Capture in the Digital Age”, Mira Milosevic, Executive Director at Brussels-based Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), said that “subscription is becoming the fastest growing source of revenue for journalism and news media. The subscription-driven part of the system is doing really well; however, we are still speaking about a very low amount of money globally”.

Other solutions taken into account in Shiffrin’s forthcoming introduction to “Media Capture in the Digital Age” refer to the possibility of “tapping new revenue sources to create a fund to support investigative journalism”, as proposed by Drew Sullivan. In this context, reports Shiffrin, Nelson and Dean suggested “creating a global fund for media development which would involve earmarking money from the OECD governments that spend money on development assistance”. Finally, the author takes into account the proposals of academics Victor Pickard and Tim Karr, who respectively suggested the “taxation of Facebook to pay for journalism” as well as “taxing micro-targeted advertising and using the money to pay for US investigative reporting”.

International support: multi-stakeholder processes

As Nelson reported, one of the best ways in which international support can be expressed is through “multi-stakeholder processes where problems are discussed and solutions debated”. The relevance of these processes lies in avoiding direct intervention in the domestic politics of a state while promoting the debate between actors - political and non-political - that can determine an effective change.

One example is the so-called [Western Balkans Media Days](#), an annual meeting promoted by the

European Commission that brings together experts in the field - policymakers, journalists, civil society representatives, and advocacy organisations - committed to defending and promoting freedom of expression. Despite difficulties in the implementation of reforms in Western Balkans and several other regional controversies and impediments, the Media Days serve as an important political momentum to address the state of play with regards to freedom of expression in the region.

International aid, therefore, can be effective in fostering debate, advocacy, and resonance for the freedom of expression, favouring a social environment for media pluralism by empowering journalists' associations, media trade unions, and civil society to become efficient and independent actors in advocating the rights of citizens to information.

Thus, as suggested by many of the authors quoted in this paper, the role of civil society is crucial in fostering a healthier media environment. "The task of building political will for reform and knowledge about what needs to be done", writes Nelson, "falls heavily on groups that can mobilize allies, broker compromise, and inform the public about needed media reforms. Broad social movements not only help push national politics in the direction of reform but expose shortcomings in media governance, help build local knowledge needed to win the fight for effective policies, and encourage media owners to act as socially responsible corporate citizens that contribute to the public good".

Promoting and supporting Public Service Media

As stated in a [2018 report](#) by the Council of Europe, "public service media should resolutely engage in countering disinformation and propaganda by developing educational programs for the general public and encouraging a critical approach to information and sources. They should engage with social media platforms, legacy media, policy-makers and other actors in a joint action against information disorder".

The implementation of a series of targeted innovative practices is necessary. [Accordingly](#), an example of how quality of news can be put at the centre of the discussion on Public Service Media comes from the Journalism in Akatemia (Journalism Academy) of the Finnish Public Broadcasting company: "one of its current main activities is, together with different Yle units (Finland's national public broadcasting company), to go through a major strategic process of defining quality principles".

As regards specific fact-checking initiatives to combat informational disorder, positive examples come from the Danish Broadcasting Cooperation and from the German public service broadcasting units, as well as the "Reality Check" service from the BBC.

Education

The purpose of media literacy, as a final result of media education, is to improve the lives of individuals by giving them more control over how the media messages will affect them. Citizens who critically understand and analyse the news, know how information is created and what are the steps for collecting and writing news will become more critical consumers of information and more inclined to demand accuracy and be active citizens.

Nelson, in an interview with the Resource Centre team, highlights that media literacy as an isolated, small-scale intervention (such as carried out as a short-term project by many donors) has not been effective. Therefore, in tackling the issue, he suggests a holistic approach in form of general civic education with a strong component of media in the school system.

“Media literacy programs that focus entirely on alerting people to the dangers that lurk in the media tend to make those people less trustful of media in general. That is why I would focus on a broader concept of ‘civic governance education’ where people can learn about the important role that high-quality, independent media can play in democracy societies. This should be society-wide, required of all students, and carried out on an ongoing basis for many years”, Nelson said.

Creation of stringent anti-capture directives on EU level

With the constant decline of media freedom in the EU countries due to democratic backsliding, there is an urgent need to tackle media capture and all other media issues at EU level. The cases of Hungary, Poland, and Croatia among many other countries highlight the importance of introducing mechanisms that will hold member states accountable and push them to fully respect media freedom once they become part of the EU.

As stated in the [conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary](#), “although media freedom per se is not an explicit competence of the European Commission, it does have significant responsibility in the areas of competition law and state aid, both of which have been abused by Hungary to silence the media. The European Commission has not acted on at least two complaints in these areas, one regarding the state aid to the public broadcaster, filed in 2016, and one regarding state aid in the form of public advertising, filed in January 2019”.

The issue was also tackled during the 2019 [Newsocracy conference](#) in Budapest. As member of the European Parliament Ramona Strugariu pointed out, media freedom, unfortunately, is not a top priority

for the Parliament: “We have an inter-group on wine”, Strugariu said, “but we have no inter-group on media freedom”.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to raise the importance of media freedom in the top EU institutions and safeguard professional media as one of the founding pillars of democracy.

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