



BRIDGE//GAP

BRIDGING THE GAPS
IN EVIDENCE, REGULATION
AND IMPACT
OF ANTICORRUPTION
POLICIES

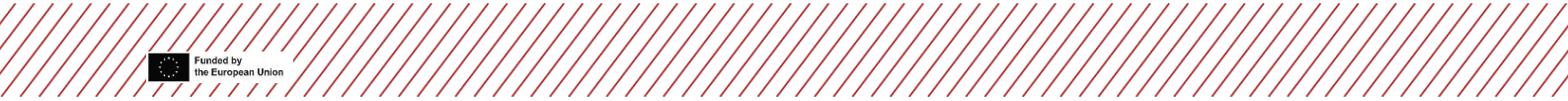
METHODOLOGY

MEDIA CAPTURE RISK MAP



Table of Contents

- 1. The Media Capture Risk Map 5
- 2. Theoretical approach 7
 - 2.1. The evolution of the media capture concept 8
 - 2.2. Introducing “Media Capture Risk” 11
- 3. Operationalization of Media Capture Risk 13
 - 3.1. Dimensions and indicators 14
 - 3.2. Data selection and aggregation 27
 - 3.3. Data validation 32
- Conclusions 35
- References 38



List of Tables

Table 1 Evolution of the concept of media capture	9
Table 2 Main indicators to operationalize the concept of media capture risk	13
Table 3 Sub-indicators of media ecosystem dimension	14
Table 4 Data sources.....	27
Table 5 Dimensions weight	29
Table 6 Indicators weight.....	30
Table 7 Cronbach alpha by dimension.....	34

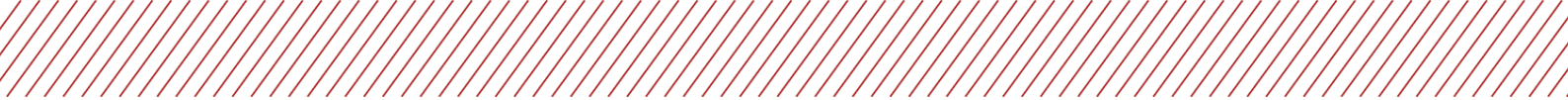
List of Acronyms

Acronym	Description
CIPE	Center for International Private Enterprise
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
CSD	Center for the Study of Democracy
DI	Dimension
DSA	Digital Services Act
EMFA	European Media Freedom Act
EOM	Euromedia Ownership Monitor
ERCAS	European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building
EU	European Union
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IFFS	Institute for Futures Studies
IND	Indicator
IPI	Index of Public Integrity
KEDGE	KEDGE Business School
k-NN	k-nearest neighbours
MCR	Media Capture Risk
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PSM	Public Service Media
SI	Sub-indicator
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation
TI	Transparency International
UNIPG	University of Perugia
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy
WP	Work Package
WP7	Work Package 7

1. The Media Capture Risk Map

The Media Capture Risk Map is an interactive tool that reveals where citizens' access to reliable and independent information is at risk across the European Union, four Western Balkan EU candidate countries, and Türkiye. It highlights contexts in which particularistic political, economic, technological interests undermine the democratic ideal of an informed citizenry, thereby weakening the conditions for democratic accountability and public debate. This innovative and interactive tool was developed under the coordination of the University of Perugia, which provided the overall scientific and methodological guidance, in cooperation with the other WP7 partners of the BRIDGEGAP project. Together, the team elaborated a theoretical framework that conceptualizes media capture risk and translates it into a set of measurable dimensions and indicators.

The Media Capture Risk Map provides users with an overview of the level of media capture risk across all countries included in the analysis. By synthesising multiple indicators into a coherent framework, the tool enables the identification of national risk profiles, highlighting variations in the extent to which citizens may be exposed to limited, biased, or controlled information environments. Through its interactive features, users can explore country scores, compare performances across different contexts, and identify patterns, thereby supporting a more informed and data-driven understanding of media capture risk across Europe and candidate countries. Beyond cross-country comparison, the Media Capture Risk Map is designed to trace the complex interplay between different structural dimensions shaping media systems. The tool integrates indicators related to political influence, economic pressures, technological transformations, and societal conditions, allowing users to examine how these factors interact in shaping the risk of media capture. By highlighting areas where media independence, pluralism, and accessibility are at risk, the tool supports the identification of vulnerabilities that can weaken public debate, reduce transparency, and limit citizens' ability to make informed decisions. In this sense, the Map contributes to a broader assessment of the conditions necessary for democratic accountability, offering evidence that can inform both academic research and civic society.



In addition, the Media Capture Risk Map is complemented by a set of reports for each country considered, which provide contextualised qualitative insights to support the interpretation of the quantitative results and offer a more in-depth understanding of national media ecosystems, political systems, and societal contexts.

This deliverable provides an original and innovative contribution through the construction of a set of comparative data based on the reworking and aggregation of existing datasets, according to WP7's theoretical and methodological framework. By integrating multiple sources, it offers a novel and consistent basis for cross-country analysis of media capture risk.

All analyses and results presented in this deliverable are the outcome of the team's original work or are based on properly acknowledged sources.

2. Theoretical approach

No publication on media and corruption fails to cite Brunetti and Weder's well-known claim that "free press is bad news for corruption" (Brunetti & Weder, 2003). Corruption can be tackled and prevented if the press fulfils its normative role as "custodians of conscience" (Ettema & Glasser, 1998). For this to occur, however, journalism must be sufficiently autonomous from political and economic pressures that constrain or redirect its action.

For this reason, the concept of "media capture" has become central in research addressing corruption, including large-scale initiatives such as the BRIDGEGAP project, and has thus been adopted, albeit being a dubious and slippery concept. Within the liberal tradition, journalism is expected to function as a watchdog of power. Yet scholars have long warned about the risk of capture by political actors and "vested interests" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008), a process that undermines the media's core democratic function of informing citizens in a balanced and independent manner. The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA, 2024) echoes these concerns, highlighting the vulnerability of public service media. At the same time, commercial interests (e.g., media owners, advertisers, and increasingly digital platforms) may compromise editorial autonomy. Today, networks capable of exerting influence over the media often combine political, economic, and technological power; in some cases (e.g., Musk or Bezos), these dimensions converge in single actors. Since news organizations are also businesses that must generate profit to survive, tensions between commercial viability and democratic responsibility are structural rather than exceptional.

The social-democratic or habermasian tradition of journalism further reminds us that media systems operate as arenas in which competing actors seek to shape the public agenda. Media structures are embedded within broader political and economic configurations and are increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures and platform power. They do not function in isolation, but are continuously shaped by, and conversely shape, the institutional and societal environments in which they operate. Indeed, we assume the news media as system interacting with other systems of the society, being influenced and influencing them.

Moreover, the contemporary informational environment extends beyond journalism. Citizens no longer consume news as a clearly bounded product; instead, they navigate

heterogeneous flows of “information” within hybrid media diets. However, the same environment is marked by the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and broader forms of information disorder, which further threaten citizens’ ability to “make informed choices, including about the state of their democracies” (EMFA 2024, 2). Ensuring the integrity of information flows and preventing capture by diverse actors has therefore become increasingly urgent.

2.1. The evolution of the media capture concept

The concept of media capture emerged in the late 1980s, when scholars observed that formally liberalized media systems often remained deeply influenced by political elites, governments, or foreign actors (Besley & Prat 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi 2008; Dragomir 2019). Economists initially adapted the concept from the theory of regulatory capture (Stigler 1971; Besley & Prat 2006). In parallel, debates on “state capture” or politicization of the state (Grzymala-Busse 2003) revealed similar dynamics in post-authoritarian contexts. Mungiu-Pippidi (2008; 2012) showed how governments and vested networks could shape media systems to influence both public discourse and policy outcomes. Bajomi-Lázár (2014) described “party colonisation of the media”, while Mancini (2012) referred to “instrumentalization” to capture systematic subordination of journalism to political or economic goals.

Over time, scholars demonstrated that capture is not confined to transitional regimes but represents a structural risk across media systems embedded in capitalist economies and political power structures (Corneo 2006; Petrova 2008; Pi 2010; Márquez-Ramírez & Guerrero 2017; Powell 2017). Research highlighted indirect instruments of influence, such as ownership concentration, selective state advertising, and allocation of public funds, used to secure favorable coverage or silence dissent (Corneo 2006; Pi 2010; Dragomir 2019). Media capture thus came to denote a continuum of dependencies, from overt political domination to more subtle market-mediated forms of control. Implicitly, this literature assumed that media autonomy was achievable in principle, and that capture represented a deviation from a normative ideal.

More recently, the concept, originally developed for post-authoritarian systems and legacy media before the widespread diffusion of the Internet, has been reformulated to address platformized environments (Schiffrin 2021; Usher 2021; Nechustai 2018; Sevignani et al. 2025). Dragomir and Horowitz (2024) argue that in such contexts capture and disinformation are mutually reinforcing: captured structures facilitate the circulation of misleading or politically instrumental content.

Phase	Period	Main Focus	Key Actors	Key Concepts/Authors
Post-Soviet origins	Late 1980s–1990s (post-Soviet, Central & Eastern Europe - transition to democracy)	Political influence on news outlets	Governments, political elites, foreign actors, vested interests	<i>Media capture</i> (Besley & Prat 2006); <i>soft censorship</i> ; <i>non-coercive censorship</i> ; Mungiu-Pippidi (2008)
Expansion and refinement	2000s–2010s (consolidated democracies, Global South, other part of the world)	Political and/or economic influence on news outlets	Governments, proprietors, advertisers, vested interests	<i>Media capture in democracies</i> (Corneo 2006; Petrova 2008; Pi 2010; Márquez-Ramírez & Guerrero 2017; Powell 2017; Dragomir 2019)
Digital reformulations	2010s–present (digital media, platform dominance)	Platform dependency, infrastructures, new funding models for news media	Big Tech (Google, Meta, etc.), advertisers, philanthropies, states	<i>Economic/digital intermediary/philanthropic capture</i> (Schiffrin 2021); <i>platform capture</i> (Usher 2021); <i>infrastructure capture</i> (Nechustai 2018); <i>media environment capture</i> (Sevignani et al. 2024); <i>media capture and mis/disinformation</i> (Dragomir & Horowitz 2024)

TABLE 1 EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF MEDIA CAPTURE

As Table 1 summarises, the concept of media capture has undergone significant transformations over the past three decades. Initially formulated to explain the dynamics of post-Soviet and transitional media systems in Central and Eastern Europe, where intermediary bodies were extremely weak and the State apparatuses were under construction, it was later refined to describe forms of political and economic domination in both emerging and consolidated democracies across the world. More recently, it has been adapted to address the structural dependencies of journalism in the digital era, in which

platforms, infrastructures, and new funding arrangements play decisive roles. These contemporary reformulations demonstrate the framework's enduring fascination while also exposing its limitations. In fact, the concept remains strongly normative, suggesting that once a media outlet is "captured" by an external actor, editorial independence is entirely lost. Such a binary understanding may obscure the more complex and negotiated nature of media influence, which often involves a continuum of pressures rather than absolute control. Attempts to introduce a more nuanced, non-normative understanding of media capture - conceived as a process or as a phenomenon unfolding in varying degrees - are ultimately unconvincing (Dragomir & Aslama Horowitz, 2021). Conceptually, the notion of media capture presupposes total appropriation or control and therefore does not readily accommodate gradual or scalar interpretations. The very definition of the term "capture", as provided by the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to "the act of taking someone as a prisoner, or taking something into one's possession, especially by force". As such, the term itself does not admit intermediate states: something is captured or not captured. From this perspective, many phenomena described as media capture are more accurately conceptualised as forms of political - and increasingly political-economic - influence over the media. Unlike influence, which is gradual and frequently negotiated, capture implies a qualitative shift toward complete control, and therefore constitutes a binary rather than a scalar condition. Moreover, the concept tends to overstate the possibility of media autonomy, but as Benson (2025, p. 128) aptly notes, "no governments, whether left or right, [are] immune from the temptation to control the media to preserve power". The literature on media capture implies that a media system free from political and economic pressures could exist, whereas in reality, all media institutions are embedded within broader structures of power. Finally, the history of journalism shows that the borders between media capture and partisan journalism are thin and moving. In our view the concept alone may not fully capture the complexity of today's media ecosystem. At the very least, it is important to emphasize that the risk in question pertains to the media ecosystem as a whole, rather than to individual media outlets. For this reason, our analysis considers both the structural features of journalism and the broader complexity of the public debate. Even

so, the notion of “media capture” remains, in our view, conceptually dubious and analytically slippery.

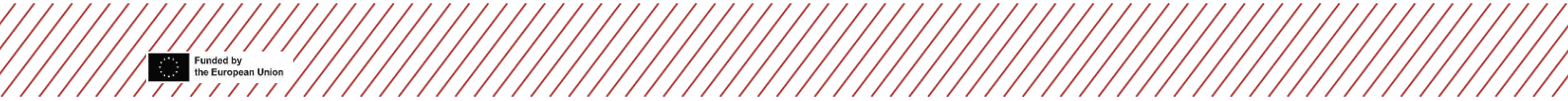
2.2. Introducing “Media Capture Risk”

For these reasons, we adopt a broad and relational understanding of media capture. We define it as situations in which particularistic interests override the universal normative function of the media system, undermining its role in enabling citizens to form informed judgments in democratic contexts. Crucially, we shift the focus from individual outlets to the media ecosystem as a whole, and from institutional autonomy alone to the informational conditions experienced by citizens. The central issue is not only whether journalism operates freely, but whether citizens are effectively able to exercise their right to be informed under pluralistic and fair conditions.

In a hybrid media environment characterized by alternative news actors and the structural influence of platforms (Van Dijck et al. 2018), particularistic interests no longer reside exclusively with traditional power holders such as political elites, owners, or advertisers. They may also emerge from within digital infrastructures themselves. The media ecosystem must therefore be understood as embedded within broader political, economic, and social configurations that shape both its resilience and its vulnerability.

Our framework adopts a relational approach that analyzes interactions among media ecosystems, political systems, and societal structures. We conceptualize media ecosystems as embedded within national institutional contexts, which condition both autonomy and exposure to pressure. At the same time, we recognize that the risk of capture depends not only on structural and institutional factors, but also on citizens’ media literacy and informational awareness.

Finally, we conceptualize media capture as a risk rather than a fixed condition. Since pressures on the media are pervasive and historically persistent, it is difficult to determine when capture is complete or partial. Our mapping exercise therefore does not identify capture as a binary outcome but highlights the structural conditions under which the risk of media capture is more likely to emerge.



3. Operationalization of Media Capture Risk

As mentioned in the previous section, the theoretical framework we developed distinguishes three interdependent dimensions - the media ecosystem, the political system, and the societal context - each comprising a set of composite indicators (simply indicators in the following) that together describe the structural conditions and pressures shaping the risk of media capture (Table 2). Each dimension includes five indicators that reflect its key facets. The rationale for this tripartite structure, as emerged from the theoretical framework, lies in the assumption that media capture is not a phenomenon confined to the media sphere alone, but the result of systemic imbalances across institutional, political, and cultural domains. The economic dimension was not treated as a standalone dimension, as the ways in which business and economic forces can influence the media system are multiple. These include, for example, advertising, public funding, impure publishing, and the various forms of hybrid networks of political and business power. These factors were therefore incorporated into the different indicators.

Dimensions	Media ecosystem	Political system	Societal context
<i>Indicators</i>	Political and business influence	Political conflict and polarization	Level of democracy
	Pluralism	Political participation	Civil society participation
	Transparency	Political rights	Corruption
	Professionalism	Power distribution	Education
	Information disorder	Rational-legal authority	Trust in institutions

TABLE 2 MAIN INDICATORS TO OPERATIONALIZE THE CONCEPT OF MEDIA CAPTURE RISK

Within this research project, media capture is operationalized through a comprehensive analysis of the media ecosystem. This includes both the structural characteristics of legacy media and the role of digital platforms – not only in their interactions with journalists and news organizations, but also in enabling the communicative agency of a wide range of actors operating within the same information environment. This analysis is complemented by consideration of the broader political and societal contexts of the countries under examination, including citizens’ capacity to navigate an increasingly complex communication landscape. Translating this theoretical model into an analytical instrument therefore requires a multidimensional operationalization capable of capturing the

complexity of interactions among legacy media, digital platforms, politics, and society (OECD, 2008).

The most complex part of the Map is the first dimension – Media ecosystem – in which each of the five indicators is further broken down into (composite) sub-indicators that detail the various aspects of the dimension (Table 3).

Political and Business Influence	Pluralism	Transparency	Professionalism	Information Disorder
State/Government Pressure/Censorship	Media Market Concentration	Transparency in Media Ownership	Editorial autonomy	Foreign Government Dissemination of False Information
Political Control Over the Media	Media Ownership Concentration	Transparency in Subsidies to Media outlets	Journalistic Profession, Standards and Protection	Government/Party Dissemination of False Information
Regulation	Political Inclusiveness	Transparency in Advertising	Media Viability	Monitoring and/or Impact of Disinformation/Misinformation initiatives
Independence of Public Service Media (PSM)	Social Inclusiveness	Content Curation		Media Literacy
Conflict of Interest	Availability of Distribution Infrastructure and Discrimination of Access			Media Trust

TABLE 3 SUB-INDICATORS OF MEDIA ECOSYSTEM DIMENSION

3.1. Dimensions and indicators

In the following, we describe the multidimensional structure that emerges as the outcome of the first phase of the theoretical framework’s conceptualization of media capture risk.

3.1.1. Media ecosystem dimension

The *media ecosystem* constitutes the core dimension of the framework and is measured through five indicators including key sources of vulnerability in contemporary media systems. These indicators assess *political and business influence*, *pluralism*, *transparency*, *professionalism*, and *information disorder*, which together define the degree of independence, resilience, and integrity of the media ecosystem. Higher levels of vulnerability across these dimensions increase the likelihood that information flows are

shaped by political, economic, or other particularistic interests. This, in turn, limits citizens' access to diverse and reliable information and raises the overall risk of media capture.

Indicators:

- **Political and business influence**

This indicator measures the extent of political and business influence over news media, public service media, journalistic practices, freedom of expression, the right to information, and social media platforms.

Higher values indicate greater influence and, as a result, a higher risk of media capture.

Sub-Indicators:

- ***State/Government influence/censorship***

This sub-indicator measures the extent of state or government influence and censorship affecting media and online platforms. It considers transparency in government requests for content moderation, the existence and practice of censorship in both traditional and digital media, and the government's technical capacity to restrict or monitor online information flows. It also assesses state control over media actors and interference with media authorities.

- ***Political control over the media***

This sub-indicator measures the extent to which political actors (politicians and political parties) influence or control over media organizations and regulatory bodies. It assesses the transparency and independence of appointment procedures within media authorities, the autonomy of editors-in-chief, and the effectiveness of safeguards and self-regulatory mechanisms against political interference. It also detects the political influence across state-owned and private media, as well as across print, broadcast, radio, and digital outlets.

- ***Media Regulation***

This sub-indicator assesses the adequacy and effectiveness of the legal and regulatory framework governing media freedom and independence. It evaluates

whether freedom of expression and the right to information are protected by law and respected in practice, and whether restrictions comply with international human rights standards. It also considers the transparency and fairness of public service media regulation, the availability of effective legal remedies, and safeguards ensuring the independence of media authorities and news agencies from political influence.

- ***Independence of PSM***

This sub-indicator measures the degree to which public service media are insulated from political influence in both governance and editorial practice. It assesses appointment and dismissal procedures, funding mechanisms, and the adequacy of legal and internal safeguards ensuring impartiality and balanced political representation. It also detects failures of public service media to fulfil their democratic role of providing pluralistic and unbiased information.

- ***Conflict of interest***

This sub-indicator measures the extent to which conflicts of interest affecting media ownership and editorial independence are disclosed, regulated, and prevented in practice. It assesses political and economic ties between media owners and political actors, the transparency of ownership structures, and the effectiveness of legal frameworks addressing such conflicts. It also considers whether media owners hold significant non-media business interests that may influence editorial content.

- **Pluralism**

This indicator assesses the extent to which citizens' access to and engagement with diverse opinions - through independent voices, editorial perspectives, and media outlets - is restricted. It therefore reflects the risk associated with limitations on information pluralism.

Higher values indicate lower levels of pluralism and, as a result, a higher risk of media capture.

Sub-Indicators:

○ ***Media market concentration***

This sub-indicator measures audience concentration across media sectors and the effectiveness of regulatory safeguards promoting competition and pluralism. It assesses market shares and audience reach of leading media owners in audiovisual, radio, print, and online markets, as well as in digital advertising. It also evaluates the adequacy of competition laws limiting excessive concentration.

○ ***Media ownership concentration***

This sub-indicator measures the degree of ownership concentration within and across media sectors and the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms preventing excessive control by a limited number of actors. It assesses ownership thresholds, enforcement mechanisms, and the independence and powers of regulatory authorities. It also considers cross-ownership links between production and distribution companies.

○ ***Political inclusiveness***

This sub-indicator measures the extent to which the media environment ensures fair and diverse representation of political actors and viewpoints. It assesses media bias, electoral coverage, access to airtime, and transparency in political advertising across public and private outlets.

○ ***Social inclusiveness***

This sub-indicator assesses whether the media ecosystem represents and serves diverse social groups, including women, minorities, and marginalized communities. It evaluates legal frameworks, diversity policies, representation in news content, and access to media infrastructures and subsidies.

○ ***Availability of distribution infrastructure and discrimination of access***

This sub-indicator measures the diversity, accessibility, and competitiveness of media distribution infrastructures across print, radio, television, and online platforms.

It assesses safeguards ensuring neutrality, competition among providers, respect for net neutrality principles, and universal media coverage.

- **Transparency**

This indicator assesses the level of transparency in the media sector - that is, the extent to which citizens can identify who controls media outlets and digital intermediaries, how financial and political influences circulate, and how content is selected, labeled, and moderated.

Higher values signal lower levels of transparency in the media system and, consequently, a higher risk of media capture.

Sub-Indicators:

- ***Transparency in Media Ownership***

This sub-indicator measures the degree to which information on the ownership and control of media outlets is publicly available, clear, and regularly updated. It assesses the existence and enforcement of legal provisions requiring disclosure of direct and beneficial owners, executives, and editors, as well as affiliations with political or economic interests. It also evaluates the accessibility and comprehensiveness of ownership data across media sectors and the effectiveness of sanctions for non-compliance.

- ***Transparency in Subsidies to Media outlets***

This sub-indicator measures the fairness, transparency, and accountability of direct and indirect State support to media outlets. It assesses whether legislation establishes clear and objective criteria for allocating public funds and whether these rules are implemented transparently in practice. It also considers public access to information on subsidies.

- ***Transparency in Advertising***

This sub-indicator measures the transparency and fairness of political and state advertising. It assesses whether laws and practices ensure equitable distribution of

public advertising funds and require clear reporting of campaign spending by political parties and candidates, including on social media platforms. It also evaluates the responsibility of online platforms in guaranteeing transparency of political advertising and the public availability of data on state advertising.

- ***Content curation***

This sub-indicator measures the transparency, accountability, and independence of content curation and moderation practices across traditional and digital media. It assesses the existence and enforcement of laws or self-regulatory mechanisms ensuring a clear separation between editorial and commercial content, prohibiting disguised advertising, and promoting transparency in online content moderation. It also examines whether digital intermediaries disclose their curation criteria and commercial agreements influencing content visibility, as well as the availability of remedies for violations of freedom of expression.

- **Professionalism**

This indicator assesses the degree of professionalism in the media sector - that is, the extent to which journalistic standards of accuracy, independence, accountability, and ethical conduct are effectively upheld, due to editorial autonomy, self-regulation, sufficient professional training, and boundaries between editorial, commercial, and political interests.

Higher values signal lower levels of autonomy and professionalism in the media sector and, consequently, a higher risk of media capture.

Sub-Indicators:

- ***Editorial autonomy***

This sub-indicator measures the degree to which media organizations are free from political, commercial, and ownership interference in their editorial decisions. It assesses the existence and effectiveness of internal and external mechanisms - such as codes of ethics, press councils, and newsroom safeguards - that protect journalistic autonomy. It also evaluates the practical implementation of these rules

and the extent to which editorial content remains independent from advertisers, owners, or external affiliations.

- ***Journalistic Profession, Standards and Protection***

This sub-indicator measures the safety, independence, and professional integrity of journalists, as well as the overall conditions under which they operate. It assesses the presence and enforcement of legal safeguards for journalists' rights, protection of sources, and freedom from arbitrary arrests, violence, or surveillance. It also evaluates working conditions, professional standards, and the effectiveness of mechanisms ensuring editorial independence, social protection, and accountability within the profession.

- ***Media viability***

This sub-indicator assesses the economic fragility and limited adaptability of media organizations in a changing market environment. It examines constraints affecting the financial health of different media sectors, the limited diversification of revenue sources, and the uneven adoption of innovation supporting newsroom operations and audience engagement. The indicator also considers the presence and effectiveness of financial arrangements between digital or AI platforms and media providers aimed at ensuring fair remuneration for content use.

- **Information disorder**

This indicator assesses information disorder - that is, the extent to which the information environment is disrupted by the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, amplified by weak regulatory safeguards, limited media literacy, and low trust in news.

Higher values signal higher levels of information disorder and, consequently, a higher risk of media capture.

Sub-Indicators:

- ***Foreign governments dissemination of false information***

This sub-indicator measures the extent to which foreign governments or their agents attempt to influence domestic political discourse through disinformation campaigns. It assesses how frequently foreign actors use social media and paid online advertisements to spread misleading or false information aimed at shaping public opinion or political outcomes. It reflects the vulnerability of a country's information environment to external manipulation and the associated risk of media capture through foreign interference.

- ***Government/Party dissemination of false information***

This sub-indicator measures the extent to which governments, political parties, or their agents engage in spreading misleading or false information to influence public opinion domestically or abroad. It assesses the frequency and scope of disinformation campaigns conducted through social media and other online platforms, both within the country and targeting foreign audiences. It reflects the degree of political manipulation of the information environment and the associated risk of media capture through state or partisan disinformation practices.

- ***Monitoring and/or impact of disinformation or misinformation initiatives***

This sub-indicator measures the existence and effectiveness of mechanisms, policies, and initiatives aimed at monitoring, countering, and mitigating the spread of false or harmful information. It assesses the presence of independent fact checking and research initiatives, national strategies, and cooperation frameworks addressing disinformation and hate speech, including the role of online platforms in limiting their dissemination. The lack of effective initiatives to monitor and counter disinformation, while safeguarding freedom of expression, increases vulnerability to information manipulation and media capture.

- ***Media literacy***

This sub-indicator measures the level of media and digital literacy within a country and the effectiveness of policies and initiatives aimed at strengthening citizens' critical understanding of media content. It assesses the inclusion of media literacy in formal and non-formal education, the availability of teacher training, and the

allocation of public resources to support such programs. It also considers individual digital and information literacy skills, as well as initiatives by media services and platforms to promote informed media use.

- **Media trust**

This sub-indicator measures the level of public trust in different types of media and news sources, including public and private broadcasters, the print and online press, social media, and digital content creators. It assesses citizens' perceptions of the reliability and integrity of information, as well as the prevalence of news avoidance within the population.

3.1.2. Political system dimension

The *political system* constitutes the second dimension of the framework and considers the institutional arrangements and power configurations that shape interactions between political actors, the media, and citizens. The level of media capture risk is closely linked to the nature of political competition, the inclusiveness of governance, and the extent to which public authority operates through transparent, rule-bound mechanisms rather than informal networks of patronage or coercion. This dimension is measured through five indicators: *political conflict and polarization*, *political disengagement*, *political restrictions*, *power concentration*, and *lack of rational-legal authority*. Together, they describe the political conditions that can either constrain or enable undue influence over the media system.

Indicators:

- **Political conflict and polarization**

This indicator measures the level of political conflict and polarization within a country. It assesses the frequency with which governments publicly challenge the integrity of the judiciary, the degree of polarization of the political system, and the depth of social divisions around politically salient issues. Contexts characterized by high levels of conflict and polarization tend to undermine democratic dialogue and trust in institutions, creating favorable conditions for political interference, disinformation

campaigns, and the control of the public agenda. These dynamics increase the overall risk of media capture.

- **Political participation**

This indicator measures the degree of political participation, considering levels of citizens' active participation in political life. It considers electoral participation, collective mobilization, and engagement in political organizations, movements, or trade unions. It also includes a digital dimension, assessing the use of social media to promote or coordinate offline political actions. Broad and meaningful participation – encompassing voting rights, civic engagement, and access to decision-making – strengthens accountability and reduces incentives for political elites to monopolize communication channels. Conversely, low and unequal levels of participation increase the likelihood that media ecosystems serve as instruments of elite reproduction, thereby heightening the risk of media capture.

- **Political rights**

This indicator measures the level of protection and respect for fundamental political rights within a country. It assesses the freedom and fairness of electoral processes, the degree of political pluralism, and the effective ability of different social groups to participate in political life. It also considers aspects related to the functioning of governmental institutions, freedom of association, and the absence of repression against civil society. Low levels of guaranteed political rights are associated with a higher risk of media capture, while stronger political rights protections help mitigate this risk by fostering transparency, civic participation, and public accountability.

- **Power distribution**

This indicator measures the degree of balance and autonomy in the distribution of political power within a country. It assesses the state's capacity to act independently from external influences, both domestic and international, as well as the extent to which power is evenly distributed across social groups and socioeconomic classes. When power is centralized in the executive or in dominant parties, the risk of capture increases, as fewer checks and balances exist to constrain political influence on the

media. In contrast, decentralized or pluralistic power structures tend to promote a more competitive communicative environment.

- **Rational-legal authority**

This indicator measures the extent to which political power is not exercised according to principles of legality, impersonality, and respect for the rule of law. It assesses the independence and effectiveness of the judicial system, as well as the predictability and impartiality of law enforcement. It also considers the extent to which governments legitimize their decisions by relying on justifications grounded in legal norms and institutional procedures. Contexts characterized by a high level of rational-legal authority tend to reduce the risk of media capture, as governance is based on stable rules and institutions, limiting arbitrary political interference. Weak rational-legal authority, by contrast, fosters clientelism, opacity, and the informal exercise of influence that typify media ecosystems with high levels of media capture risk.

3.1.3. Societal context dimension

The *societal context* constitutes the third dimension of the framework, encompassing the social, cultural, and normative environment in which other dimensions (media, politics, economy, and so on) are embedded. While the political system focuses on institutional dynamics, the societal context accounts for the deeper social conditions that sustain or erode democratic resilience. This dimension is measured through five indicators: *democratic deficit, civil society disengagement, corruption, low education, and mistrust in institutions*. Together, these indicators reflect the cultural and moral infrastructure upon which the legitimacy and functioning of both media and political systems depend. They highlight that media capture is not solely the outcome of institutional weaknesses but is also shaped by broader societal deficits in civic culture, education, and trust.

Indicators:

- **Level of democracy**

This indicator measures the overall level of democratic development in a country by integrating multiple dimensions of democracy, including electoral, liberal, participatory,

deliberative, and egalitarian components. It also accounts for the equitable distribution of resources and the protection of civil liberties. Contexts characterized by democratic deficits – such as limited pluralism, restricted political participation, and weak transparency – are more vulnerable to media capture by political and economic elites.

- **Civil society participation**

This indicator measures the level of participation and engagement of civil society in public life. It assesses the freedom and capacity of civic organizations, NGOs, and social movements to operate, express themselves, and contribute to decision-making processes. It also considers the presence of legal safeguards against abusive litigation (anti-SLAPP measures), equality of access to and protection of rights, as well as citizens' participation in volunteering activities and community initiatives. In contexts where civil society is weak, insufficiently protected, and non-inclusive, the risk of media capture increases, undermining transparency, pluralism, and public accountability.

- **Corruption**

This indicator measures the level and prevalence of corruption within public, political, and judicial institutions, taking into account both perceptions and practices of abuse of power for private gain. It assesses multiple executive, legislative, and judicial corruption, the transparency of political financing, the disclosure of conflicts of interest, and compliance with international anti-corruption standards. It also incorporates oversight and accountability mechanisms, such as judicial independence and citizens' opportunities for electronic participation in decision-making processes. Contexts characterized by high levels of corruption and fragile institutions are more vulnerable to forms of media capture, as political and economic interference tends to undermine media autonomy and pluralism.

- **Education**

This indicator measures the overall level of education in a country, considering equitable access to quality basic education, enrolment and completion rates in secondary education, as well as the share of the population with tertiary educational attainment. It reflects the capacity of the education system to provide citizens with the skills

necessary to fully exercise their rights, participate consciously in democratic life, and critically assess information. Societies characterized by lower levels of educated and critically informed human capital are more exposed to the risk of media capture, due to reduced informational resilience and a weaker capacity for independent evaluation.

- **Trust in institutions**

This indicator measures the level of citizens' trust in key public institutions, including the government, parliament, the judicial system, local authorities, and political parties. It reflects perceptions of their legitimacy, transparency, and effectiveness in representing collective interests and ensuring compliance with democratic rules. Contexts characterized by low levels of institutional trust tend to undermine stability, accountability, and the quality of public debate, thereby increasing vulnerability to media capture.

To summarize, the concept of media capture risk is structured as a hierarchical, multidimensional construct. At the highest level lies the overall media capture risk, measured through three core dimensions: "Media ecosystem", "Political system", and "Societal context". Each dimension is operationalized through five specific indicators. In the case of the Media ecosystem dimension, indicators are further disaggregated into five sub-indicators. Measurement at this most granular level relies on elementary variables, which are described in detail in the following section.

3.2. Data selection and aggregation

For each indicator (and sub-indicator), multiple elementary measurements (hereafter referred to as variables) are collected from publicly available sources, as listed in Table 4. For the complete list of variables, please refer to Annex 1.

Data Source	Host Institution	Time Period	Type of Sources	Countries
Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM)	EUI (European University Institute)	2025	Experts	EU 27 + 5*
Euromedia Ownership Monitor (EOM)	University of Salzburg et al.	2022-2023	Experts	EU 27
V-Dem	University of Gothenburg	2024	Experts	EU 27 + 5
Freedom in the World	Freedom House	2024	Experts	EU 27 + 5
Worldwide Governance Indicators	World Bank	2022	Experts	EU 27 + 5
Index of Public Integrity (IPI)	ERCAS/CIPE	2023	Experts	EU 27 + 5 (No Montenegro)
Transparency Index (T-Index)	ERCAS/CIPE	2024	Experts	EU 27 + 5
Eurobarometer Standard 101	European Union	2024	Citizens	EU 27
Eurobarometer Media & News Survey	European Union	2023	Citizens	EU 27
Eurostat	European Union	2023	Official data	EU 27 + 5
Corruption Perception Index (CPI)	Transparency International	2024	Experts	EU 27 + 5
Balkan Barometer	Regional Cooperation Council	2024	Citizens and Companies	Western Balkans
Global Education Monitoring Report	Unesco	2022-2023	Official data	EU 27 + 5
Global State of Democracy Initiative	International IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)	2021-2024	Official data + Experts	EU 27 + 5

TABLE 4 DATA SOURCES

* *Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye.*

Because they are quite disparate, it was not always possible to find data from the same year. As a result, the data used to create the Map vary by source and span the period from 2022 to 2025¹. The decision to use data from fourteen different sources also allowed us to

¹ The dataset underpinning the Media Capture Risk Map reflects the state of data availability as of November 2025, corresponding to the release of the updated version of the Media Pluralism Monitor. Additional data

consider data of a variety of types, ranging from expert opinions to citizen opinions, as well as official data². Given the heterogeneous nature of the data sources employed - including expert assessments, survey data, and official statistics - some variability across indicators is to be expected. Differences in data collection procedures and measurement strategies may result in isolated anomalies. However, taken together, the data show a sufficient level of consistency to allow for meaningful cross-country comparison.

Finally, 306 single variables are collected, which reflect the identified indicators (and sub-indicators) for each dimension of the media capture risk. Some of these variables are missing for specific countries. For imputation of missing values, we employ a method called “k-NN” (k-nearest neighbours). It considers the set of variables of the k nearest countries to that with a missing variable and applies a summary statistic to those variables to impute the missing value. This approach can be repeated for each country variables and values. This method is employed using $k = 5$ and the median as summary statistic, whereas the set of nearest countries is searched at the dimension level for missing variables in the “Political system” and “Societal context”, and at indicator level for missing variables in the “Media ecosystem”.

Following the above (hierarchical) multidimensional structure, variables are then aggregated to get indicator (and sub-indicator, for “Media ecosystem”) measurements at the country level. First of all, variables need to be normalized, as they reflect several and different situations connected with a specific facet of media capture risk. Moreover, they differ in unit of measurement, hence in typology (categorical responses/integers or real numbers), but also in polarity (positive/negative relationship between a measure and the media capture risk). In this regard, we decide to align them considering a positive polarity

sources included in the analysis were not updated beyond this point, as their most recent releases had been published earlier.

² Please note that, although several datasets available could have been considered in line with the objectives of this deliverable, the selection was guided by their coherence with the theoretical framework and, crucially, by their capacity to ensure adequate cross-country comparability. In particular, preference was given to sources providing consistent coverage across the countries included in the analysis, as many existing datasets offer only partial or geographically limited data. Regarding the selection of EU candidate countries, only those for which complete data availability across all sources listed in Table 4 could be verified at the start of the project (April 2024) were included in the analysis.

(the higher the variable, the greater the media capture risk) and applying the Min-Max normalization approach, so they range between 0 and 1³.

Linear aggregation is used for the weighting system and for computing composite measures at further levels of the multidimensional structure (i.e., for the dimensions and the overall level of media capture risk). Decisions regarding the selection of dimensions, indicators (or sub-indicators), variables, and related weights are made by the WP7 team on the basis of the media studies literature and EU policy recommendations. In particular, the literature considered spans from journalism and its different traditions to comparative studies on media systems, disintermediation, and the role of digital platforms in the news environment. Regarding EU legislative and regulatory frameworks, the European Media Freedom Act (2024) and the Digital Services Act (2022) are taken into account. The choices made by the WP7 team on the basis of these criteria were discussed with experts involved in other media monitoring projects, as well as with other media scholars so to obtain the final composite measure of the overall media risk capture (Tabb. 5 and 6).

	Dimensions	Weight
<i>Media capture overall</i>	Media ecosystem	50.0
	Political system	25.0
	Societal context	25.0

TABLE 5 DIMENSIONS WEIGHT

³ A sensitivity analysis, across the multidimensional structure (overall, dimensions, and indicators), comparing Min-Max against an alternative normalization method (namely, z-scores) has been conducted. Results have shown consistency, with rank-correlations always over 0.95.

Dimension	Indicators	Weight
<i>Media ecosystem</i>	Political and business influence	27.0
	Pluralism	15.0
	Transparency	21.0
	Professionalism	22.0
	Information disorder	15.0
Dimension	Indicators	Weight
<i>Political system</i>	Political conflict and polarization	20.0
	Political participation	10.0
	Political rights	25.0
	Power distribution	10.0
	Rational-legal authority	35.0
Dimension	Indicators	Weight
<i>Societal context</i>	Level of democracy	23.0
	Civil society participation	20.0
	Corruption	21.0
	Education	21.0
	Trust in institutions	15.0

TABLE 6 INDICATORS WEIGHT

From a technical point of view, let x_{cm} be the observed value of variable m in country c , with $c = 1, \dots, 32$ (number of countries) and $m = 1, \dots, p_i$ (number of variables contributing to indicator i). The normalised value of x_{cm} using the Min-Max method can be denoted by y_{cm} and is given by:

$$y_{cm} = [x_{cm} - \min(x_{cm})] / [\max(x_{cm}) - \min(x_{cm})], \quad \text{if variable } m \text{ has positive polarity,}$$

$$y_{cm} = [\max(x_{cm}) - x_{cm}] / [\max(x_{cm}) - \min(x_{cm})], \quad \text{if variable } m \text{ has negative polarity,}$$

where $\min()$ and $\max()$ are the minimum and maximum feasible values of each variable (according to the data source which they come from).

As mentioned above, when aggregating values at a certain level of the hierarchical multidimensional structure, we consider a linear function and a set of weights provided by experts. Hence, let w_m be the weight of variable m , such that they sum up to 1 over the variables within each indicator.

Specifically, considering the "Political system" and "Societal context" dimensions, the aggregated measurement of indicator i for country c , denoted by IND_{ci} , is obtained as

$$IND_{ci} = \sum_{m \rightarrow i} w_m y_{cm},$$

where the sum is over the variables that contribute to indicator i (specified using notation $m \rightarrow i$ under the summation symbol), with $i = 1, \dots, 10$ different indicators (five indicators in each of the two dimensions at issue, see Table 1).

As far as the “Media ecosystem” dimension is concerned, we have an intermediate level in the multidimensional structure, namely the sub-indicator one (see Table 3). Consequently, before computing the values at indicator level i , we need to obtain the aggregated measurement of sub-indicator s for country c , denoted by S_{cs} , as follows:

$$S_{cs} = \sum_{m \rightarrow s} w_m y_{cm}$$

where the summation is taken over the variables associated with sub-indicator s , with $s = 1, \dots, r_i$ (number of sub-indicators within indicator i).

At this point, sub-indicator values need to be aggregated for getting IND_{ci} as follows:

$$IND_{ci} = \sum_{s \rightarrow i} w_s S_{cs}$$

where the sum considers the sub-indicators within indicator i and w_s is the weight of sub-indicator s (such that the sum over all the sub-indicators of indicator i is equal to 1).

At the upper level of the hierarchy (the dimension), the aggregated value of dimension d for country c , denoted by DI_{cd} , is computed as

$$DI_{cd} = \sum_{i \rightarrow d} w_i IND_{ci}$$

where now the sum is over the indicators of dimension d , w_i is the weight of indicator i (such that the sum over all the indicators in dimension d is equal to 1) and $d = 1, \dots, 3$ (“Media ecosystem”, “Political system”, and “Societal context”).

Finally, at the top of the hierarchy we have the overall measure of media capture risk for country c , denoted by MCR_c , which is computed as

$$MCR_c = \sum_d w_d DI_{cd}$$

where the sum is over the three dimensions and w_d is the weight assigned to each one.

3.3. Data validation

The data used for the construction of the Media Capture Risk Map underwent a multi-layered and iterative validation process, designed to ensure the robustness, coherence, and comparability of the index and its results. Validation was conducted at two main levels: (i) validation of the operationalisation of the theoretical framework underpinning the index, and (ii) validation of the results produced by its application. At each level, both internal and external peer-review mechanisms were systematically applied (OECD, 2008).

The first level of validation concerned the methodological design of the Media Capture Risk Index. This included the validation of (a) the selection of the main dimensions and indicators composing the index, (b) the choice of data sources, and (c) the identification of the individual variables operationalising each indicator. During the initial phase of theoretical design, all methodological components were internally validated by the project's research team through structured discussions and internal peer review. Subsequently, an external validation was carried out through the involvement of a group of independent experts with recognised expertise in media systems, political systems, and sociology. The feedback collected during this first validation cycle informed a second validation phase. In this phase, methodological revisions and refinements were first discussed and validated internally among the researchers responsible for the project and the partners of Work Package 7 and then submitted to a second round of external validation involving a group of sectoral experts. This iterative process aimed to ensure conceptual soundness, transparency, and adequacy of the methodological choices in relation to the analytical objectives of the project.

Following the theoretical design, the index was operationalised and applied to produce the Media Capture Risk Map. This stage was also subject to a two-step validation process. The first validation step focused on the overall cross-country results of the Map and aimed at verifying the internal coherence of the scores, their consistency with the methodological framework, and their comparability across countries. This assessment was conducted internally by the core research team and the partners of Work Package 7, and externally through consultation with a group of experts in comparative media and politics research. The second validation step concerned the country-level results presented in the individual

country reports. These results were validated with the support of external country experts for each country covered by the Map. The country experts reviewed the empirical evidence, sources, and risk assessments, with particular attention to context-specific dynamics and recent developments.

Finally, we assess the reliability of the indicators in measuring each specific dimension of media capture risk. For this purpose, Cronbach alpha is computed within all the three dimensions. This coefficient, as is well known, provides an estimate of the internal consistency of the indicators, based on the correlations among them. Higher values indicate stronger evidence that the indicators measure the same underlying construct. Results are shown in Table 7, in which we report the Cronbach alpha computed within each dimension (first column, labelled as “raw”). As can be seen, in each dimension we can observe good internal consistency, with raw Cronbach alpha values equal to or above 0.75 in all three cases.

Moreover, within each dimension, alpha coefficients are also computed after removing each indicator in turn (“alpha if item deleted”). No substantial increase can be observed when any indicator is deleted. Although the exclusion of Political participation would result in a marginal increase in Cronbach’s alpha, the indicator is retained due to its strong theoretical relevance and its central role in the conceptual definition of the construct.

Dimension	Deleted Indicators	Cronbach alpha*
<i>Media ecosystem</i> (raw Cronbach alpha: 0.86)	Political and business influence	0.79
	Pluralism	0.90
	Transparency	0.84
	Professionalism	0.79
	Information disorder	0.81
<i>Political system</i> (raw Cronbach alpha: 0.75)	Political conflict and polarization	0.66
	Political participation	0.85
	Political rights	0.58
	Power distribution	0.72
	Rational-legal authority	0.53
<i>Societal context</i> (raw Cronbach alpha: 0.89)	Level of democracy	0.82
	Civil society participation	0.83
	Corruption	0.82
	Education	0.90
	Trust in institutions	0.92

TABLE 7 CRONBACH ALPHA BY DIMENSION

* COMPUTED AFTER DELETION OF EACH INDICATOR

While the final responsibility for the assessments remained with the project team, this validation step contributed to enhancing the empirical accuracy and contextual sensitivity of the country-level findings, thereby strengthening the overall reliability of the Media Capture Risk Map.

Conclusions

The Media Capture Risk Map, as conceptualised and implemented, figures as an innovative, comparative, and interactive tool designed to assess the risk of citizens being insufficiently informed across EU Member States, four candidate Western Balkan countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia), and Türkiye.

By operationalising the concept of media capture risk with a holistic approach and into a multidimensional framework, the Map provides a structured and evidence-based overview of how political, economic, technological, and societal factors jointly shape contemporary media ecosystems.

The index developed shows that the countries with the highest risk are mostly those outside the European Union, with Türkiye at the top. However, one EU country also stands out in this group: Hungary. At the other end of the spectrum, accordingly with many other sources, the Nordic countries emerge as the most resilient, showing the lowest levels of risk. Looking at each dimension separately, some variations and structural vulnerabilities emerge, posing a threat to democracy and limits to an informed citizenry. Considering the media ecosystem dimension, Hungary ranks alongside Türkiye at the highest level of risk, it also increases for Malta. By contrast, based on the data related to the political dimension, Türkiye remains firmly at the top, and the level of risk increases for North Macedonia. Finally, looking at the societal context dimension, Türkiye and North Macedonia emerge as the countries with the highest level of risk. However, beyond these extremes, results indicate that significant vulnerabilities emerge within consolidated democracies. This suggests that systemic imbalances, driven by economic fragility and polarization, are creating fertile ground for capture across Europe.

Nonetheless, it is paramount to consider that the deliverable itself is the Map, as a democratic tool for a wide range of stakeholders. For policymakers and institutional actors, it provides a robust analytical basis to support evidence-informed decision-making and to identify areas where interventions may be needed to safeguard democratic accountability. For researchers, it offers a replicable and scalable framework that enables comparative analysis across countries and over time. For media professionals, it highlights structural

constraints affecting journalistic autonomy and information quality. Finally, for citizens, it increases transparency and awareness regarding the conditions under which information is produced and disseminated.

Moreover, the Map has been designed as a dynamic instrument, intended to be updated on a regular, annual basis, depending on availability of funding. Its long-term relevance depends on the continuous monitoring of media ecosystems and on the systematic collection and integration of new data. In this perspective, the tool should be understood not as a static output, but as an evolving infrastructure supporting ongoing analysis. At the same time, the implementation of the Map has highlighted important data gaps that should be addressed in future iterations. In particular, further efforts are needed to improve the availability of data on information disorder, including disinformation and misinformation dynamics, in accordance with the European Democracy Action plan. Developed to build more resilient democracies across the EU, the plan aims to: promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom, and protecting Europe's democracies from the threats and harmful effects of disinformation, information manipulation and interference, in particular from foreign actors. To that end, more data about media, digital, and AI literacy is needed, in order to gather all the initiatives that help to build a stronger and more resilient society from anti-democratic attitudes.

Additionally, data coverage for EU candidate countries remains uneven and would benefit from closer integration with other EU-funded research initiatives. Strengthening the monitoring of media ecosystems in these contexts is particularly relevant, as it may contribute to a more informed assessment of their alignment with EU standards and, ultimately, support the enlargement process.

In a broader perspective, the Media Capture Risk Map contributes to ongoing European efforts to safeguard media freedom, pluralism, and the integrity of the democratic public sphere, by supporting evidence-based regulatory approaches to systemic risks, platform governance, and information integrity, in line with the objectives pursued by the Digital Services Act (DSA 2022) and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA 2024). By providing a transparent and comparable evidence base, the tool supports the monitoring of risks that

may undermine citizens' access to reliable, plural, and independent information, and helps identify structural vulnerabilities that can hinder the effective implementation of EU standards across Member States and candidate countries. In an increasingly complex and platform-driven information environment, ensuring access to trustworthy and diverse information is not only a regulatory objective, but a fundamental precondition for democratic resilience. In this regard, the tool offers a concrete contribution to strengthening accountability, fostering informed public debate, and enhancing the capacity of European societies to respond to evolving challenges affecting their information ecosystems.

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