

Austria

Population: 9.1m

Country media capture risk overall (value - %): 33.6

Media capture risk average across countries (mean - %): 38.3



Country Overview

Austria is generally characterized by a medium level of media capture risk across all three dimensions (media ecosystem, political system, and societal context). The score (33.6) is determined by a contemporary media and political landscape deeply shaped by its historical development. As the former core of the Habsburg Empire, the country inherited strong state institutions, later reconfigured through the transition to a modern republic after the Second World War. Since 1955, Austria has maintained a stable tradition of parliamentary democracy. However, in 2024-25 the country entered a phase of political instability following the narrow electoral victory of the far-right party *FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs)* in September 2024.

The media system continues to reflect structural legacies of the post-war *Parteienpresse*. Although formal party-aligned journalism has declined since the 1980s, longstanding tensions surrounding editorial independence, political influence, and media bias remain embedded in Austria's corporatist media tradition. Recent developments suggest a partial revival of press-party parallelism, particularly in the online environment, where media outlets with varying degrees of proximity to political actors have proliferated. These include platforms linked to parliamentary groups, former politicians, or party-affiliated funders, pointing to renewed forms of political alignment. Similarly, recent studies highlight how major political parties have supported new journalistic initiatives, reinforcing connections between media and political actors, including the use of public funds to secure favorable media coverage. These dynamics have resurfaced in recent debates, particularly around public service broadcasting and the role of the state in media governance. Journalists also face legal and administrative pressures, contributing to an environment in which political and legal influence over the media remains present. An additional and related structural feature, shaping the Austrian media landscape, is the relatively small size of the country, which contributes to the development of a close-knit journalistic field. The limited number of political and media actors fosters dense personal networks between journalists and politicians, which can influence news production processes and further blur the boundaries between media and political spheres. This proximity represents a relevant condition in assessing the risk of media capture.

From an economic perspective, the media sector faces persistent structural challenges. Declining revenues and ongoing downsizing reflect the gradual erosion of the traditional media market, while global digital platforms now capture the bulk of advertising revenues. The closure of the historic *Wiener Zeitung* in 2023 symbolized this contraction, while tabloid outlets continue to dominate both readership and access to state support, leaving limited space for newer digital media and innovation. The sector remains dominated by long-established actors. *ORF* continues to hold a leading position across broadcast and online media, while *Kronenzeitung*, founded in 1959, remains the most widely read newspaper. State influence persists through direct press subsidies (approximately €9 million annually) and extensive public-sector advertising (around €200 million per year). While direct subsidies are closely monitored by the regulatory authority, public sector advertising is distributed without comprehensive oversight, raising recurring concerns about editorial independence. Medium risk is also shown in information disorder, particularly regarding the monitoring and the impact of disinformation, government dissemination of false information, and, in general, about media credibility.

Politically, today Austria is marked by a moderate degree of polarization, with media governance frequently at the center of public controversy, causing a strain on political participation. Austria continues to be widely classified as a democratic system with strong formal protections for civil and political rights. At the same time, recent assessments indicate some erosion in rule-of-law components, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, reflected by the civil society participation composite indicator. Public perceptions of limited political accountability have contributed to growing civic skepticism, although reforms such as the introduction of a new freedom of information law represent efforts to enhance transparency and democratic legitimacy.

Overall, Austria's media environment remains formally pluralistic but increasingly shaped by political pressures, economic constraints, and considerable market concentration. While the political system retains its democratic foundations, emerging institutional vulnerabilities and societal tensions raise ongoing questions about media independence, accountability, and education levels.