CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF DEMOCRACY

CAPTURE PROOFING MEDIA IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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The Kremlin Playbook includes a wide range of hard, soft, and sharp power tools that Russia deploys in order to wield its disruptive influence over Europe and the globe.[1] Governance vulnerabilities and democratic deficits in the target countries have represented key enabling factors for the leveraging of the Kremlin's economic presence in key sectors (such as energy) into what has often amounted to state capture.[2]

The emerging democracies in Southeast Europe (SEE) represent one of the most vulnerable regions in Europe to foreign malign influence. On the one hand, domestic developments in SEE states related to democratic backsliding and the erosion of civic and political liberties have fed into low **governance standards and public disenchantment**. On the other hand, foreign authoritarian states, primarily Russia and increasingly China, have intensified their sharp power influence efforts directed at further derailing faith in liberal democracy and presenting authoritarianism as a more viable political alternative.

The European Union and the United States' weak response has additionally enabled and emboldened the two authoritarian powers in SEE. The EU's enlargement

[1] Shentov, O., Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., eds., *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

[2] Shentov, O., Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., eds., *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, 2018.

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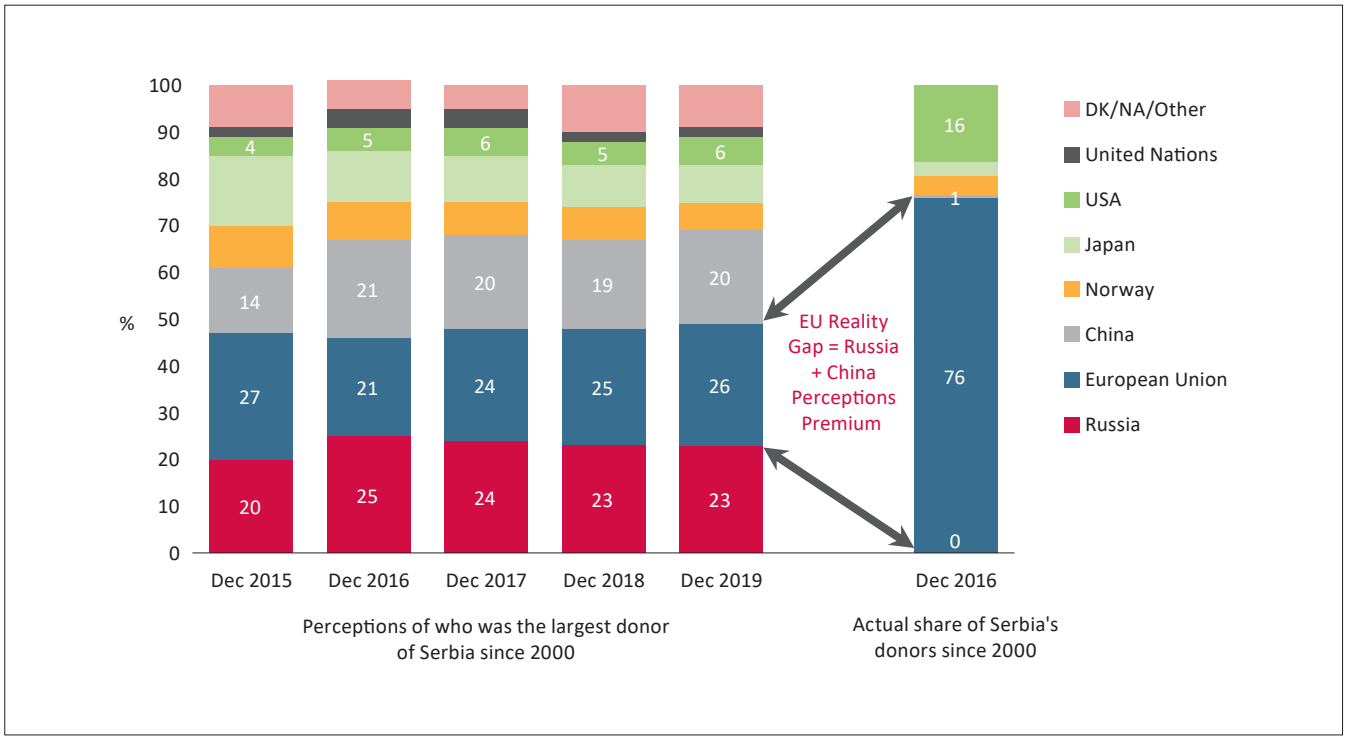
KEY POINTS

- Russia's media capture tactics in Southeast Europe are part of its overall **state capture power toolbox**. Opaque and corruptive local business-political networks, have enabled the penetration of Russian influence in the media sector across the region.
- Media capture has complemented Russia's political and military bullying and sizable economic footprint in critical sectors in SEE. This **vertically integrated Russian strategy** has won hearts and minds among the Balkan publics, strengthening the image of authoritarian governance and denigrating the Western liberal democratic model.
- Russian state-controlled media have blanketed the region's info space with the **full array of pro-Russian narratives and disinformation**. Local pro-Russian partisan and pro-government outlets have amplified them.
- **China** has increasingly stepped into **Russia's local proxy networks**. The vast resources of the Belt and Road initiative and China's state media have further boosted the media capture model in the region.
- The US and the EU need to provide a **robust response to Russian and Chinese-enabled media capture in SEE**. It should be anchored in a credible integration and democratisation process focused on: (i) increased economic engagement; (ii) strong anti-corruption and rule of law conditionality; (iii) comprehensive security support; and (iv) robust strategic communication.

Figure 1. Winning the hearts and minds: perceptions vs. reality on Serbia's largest donors



Note: *Data shows the response to the question "Who would you say has been the largest donor to Serbia since 2000?"*
Source: *CSD based on Ministry of European Integration of Serbia 2015 – 2019.*

drive into the Western Balkans has stalled. In particular, the block has been unable to develop and implement effective tools for tackling **rampant corruption and state capture** in SEE, including within EU member states. Its insistence on maintaining a business-as-usual relationship with Russia and China, in the face of ever-mounting evidence of their combined malign intent to undermine the Western democratic order, has further eroded the EU's credibility in the region.

The corrosive effects on democracy of this mutually reinforcing domestic-international nexus have been particularly evident in the Balkan media landscape. **The Kremlin and Beijing have gained a foothold** in the Balkan media space undermining journalistic independence and disseminating narratives serving their political and economic interests. They have been able to win the hearts and minds of the Balkan publics and diminish the attractiveness of the Western liberal democratic model of governance. Russia in particular has sown distrust in regional media audiences about their countries' Euro-Atlantic path by prominently disseminating anti-EU/NATO narratives.

The SEE cross-country regional comparison reveals a number of key similarities in Russia's media capture influence tactics. **The Kremlin typically deploys informal instruments of influence** rather than direct ownership. The key instrument of the Kremlin's media capture influence in SEE is the **cultivation of opaque local networks of patronage,** which have editorial control over key local media groups.[3] In addition, the Kremlin employs **auxiliary tools of media capture**:

- tapping into and instrumentalizing advertising revenue (**financial capture**); and
- benefitting from the pro-Russian cultural, ideological, and linguistic affinities of journalists and the general population in some of the countries, such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia (i.e. **cognitive capture**).

[3] Filipova, R. et al., *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021.

Russia amplifies its media capture influence in the region through spreading and supercharging propagandistic and divisive narratives and disinformation.

Common Patterns, Instruments, and Narratives

Russian media influence in SEE is channeled through the diffusion of **common disinformation narratives** through different instruments depending on the degree of political, economic, and ideological distance between a domestic Balkan media channel and Russia.[4] The more closely politically and economically integrated a given outlet is in (pro-)Russian oligarchic networks, the more explicitly biased it is in relation to spreading Russian disinformation narratives:

- The outlets that are **directly owned by Russia** (such as the national language editions of Russia Beyond, Sputnik, and News Front) are distinguished by the most straightforward and aggressive promotion of Kremlin propaganda. They seek to amplify Kremlin's messages through sheer volume of dissemination, as well as through supercharging hyperbole. On topics important to the Kremlin, Russian-owned outlets produce on average four times more articles per month than locally-owned ones. They have much more limited coverage of nationally relevant events and developments in SEE.
- **Partisan outlets** (published by a political party with strong links to the Kremlin) are characterized by the provision of a party-favoring spin on the dissemination of Kremlin propaganda. Partisan outlets seek to ensure Russian financial support for their political patrons by indiscriminately placating the Kremlin's image. This is further facilitated by useful polarization and references to common historical and religious bonds widely present in Russian narratives.
- **Mainstream dailies** (i.e., more widely circulated or read sources, which maintain some, albeit not exclusive, ties to (pro-)Russian groups) feature a less unequivocally positive image of Russia. The outlets attempt to appeal to a wider audience, which means that their editorial policy favors both pro-Russian and pro-Western pieces.

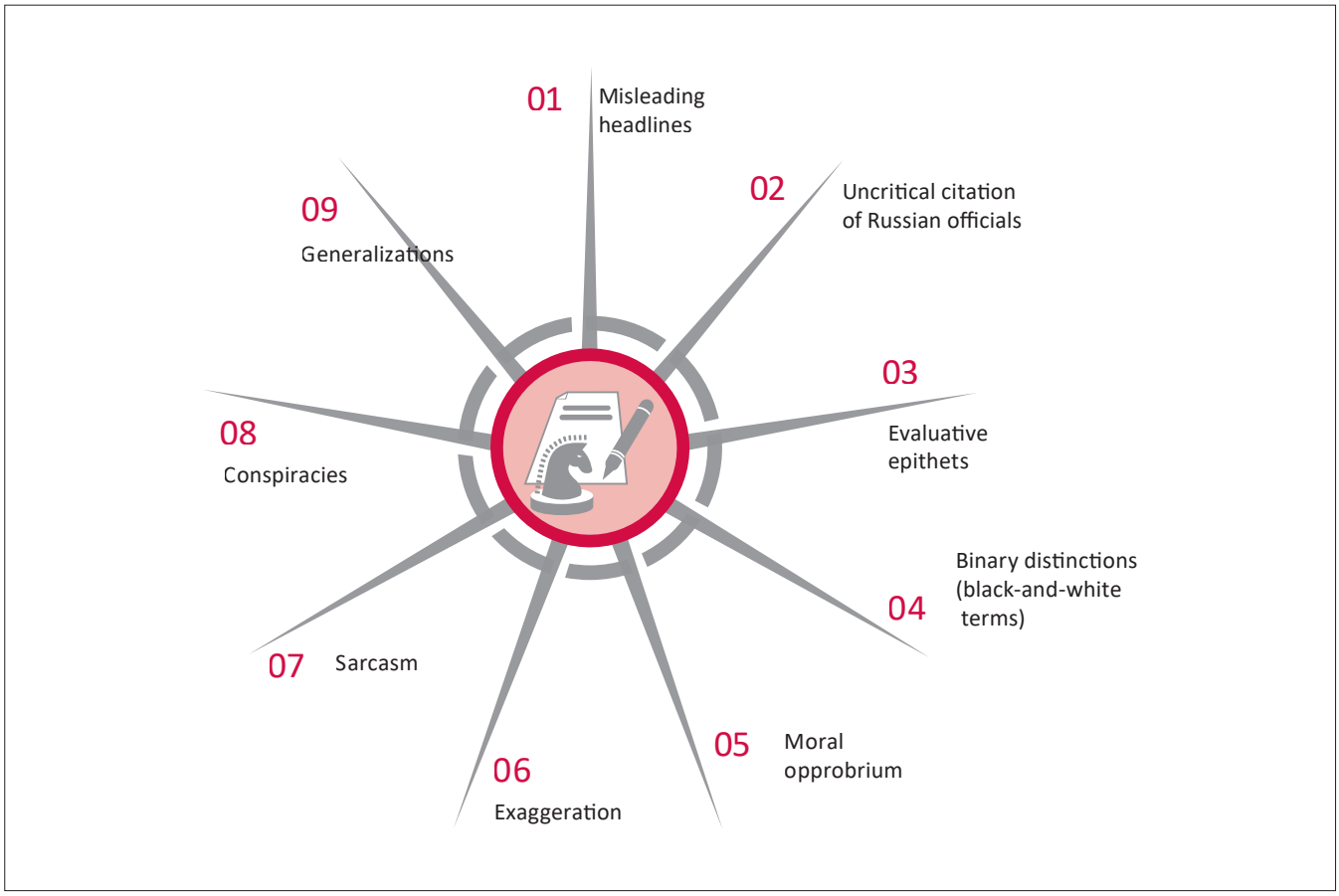
Pro-Russian narratives in the latter two types of outlets are enabled and modulated by their **dependence on government support, including EU funds** in some member states of the region. As governments in the Balkans have been hooked onto large-scale business ventures with Russia (and China), they mold their national media environments to, at minimum, avoid topics that might upset the Kremlin (or Beijing). Governments and large state-owned enterprises are often the biggest advertisers in media in Southeast Europe. They further leverage access to government ministers and news to motivate or intimidate journalists from mainstream media into providing favorable coverage of their relations to Moscow and Beijing.

SEE states are also susceptible to Russian narratives as a result of commonly present cultural and sociopolitical affinities. The public discourse in many of the countries reveals a **persistent East-West ambivalence** due to contradictory societal attitudes toward geopolitical allegiances and the essence of liberal democratic values. The predominant support for EU membership among Balkan nations is based on the belief in the instrumental benefits that it can yield (freedom to travel, employment opportunities) rather than in the value-based democratic underpinnings of the EU. This instrumental-based perspective on EU membership, further increases the countries' vulnerability to narratives against Western values. Another trend is the **widespread discontent with the overall process of democratization**, the distrust of political institutions, and an overall dissatisfaction with the political system and the functioning of the economy. Such disenchantment with national political, social, and economic developments enables authoritarian leaders with an anti-Western agenda to gain popularity in SEE.

Serbia is the regional leader in terms of the volume of the publication of pro-Russian content. In Serbia, Russian disinformation narratives have spread strongly outside the Russian-owned outlets, and in particular to pro-government outlets that dominate the Serbian media space and disseminate Russian narratives as

[4] Filipova, R. and Galev, T., *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018.

Figure 2. Pro-Russian stylistic modes of message



Source: *CSD.*

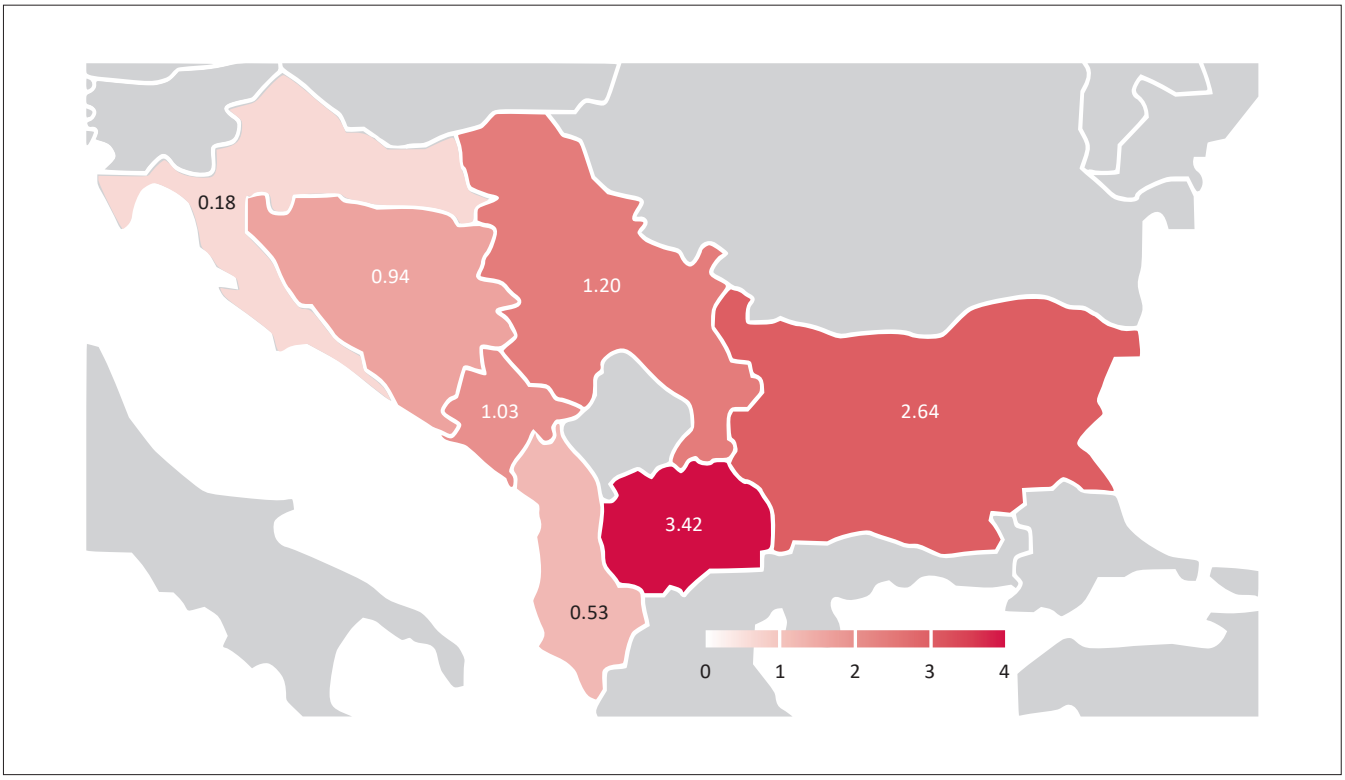
part of the government's policy to forge close foreign policy and economic ties with Russia. Moscow's opposition to the independence of Kosovo has shaped a pervasive narrative within the Serbian media environment of Russia as a protector of Slavic nations against Muslim-majority countries.

The Kremlin goes social media

The Kremlin's propaganda capitalizes on the **increasing distrust in mainstream media** in the Balkan countries and the simultaneous **proliferation of social media use**. The number of followers and interactions with the social media accounts of Russian-owned outlets in SEE have been increasing and have reached impressive heights. In Serbia and Bulgaria, in particular, they have reached more than 100,000 followers and have elicited millions of interactions (the populations of each of the two countries are less than seven million people). Serbian versions of the Russian-owned outlets are most probably read across former Yugoslavia and by the sizable Serbian diaspora. While these accounts typically share links from their online media/news outlets, the numbers of digital content, such as live coverage, videos, and animated slide decks, have been on the rise, too.

In addition, **Russian embassies across the Balkans have been growing their social media presence**, seeking to engage online with local political figures and further promote the official Kremlin line. Despite Serbia's dominance as a Russian disinformation hub in the region, the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria ranks first in terms of followers and interactions. The pages of Russian Embassies in Bulgaria and North Macedonia have been the most active in the region, with the highest number of posts per day. Russian embassies' social media activity has been on a par with that of US Embassies in some Balkan countries and much higher than the ones of the EU, UK, and China.

Figure 3. Average number of posts per day on Russian Embassies' Facebook pages in SEE



Note: *Data covers the period between February 2018 and February 2021.*
Source: *CSD based on CrowdTangle.*

China and the Kremlin Enablers

The convergence of Russian and Chinese disinformation strategies and narratives has accelerated on a global level over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. However, this process of overlap has been most evident in Southeast Europe. **Russia's local proxies increasingly act also as enablers of China's media influence**, promoting complementary propaganda messages that further the official Russian and Chinese viewpoints and extol the cooperation between the two states hailing them to be a viable and desirable alternative to the liberal international order. Even more overtly, in countries such as Serbia, the promotion of joint Russian-Chinese activities is strongly supported by the government.

Apart from the growing overlap of Russia's and China's disinformation activities, other authoritarian actors have also aimed at influencing the information landscapes of SEE states. **Turkey** has established a media footprint primarily in the Muslim-majority Balkan countries. In addition, **Hungary** has also acquired key media outlets in the region, promoting Russian disinformation narratives and backing authoritarian-leaning political actors.

What's next

The US and the EU need to provide a robust coordinated response to Russia and China's media capture in SEE. It should be anchored in the EU integration and democratization process and should focus on: (i) increased economic engagement; (ii) strong anti-corruption and rule of law conditionalities; (iii) comprehensive security support; and (iv) robust strategic communication action. SEE should draw upon and benefit from the EU's *Democracy Action Plan* and the US administration's heightened focus on democratization and anti-corruption. The EU should support and underwrite the US-driven *Three Seas Initiative* to ensure the development of a common economic and security capacity across Central and Eastern Europe.

The EU should **reconsider recent strategic wins for Beijing and Moscow**, namely the *EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment* (which is particularly detrimental to the European media market) and Russia's two geopolitical pipelines in Europe – North Stream II and TurkStream. The US should seek to reinvigorate its strategic partnership with the EU by agreeing on important bilateral economic-financial issues, such as the global digital tax plans or joint green deal initiatives while insisting on a common policy vis-à-vis Russia and China.

A solid, **transatlantic**, **anti-corruption, and financial transparency response** should be the first line of defense to anti-democratic media capture in Europe, including:

– strengthening **coordinated corporate financial transparency initiatives** targeting, in particular, offshore havens laundering Russian, Chinese, and other authoritarian states' financial flows;
– expanding **Magnitsky act type of legislation and implementation**, including not only human rights but also corruption in its scope;
– developing and promoting **transatlantic initiatives tackling regulatory capture** in the industries that are most strongly exposed to Russian and Chinese malign influence, such as energy, communications, and infrastructure.

A number of **EU and U.S. related initiatives** could be paramount in aiding domestic efforts for countering media capture and disinformation across the region:

- In line with the ongoing discussions on linking the disbursement of European funds to the quality of the rule of law within the EU, the **disbursement of EU communications funds** should become conditional on the full disclosure of the funding allocation methodology and the adherence to strict selection criteria for beneficiaries. Such criteria should be based on the quality of reporting and ownership transparency.
- The EU should expand the administrative and personnel capacity of the European External Action Service's **East StratCom Task Force** – specially dedicated to debunking Russian disinformation across European countries. The Task Force should also become a permanent unit with an expanded scope within the EEAS.
- The EU should strengthen its **strategic communication efforts** to raise the profile of its economic and social development activities in the Western Balkans. As evidenced during the coronavirus pandemic, Russia and China were quickly able to deploy a publicity campaign presenting the medical aid they provided to the region as more significant than that of the EU. They have succeeded and will continue to use every opportunity to undermine the EU's standing in the region.
- The EU should include the Western Balkans in its *Democracy Action Plan and Digital Services Act* programming**.** Both the US and EU member states with strong public media models (such as DW in Germany, RFI in France, or BBC in the UK) need to **expand programming** in the Balkans and in national languages aimed at supporting journalistic excellence and upholding high reporting standards.
- The EU should exercise greater vigilance in regard the **footprint of Russian and Chinese** state-owned media in the European media space. The adoption of a regulatory regime designed specifically to monitor the operation of foreign state-subsidized companies in the European single market should also include authoritarian state-sponsored media organizations attempting to establish a foothold in the EU.
- The US Agency for International Development should **reinstitute instruments and platforms** for supporting good governance and media freedom initiatives on a **regional level**. Among these instruments could be the joint creation with the EU of media programs that support investigative journalists either part of independent consortia or working in mainstream media outlets even when their editorial policy is captured.
- The US Department of State should enhance multilateral exchange programs in SEE such as the **technology and media corps** that can mobilize civil society and volunteer engagement to support the region's reform agenda.

SEE governments should:

- Make compulsory the provision of **information on the ownership structure of media outlets** in a publicly available registry; consistently monitor and enforce sanctions in cases of non-compliance. Moreover, specific provisions on the screening of foreign media ownership should be incorporated.
- Complement national media ownership registries with the creation of **a common European registry** (that also includes EU membership candidate states) To ensure coordination and compliance with European rules.
- Introduce and strengthen **new public and private media financing models**, which would help reduce advertising and media power concentration, including:
  - Introduce and promote **alternative/non-profit funding models** ensuring a diversity of ownership stakes as well as different sources of financing.
  - Develop specific government **media financing transparency measures**, which should make public all state funding to media, including direct budget subsidies, advertising budgets, including by state-owned enterprises, media advertising budgets within public procurement contracts, etc.
- Ensure greater **advertising market transparency** by creating a publicly accessible registry that contains data on the market shares held by the biggest advertising companies, broken down by advertising revenue, profits from subscriptions, and paid content.

Provided the unwillingness or incapacity of many of the governments in SEE to act openly on countering media capture, local **civil society, independent media, and the private sector** have a particularly strong role to play in building a solid response to malign foreign media influence by:

- Creating **regional civil society coalitions** aimed at tackling state capture, strengthening media monitoring, debunking disinformation, improving state funding, and ownership transparency. These civil society coalitions would be made up of SEE and international experts, media outlets, non-governmental organizations, etc. Such groups would foster regional expert cooperation to guide SEE audiences on how to spot and counter-propaganda campaigns. The EU and the US through their respective regional cooperation programs run by the Directorate General Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission and the United States Agency for International Development could actively build and support such coalitions.
- It is particularly important for civil society and government institutions in the region to develop a **public-private partnership** approach to tackling the abuse of **social media for political ends**, including abuse by foreign powers. Such manipulation can easily exploit social vulnerabilities and divisions to tilt the scales in favor of a particular candidate. Social media should be sensitized and urged to address in the local languages the disruptive effects of their platforms on the democratic public discourse, focusing in particular on polarization, extremism, and foreign propaganda.