

From Transition to Authoritarian Populism: Historical Contingencies of Media Instrumentalization in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This study explores media instrumentalization in Central and Eastern Europe through the perceptions of journalists in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia. Using semi-structured interviews, the article argues for a historical perspective on media instrumentalization in post-socialist contexts, considering the legacy of transition and the impact of authoritarian populist rule, while emphasizing the intertwined nature of economic interests and political power. The research offers fresh insights into the mechanisms and consequences of media instrumentalization, highlighting significant challenges to media autonomy and journalistic integrity, including issues of polarization, de-professionalization, and loss of public trust.

Keywords

media instrumentalization, transition, polarization, Central and Eastern Europe, authoritarian populism

The socialist period in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was defined by strong state control over the media, where state ownership and editorial policies closely aligned with the dominant party ideology. The collapse of socialist regimes in the 1990s marked the transition from socialism to capitalism, encompassing political shifts from

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one-party governance to liberal parliamentary democracy and economic shifts from planned economies to free markets. This transition fundamentally reshaped the media landscape, leading to a wave of media privatization intended to foster liberalized markets and external pluralism. While this resulted in an explosion of new media outlets, privatization was deeply flawed, often marred by clientelism and corruption. In many cases, it became synonymous with scandal and crime, leaving fragile media systems vulnerable to external pressures and manipulation. This process not only exposed media systems to political and economic interests but also shifted control from party politics to the pervasive influence of these forces, thereby eroding journalistic independence.

This transformation brought about a new media model where political and economic actors became closely intertwined, shaping journalistic practices and media ownership structures. These shifts underscored not only the complexity of transition but also the vulnerability of CEE media systems to instrumentalization, as political and economic pressures have persistently undermined their independence.

Additionally, the rise of right-wing populism and the destabilization of liberal democracies have further eroded journalism and increased political and financial control over media. These processes were characterized by the “instrumentalization” of the media (Mancini, 2012), that is, using the media for political and business purposes. While instrumentalization is not unique to CEE (see Willnat et al., 2024), the (post) transition context offers a distinct lens through which to examine its evolution, as it intersects with neoliberal reforms, privatization, and the rise of authoritarian populism. In this region, instrumentalization has manifested in various tactics of control, from censoring editorial policies, journalists, or media content to controlling finances, bypassing laws, or appointing directors.

In this article, we take a historical perspective of the most prominent mechanisms of media instrumentalization in the neighboring Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia, spanning the period since transition to the present. Our study offers a distinctive contribution by focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of journalists, providing a longitudinal and insider perspective that is often absent in existing research on media instrumentalization. In line with studies on media transformation in CEE (Gross & Jakubowicz, 2013; Jakubowicz, 2005; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Peruško, 2013; Sparks, 2000), our historical approach is context-based, addressing specific, concrete problems of development of media and journalism, evaluating transitions, and transformation while being sensitive to contexts and distinctions.

Using semi-structured interviews with experienced journalists, we explore their perspectives on political and economic control over the media and its impact. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. *What do journalists identify as media instrumentalization's primary mechanisms and impacts in Central and Eastern Europe?*
2. *How have these practices of instrumentalization shifted in response to political and economic transformations, including periods of authoritarian populism?*

We explore how journalists reflect on patterns of instrumentalization and how these have changed in the last 30 years, in relation to the shifting political landscape. By addressing this question, our study fills a critical gap in the literature by examining the intersection of historical legacies, economic pressures, and authoritarian populism in CEE media systems. We emphasize the need for a historical perspective that considers both the legacies of transition and the impact of authoritarian populist rule to understand the evolution of media instrumentalization in the region. Unlike previous studies focused primarily on media systems or political actors, our research foregrounds journalists' voices, providing unique insights into how instrumentalization is experienced, navigated, and resisted. To our knowledge, no existing research has explored the instrumentalization of CEE media through the direct account of journalists. In this article, we aim to address this gap, providing evidence from the experiences of professionals, who offer insights on past and present interference in media and journalism.

Our approach aims to understand the genesis of current developments by examining trends of instrumentalization over time. Existing research (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Peruško, 2013; Splichal, 2001) confirms that instrumentalization in (post)transition has been more excessive under governments with authoritarian tendencies. Therefore, apart from analyzing journalists' experiences with instrumentalization in a longitudinal historical reflection, we pay particular attention to experiences of authoritarian populism: in Hungary since Fidesz's governing position in 2010; in Slovenia, the periods of Janša's SDS governments of 2004 to 2008, 2012 to 2013 and 2020 to 2022; and in Croatia during the Sanader governments of 2003 to 2008 and 2008 to 2009.

A Distinctive Capitalism: The Intertwining of Political and Economic Control Over the Media

Several analyses (Gross, 2003; Jakubowicz, 2005; Peruško et al., 2020) have established that particularities of the media in CEE must be reflected in the context of the region's unique political and economic developments, particularly the post-1989 transition, which prompted the transformation of state-owned media. Transition in the CEE media context is not a straightforward shift, but a multifaceted, ongoing process deeply influenced by the interplay of political and economic interests. As de Albuquerque (2023) critiques, Western-centric frameworks often oversimplify transition as a linear move from control to freedom, ignoring the socio-political complexities of the region. Gross and Jakubowicz (2013, pp. 1–2) define transition as the collapse of old political and media systems, marking the dismantling of state control structures. However, this collapse frequently gave way to new dependencies rooted in the convergence of political and economic power.

The subsequent "transformation" phase represents a shift to a new type of media system (Gross & Jakubowicz, 2013). While envisioned as pathways to democratic media, these aspirations were often undermined by practices reinforcing informal mechanisms of control. Gross and Jakubowicz (2013) describe this as "transitioning backward," where transformations re-imposed clientelistic media controls, driven by political, and economic pressures.

Ambiguity about transition's endpoints further complicates its process. In some cases, changes began even before 1989, as civil society and journalists in Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary pushed for reform. Journalists recall that the immediate post-transition period, when old controls had dissolved, was one of the rare moments of true freedom (Gross and Jakubowicz, 2013, p. 10). Yet, this freedom was short-lived as privatization, economic pressures, and political interference quickly reasserted control.

Indeed, a central feature of the transition was the "distinctive" capitalism emerging in CEE, characterized by a close interrelationship between political and economic power, particularly in the media (Sparks, 2000, p. 34). Rather than dismantling control, transition entrenched systems where political and economic interests became inextricably linked, shaping the trajectory of CEE media systems. This distinctive capitalism was marked by the consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of a few elites, often former political actors or their associates, who leveraged their positions to dominate emerging markets. Media became a battleground for these intertwined interests, reinforcing patterns of control rather than fostering pluralism and independence.

Criticism of the previous political regime highlighted characteristics such as "political control, state interference, ideological monopoly, bureaucratic rigidity, and economic inefficiency" (Splichal, 1995, p. 99). This led to the belief that a capitalist market economy was essential for media democratization. In the early 1990s, a neoliberal consensus pursued the idea that the transition to political party pluralism and parliamentary democracy needs to be accompanied by deregulated media competing in the free marketplace. However, political and economic forces continued to interfere in the media under a new ideology of market-centered capitalism, leading to what Splichal called (1995, p. 99) a "paternalist commercialization" of the media, with increasing privatization and commercialization alongside continued state control.

A flawed push for democratization was not the sole cause of the deep political-economic ties in CEE media. Politically driven privatization during the transition merged political and economic elites, making media-political links a natural by-product of post-communist transition changes (Nagla & Kehre, 2004, p. 262). Moreover, post-1989 political and economic elites primarily emerged from former Communist and anti-Communist factions, keen on controlling the media (Gross, 2003, p. 80). Gross (2003, p. 87) notes that the profit orientation of media owners is "married" to political control over the media, meaning that some owners are also politicians, members of a political party, or otherwise politically engaged. Conversely, political elites frequently collaborate with business groups to maintain media control. Thus, the establishment of capitalist economies in CEE not only reasserted control over the media but also ended what Sparks (2000, p. 35) termed the "anarchic freedom" that journalists enjoyed pre-transition.

The alignment of capital with political forces has transformed the news media into a form of "political capital," where political entities seek access to funding and economic actors aim to gain advantages in the competitive media markets. For example, strategic alliances with political figures enabled companies such as SBS (Scandinavian Broadcasting System) and CME (Central-European Media Enterprises) to monopolize

the broadcasting market in CEE, controlling investment, ownership, regulation, managerial and professional practices, and inflow of media (Sparks, 2000, pp. 36–37). As the transition progressed post-2000s, both global and local business elites increased their investments in media outlets to promote the business or political interests of these entrepreneurs (Štetka, 2012). This symbiotic relationship between politicians and businessmen, as Sparks claims (2000, p. 37), stems more from the nature of transition than from inexperience or ignorance.

These developments underscore the limits of existing media systems theory. Traditionally, media models included the libertarian, with separate political and economic spheres, and the communist, marked by the total unity of political and economic power under totalitarian control (Sparks, 2000, p. 35). The end of the Cold War and the shifts in CEE media challenged this dichotomy, revealing a “third position” where politicians, businessmen, and the media intertwine, blurring divisions between the political and the economic realms. This model reflects a relationship between politics and economics characterized as “neither of identity nor of complete separation, but of interpenetration” (Sparks, 2000, p. 36).

Media Instrumentalization in a Volatile Political Context

The volatile political and media systems in the CEE countries have rendered them vulnerable to media instrumentalization. We use instrumentalization as a key concept to analyze political and economic pressure on the media as it is exercised in the three countries, drawing on Mancini’s definition, which describes it as a process where actors “use the media to intervene in the decision-making process, to reach specific goals at specific moments, or to support personal candidacies and alliances” (Mancini, 2012, p. 271). This concept proves relevant to analyze both historical and current pressures on the media in the region, particularly as it is associated with unstable politics-media relations. In Croatia, the media system was characterized by “a constant conflict with the remnants of the authoritarian elements” embedded in the party system (Peruško, 2013, p. 720) while in Slovenia, the evolution of “cartel, elitist and catch-all parties” (Fink-Hafner, 2006) added to the “combative nature of politics” (Gross, 2003, p. 84) that influences the vulnerability of the media market to instrumentalization. Similarly, in Hungary, the media became the scene of intense political battles between parliament, government, the constitutional court, and the president, with purges of journalists and media officials that led to assertions that little had changed since the communist regime (Lánczi & O’Neil, 1996). Such regional instability is coupled with a degree of coercion that puts pressure on journalists to advance causes of political or economic actors, including the constant improvement of their public image (Örnebring, 2012, pp. 506–509).

Mancini’s concept of instrumentalization is associated with concepts of colonization (cf. Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, 2014) and media capture (cf. Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008), denoting processes when media become embedded in the political struggle because they reflect the contingent interests of politicians, businesspersons or groups. Instrumentalization relates to the “direct extension of the political power structure”

(Jakubowicz, 2012, p. 16), enabling party representatives and business elites to exert pressure on media and journalists.

One related phenomenon that has shaped media systems in CEE is tycoonization, where wealthy individuals or corporations acquire control of media outlets. While privatization often led to the concentration of media ownership in the hands of such private entities, this process did not always result in media capture by political forces. Tycoonization refers to the concentration of media ownership in the hands of private entities, but it does not necessarily mean that media is captured or controlled directly by political machinery. Media capture—where media outlets serve as instruments of political influence—is a more complex phenomenon and cannot be solely attributed to privatization or the actions of tycoons. In many cases, editors, directors, columnists, and journalists have willingly aligned themselves with political ideologies (Gross, 2002) or parties, often “surrendering” to work on behalf of these political interests. This type of ideological alignment or voluntary instrumentalization is an important nuance, as it shows that media capture can occur through individual agency, not just ownership structures. Instrumentalization can apply across the political spectrum, including liberal democratic ideologies, where media outlets may also be used to serve political goals.

Evidently, instrumentalization impacts journalism, its quality and autonomy. In the 1990s, Peruško (2013, p. 716) observed high polarization between “state building” journalists and “traitors,” reflecting divisions in the political field. Subsequent periods have also seen increased polarization in the journalistic field, in Croatia after the 2003 re-election of the conservative, center-right party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), in Hungary under the Orbán’s Fidesz government since 2010, and in Slovenia under Janša’s SDS government in three election periods (2004–2008, 2012–2013, and 2020–2022), when the media faced heightened political instrumentalization and economic devastation of (mostly public) media. The evidence from CEE suggests strong news media instrumentalization by local business elites, ranging from “pure” business PR to open attacks on opponents (Štetka, 2012, p. 446), often in close alignment with political power (Peruško et al., 2020, p. 168).

Authoritarian Populism: Shaping Media Behind a Democratic Mask

The interplay of politics, media, and economics in CEE exemplifies the dynamics of competitive authoritarianism, a regime type characterized by competitive elections alongside frequent democratic violations (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 5–8). While civil liberties like freedom of speech and press freedom are nominally upheld, they are often undermined through harassment, arrests, or attacks on critics. Authoritarian repression such as media control is typically indirect, achieved through proxies or patronage rather than direct state intervention, revealing a deep entanglement of political and economic forces that compromises press independence (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 8). In the CEE context, democratic institutions appear superficially intact

while political elites undermine them through covert influence on media channels, eroding democratic competition. This form of indirect media control is particularly evident in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia, where political elites exploit economic dependencies, patronage networks, and selective law enforcement to control the press.

While the concept of competitive authoritarianism captures broader regional trends, we use the framework of authoritarian populism to describe specific manifestations of control, where populist leaders concentrate power through patronage networks, shaping media and public narratives to their advantage. This distinction highlights how media control under competitive authoritarian regimes intersects with populist strategies in CEE states, particularly in framing opposition voices and critical journalism as public threats. Populist leaders claim to represent “the people” against elites and, in competitive authoritarian regimes, often subvert democratic institutions under the guise of fulfilling a popular mandate. In this context, authoritarian populism operates within competitive authoritarianism, legitimizing media restrictions by invoking protection from misinformation or foreign influence while consolidating control over public discourse. Indeed, scholars argue that populism and authoritarianism frequently overlap; for instance, Mudde (2007) highlights how populist radical right parties combine nativism, populism, and authoritarianism.

The literature on populism is extensive: it has been defined as a thin ideology (Mudde, 2004), a communication style (Tóth et al., 2024), a performance (Moffitt, 2016), a logic (Laclau, 2005), or an attitude (Akkerman et al., 2014). This study, however, focuses on Stuart Hall’s (1985) concept of authoritarian populism which he defined as a hybrid regime that combines populist appeal with authoritarian practices, maintaining democratic appearances while exercising coercive control. Hall’s framework emphasizes the unique blend of popular consent and coercion, where media, economic resources, and policy become tools for shaping public narratives and consolidating power. In this regard, our analysis does not focus on populism’s typical “people versus elite” framing; instead, we examine how competitive authoritarian political systems intervene in the media to sustain power and influence public opinion.

Hall’s concept of authoritarian populism provides a valuable framework for understanding media control in CEE, particularly in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia, as it explains how governments can instrumentalize media to consolidate power. These regimes exhibit populist characteristics primarily through their legislative practices and communication strategies, shaping laws, and media narratives to manipulate media and public opinion while maintaining democratic legitimacy (Palonen, 2018; Tóth et al., 2019). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Hungary under Orbán’s Fidesz government, where regulatory changes and takeovers by pro-Fidesz oligarchs fundamentally reshaped the media landscape to amplify government messaging. By 2019, an estimated 80% of Hungary’s news media was consolidated under pro-Fidesz ownership (Mérték, 2019). By controlling media ownership and funding, the Hungarian government has effectively co-opted large parts of the press, creating a media environment that promotes nationalist and anti-EU rhetoric. In Slovenia, Janša’s governments have similarly used economic pressures and strategic appointments to align media with the ruling party’s interests, fostering an atmosphere of self-censorship and

weakening the influence of independent outlets (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2024). Croatian media, particularly under the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), reflects comparable patterns, where nationalistic themes and economic influence are leveraged to control media narratives (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021; Peruško, 2013).

In these countries, authoritarian populism manifests in multiple ways that lead to media instrumentalization and the erosion of media freedom. Rather than outright censorship, governments in these competitive authoritarian regimes typically employ indirect methods: leveraging financial dependencies, reshaping ownership structures, and applying selective regulations. For instance, in Hungary, pro-government ownership changes have led to critical outlets being closed, mass firings, and journalists being pressured to conform to political expectations under threat of unemployment (Çelik et al., 2024). One notable example is the closure of *Népszabadság*, Hungary's largest and most influential opposition newspaper, when in 2016 its Austrian-owned publisher Mediaworks abruptly shut it down citing financial losses. However, the closure followed investigative reports exposing government corruption, raising strong suspicions of political motives. This was further reinforced when Mediaworks was soon sold to a company linked to Lőrinc Mészáros, a close ally of Prime Minister Orbán (Freedom House, 2016).

Similarly, in Croatia, government influence over key media leadership positions and control of advertising budgets further consolidated power over media narratives, subtly pressuring outlets to comply with preferred messaging (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021). In Slovenia, Janša-linked entities influence editorial decisions and marginalize opposition voices, framing dissenting media as threats to national integrity (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2024). Such methods allow these governments to maintain democratic appearances while limiting journalistic independence and fostering a polarized media environment.

Methods and Sample

The empirical analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors from Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia to analyze their experiences with media instrumentalization. It explores how political and economic influences have shaped journalistic practices since 1989, highlighting context-specific factors. The case studies share similarities regarding their geographical region, socialist pasts, transitions to capitalism and democracy, EU accession, and media systems. Croatia and Slovenia share intertwined political and cultural histories as former parts of Yugoslavia, while Hungary's ties to both countries stem from their shared history within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. All three countries experienced troubled regime change and corrupted ideological shift from socialism to capitalism, privatization, and media instrumentalization as integral aspects of governance, leading to periods of authoritarian populist control.

We conducted 50 interviews: 15 in Croatia, 15 in Hungary, and 20 in Slovenia. Participants were selected based on a minimum of 10 years in prominent national or regional news outlets, using snowball sampling. The sample included journalists from

public and private media, broadcasting, daily and online press. Our sample exhibits diversity across age, gender (46% female), and professional roles, ranging from reporters, columnists, and commentators to editors and senior decision-makers such as editors-in-chief and executive managers. Despite these varied functions, we collectively refer to them as “journalists,” given that each plays a role in shaping the media landscape, albeit from different professional perspectives. Notably, 60% of the sample were seasoned journalists of age 50+, allowing insights into practices dating back to pre-transition years.

The sample encompasses a wide range of media genres, including online, print, and broadcast outlets. Politically, we included journalists from diverse sectors within each country, covering both quality and tabloid media, as well as organizations with liberal, left- and right-wing orientations. Additionally, the sample includes journalists currently working in—or with prior experience in—public service media. In the context of Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia, public media outlets often exhibit pro-government leanings, influenced by political appointments and funding structures that can affect editorial independence. Including public media journalists allowed us to capture perspectives from both state-aligned and independent sectors within the media landscape. However, notably, most participants came from the private sector and identified as critical of right-wing populist politics.

The interviews were conducted in participants’ native languages, both in person and online, between January and August 2022. They typically lasted between 60 and 90 min. Standardized interview guides, pre-tested through two pilot interviews in each country, were used to ensure consistency. The research team documented each interview in detailed, standardized notes.

The analytical approach followed for data collection and analysis was inductive and interpretive. The interviews were anonymized, transcribed, and textually analyzed using MAXQDA and NVivo software, and subsequently studied through successive stages of coding and constant data comparison across the three national samples, aiming for analytic rigor and theory-building that could be further tested (Birks & Mills, 2011). A close reading of the interview transcripts was followed by noting central concepts, key emerging patterns, and variations (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis followed instructions for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining explicit journalists’ narrations and underlying ideas about the instrumentalization of the media and their consequences for media and journalism.

Mechanisms of Instrumentalization in a Historical Perspective

Journalists in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia provided detailed accounts of the numerous strategies of media instrumentalization employed by various political and economic actors and successive governments since the transition. They are critical of the prevailing attitudes of power holders who view the media as their private property, which they exploit for their own political and economic purposes, and not something

that is supposed to serve the public (HR-05). As one journalist has put it: “Journalism is tears and sweat if it is real. It is not an input or an investment” (SI-18).

These pressures, particularly in a political/ideological sense, are seen to be coming from both the left and the right (SI-12; HU-10). Nevertheless, our respondents also noted that the periods of authoritarian populist rule in their respective countries—Orbán in Hungary, Janša in Slovenia, and Sanader in Croatia—had significantly more detrimental effects on journalism, in the way that interventions intensified, media instrumentalization accelerated, and autonomy and media plurality in general deteriorated at a much higher rate. Journalists’ narrations of the mechanisms employed by both political and economic actors to instrumentalize the media highlight significant similarities across all three countries. In the next section, we will discuss the most relevant and important ones mentioned by journalists.

Privatization, Tycoonization, and Media Capture

In both Hungary and Slovenia—unlike in Croatia, where war took place—the period immediately after the end of the socialist regime was seen as “euphoric”: journalists described a “hopeful period for all of us, preparing a newspaper in such a way that we finally have democracy, freedom, and we write what we want” (HU-04). Privatization was embraced as the road to democratization: “At that time it seemed that only the sky is the limit, everything rushed into privatization” (SI-19). However, this brief period of optimism was quickly replaced by concerning developments. Unchecked privatization quickly took over in all three countries, which was lacking in regulation and led to the takeover of the media by tycoons, oligarchs, and foreign owners, who treated the media as political capital to be exploited for their own goals. This trend, as described by the journalists, only worsened during periods of authoritarian populist rule, when ownership networks were strategically aligned with ruling elites (Schnyder et al., 2024).

In Slovenia in the 1990s, privatization led to media success benefiting the owner, intensifying pressure on journalists: “Privatization brought the robbing of media resources, their infrastructure and the transformation of media property into a property of the owner” (SI-12). A promising model of journalist co-ownership, where journalists held a majority of shares (i.e., 60% at the example of *Delo* newspaper), collapsed after a few years. In fact, selling off journalists’ ownership shares is largely viewed in Slovenia as one of the main failures of the transition, which accelerated privatization. “Most of us sold our shares overnight, apart from a few who got rich afterwards. This is the phenomenon of naive children of socialism. . .” (SI-07). Worker’s shares were sold to private companies that “all had their own interests” (SI-19), contributing to the tycoonization of the print sector and the loss of its credibility (SI-14). The owners didn’t have any legal obligations toward the press and the unions weren’t prepared. Eventually, the success of newspapers was turned into “a profit for the owner without any protection of journalistic work” (SI-19). By and large, the TV sector underwent extensive privatization and commercialization by foreign owners, while the print sector faced challenges due to extensive privatization, driven by speculative capital and ownership by local oligarchs. Many media outlets, especially in print, have been

acquired by local oligarchs and foreign investors with little regard for journalistic integrity, prioritizing profits over quality reporting.

In Croatia, during the 1990s when the war was in full swing, the pressure on media was nationalistic, patriotic, and state-building. Similar to Slovenia, privatization, tycoonization, and hidden or non-transparent ownership were characteristic of this period of transition. For example, two main daily newspapers, *Slobodna Dalmacija* in 1993 and *Večernji list* in 1994 had been privatized under suspicious circumstances, and clandestinely controlled by the ruling party, HDZ (Malović, 2004). Though a media act was in place, ostensibly to ensure that ownership is registered and transparent, in practice this was frequently bypassed by hiding behind investment funds of foreign owners (HR-13). This created a situation in which a single tycoon could own a large number of media companies, but officially these would be in the ownership of friends, colleagues, or other people connected to them so that one could not prove their monopoly over the media (HR-12). In this way, “the ownership structure of the media was crafted by the dominant political party, leading to control and instrumentalization of the media” (HR-13).

In Hungary, privatization was slightly different. Broadcasting privatization was delayed until 1997 due to constitutional broadcasting regulations requiring a two-thirds majority. This delayed the entrance of the first (and largest) private television stations, *RTL Klub* and *TV2*. In print media it was largely journalists themselves who entered negotiations with would-be investors in a process of so-called “spontaneous privatization” (Jakab & Gálik, 1991). Hence, the privatization of the printing houses was “by and large transparent and did not stir emotions in the country” (Gálik, 2004, p. 212), though, in fact, this also contributed to significant foreign ownership of the media in Hungary, mirroring trends in Slovenia. By 1999, foreign companies controlled over 80% of the national daily newspaper markets (Gulyás, 2003, p. 97). Nonetheless, Hungarian journalists highlighted this period as the onset of the “media wars”—a clash between left and right-wing parties for media control—, marking an early indication of challenges to come (HU-04). This era initiated what is now more than 30 years of media capture attempted by democratic governments both from the left and right, often through the aid of politically connected oligarchs and straw men, to reshape the Hungarian media sphere in their own political interest. For many journalists, political attempts to control and influence media are viewed as routine, simply “part of the job” (HU-09).

Whilst all three countries experience distinct attempts by political forces from across the spectrum to instrumentalize the media through ownership takeovers during privatization, our findings show that pressures intensified during periods under authoritarian populist governments. These were characterized by the acquisition of ownership by political actors, particularly oligarchs connected to ruling populists, and through attempts from these owners to influence journalistic content, particularly notable in the intensification of propaganda material.

In both Slovenia and Hungary, where foreign investment was high, especially from Germany, investors started to withdraw once it became clear that profit wasn’t as high as expected. With the acceleration of the financial crisis (2006 onwards) Western

owners mostly sold their shares to local oligarchs (SI-17; HU-07) who didn't have knowledge of media and were buying them to increase their own political and economic influence (SI-17).

In Hungary, there has been a clear process of Orbán-friendly oligarchs buying up the large majority of Hungarian media outlets since 2010. HU-03 sees this as a deliberate Fidesz strategy aimed at targeting major players in the industry, specifically mentioning two of the biggest Hungarian online outlets (*Index*, *Origo*) and newspapers (*Népszabadság*, *Magyar Nemzet*), acquired by Fidesz-connected oligarchs. Subsequently, these were either closed down or transformed into government propaganda outlets. As a Hungarian journalist explained, "an economic centralization begins, that is, a change in ownership structure, where essentially the state and the state party are the owners singlehandedly. Of course, not on paper, where [the owner] is a reliable entrepreneur" (HU-07).

Similar tactics were employed by Janša, who is among the founders and co-owners of the Slovenian right-wing media house Nova24 which includes a TV station and a web portal operating as supporters of the SDS party and reporting favorably of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán. Since 2017 at least 16 regional web portals have been established that provide regional news for the *Nova24TV* web outlet. While their publishers claim them to be independent news portals, the documentation in the media register was in several cases identical, and almost all were registered by the same company (Kučić, 2019). A peculiarity of Slovenia is the increased political investment in the media, which coincided with the establishment of an international network mostly run by conservative politicians in Hungary, Czechia, and Poland (SI-12). All these trends occurred in the absence of legal provisions that would prevent capitalist and political excesses in the media:

Political investment in media from abroad, by conservatives in Hungary, Czechia and Poland is strong. . . . Additionally, there exists strong international capital that is politicized and that finances conservative media that uphold nationalistic journalistic criteria. (SI-12)

In Croatia, the questionable privatization by HDZ of two prominent daily newspapers, *Slobodna Dalmacija* and *Večernji list*, entrenched a clear divide between state and opposition media. Croatian public radio-television, Croatian press agency *Hina*, and media house *Vjesnik* became entirely dependent on HDZ. Importantly, compared to Slovenia and Hungary, the pressure on journalists in Croatia during and immediately after the war was significantly more severe and direct, occasionally escalating to violence, including assassinations.

While privatization in CEE countries often led to tycoonization and ownership consolidation, this did not always result from direct political interference in the media. The journalists' narratives demonstrate that political instrumentalization often operated through a combination of external ownership structures and the agency of media professionals themselves. In Slovenia, the decision of journalists to sell their co-ownership shares, whether due to financial necessity or disillusionment, inadvertently

facilitated tycoonization and weakened journalistic independence. In Hungary, journalists described accepting political interference as a routine part of their work, reflecting how alignment with dominant narratives often became a strategy for professional survival. Similarly, in Croatia, journalists' participation in producing nationalist content during the war illustrates how voluntary alignment with state-building efforts reinforced media instrumentalization. Coman and Karadjov (2021, p. 251) observed that journalists in the region are often unable to provide a convincing picture of their "mission" and fail to defend the public interest. These examples highlight that media capture in CEE cannot be solely attributed to privatization or tycoonization but also stem from within media organizations, where individual agency and ideological alignment play crucial roles. By acknowledging these dynamics, our analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of media instrumentalization, which operates through both structural mechanisms and the actions of media professionals, with editors, directors, and journalists voluntarily aligning themselves with political parties or ideologies (Gross, 2002).

Populist Authoritarian Governance: Ownership Changes and Content Control

With increased direct political interventions in the media, journalists in all three countries have experienced ongoing pressures on content production, spanning from the socialist regime to the present day. This instrumentalization often involved direct interventions, including pressure on the editors regarding what and how to write (SI-19). Yet, many journalists accepted this as "part of the job":

There's a saying that if you're a miner, you don't complain that it's dark in the mine. If you are a political journalist, I think that you don't panic or sulk when a secretary of state or a minister calls you, because that's when you're doing a good job, when they call you. (HU-09)

Nevertheless, respondents in all three countries highlighted interference in journalism as having been markedly more pronounced during periods of authoritarian populist governance.

A common mechanism of media instrumentalization involved replacing managerial and editorial staff with partisan individuals who influence journalistic work to serve the political or economic interests of the owners. This often resulted in editorial censorship, dictating both what does and does not get published. Many of the interviewees recounted how this pressure became too much, leading them to quit or transfer to another outlet, to avoid compromising their journalistic standards.

In Slovenia, journalists noted the owner's influence on the daily press, with editors refraining from publishing critical stories about the owner or its government ties. At newspaper *Delo*, ownership changes aimed to align with Janša's government resulted in increased control mechanisms through governing boards (SI-12). "It seems that in post-transition countries and in the context of global social changes politics wants to

take control over the media to a greater extent than in socialism” (SI-13). Under Janša’s government “the political climate affected *Delo* in a very negative way”: several good journalists left the newspaper, the editorial policy has changed, and dissatisfaction among journalists increased as they “were faced with the politics of balancing” (SI-19). Similarly, publishers and editors of the *Nova24* media group are dominated by members of the former populist Prime Minister, Janša’s SDS party. It has been established (Kučić, 2019) that the *Nova24* media group shares content among its portals, promoting right-wing, authoritarian politics and SDS party interests.

In Croatia, political pressures from both the left and right are felt, but the populist HDZ party, dominant since the transition, is seen as the main source of political manipulation of the media:

We have a two-party system, HDZ or SDP with some always in power. HDZ has a more direct and visible influence, unfortunately a little more primitive. They always play the card of nationalism and that journalists should be social and political workers. As they used to be in Yugoslavia. And they have been in power much longer than SDP. All the others are outsiders without much influence. (HR-11)

One respondent had her TV show canceled on national television (*HTV*) because of her syndical engagement: “In my opinion, it is censorship and today I can say it very clearly and loudly” (HR-06). Another was fired for criticizing local administration, illustrating the prevalent control over media content (HR-12).

However, journalists in Hungary report the most radical interventions in content produced by government-affiliated media, a reflection of the country’s prolonged period of uninterrupted authoritarian populist rule, the longest in our study. As one journalist explains, “Hungary is somewhat special with this kind of semi-authoritarian system, where the government invested heavily in silencing certain voices and bolstering its own quite brutal propaganda machine” (HU-13). For example, two respondents independently recounted how—working as editors-in-chief at major Hungarian online news portals—their refusal to allow owners and top management to interfere in the publishing of journalistic content had led to their dismissal, both of which were clearly politically motivated (HU-05; HU-09). The result in both cases was a massive walkout from the journalists working at their respective outlets, not only as a form of protest but also because they felt they were no longer “protected” from interference from the owners. HU-06, who worked under one of the editors, explained that “the editorial office—that is, the content producers, the journalists, reporters, photographers, videographers—, really up until the moment that we quit, we were able to operate in an environment of editorial independence. We also quit because, the moment [the editor was fired], this ceased.”

A distinctive form of political intervention in media content involves the politicization of public service media, which deserves examination. By virtue of its ownership and funding structure, public service media is the most vulnerable to exploitation from political and governmental forces, and journalists from all three countries in general saw this pressure as having been exerted by all political parties: “On public television

the symbiosis of editorial policy and governing policy is more than obvious [. . .] In fact, they are always the service of the ruling party. . .” (HR-08). Another journalist explains that this is based on economic logic: “that is where the money comes from, and it would simply be naive or false naivety to think that if the government and the state give the money, even if it is our [public] money, then it does not try to have some influence at some level, or to exert pressure” (HU-12).

However, akin to private TV, periods of authoritarian populist rule in each of the countries brought about a marked increase in governmental control over public service media. In Slovenia, Janša’s last government (2020–2022) orchestrated the instrumentalization of the public service media and the national press agency through changes in media laws, appointment of politically affiliated directors, dismissal or relocation of “unwanted” journalists, and mandatory transcript verification (SI-13). In Hungary, these exact same measures have been used since Orbán’s second government in 2010, starting with the introduction of a new media law that was widely criticized by both domestic and international watchdogs for concentrating power over the media in the hands of Fidesz appointees. With over a decade of political instrumentalization, today journalists consider Hungarian public service media as having the function of spreading government propaganda, having become its “megaphone” (HU-06), while the news agency is seen to be “useless as a news source” (HU-15).

Remarkably, many journalists consider this mechanism of instrumentalization of both the public and private media—particularly during periods of authoritarian populist rule—as having such a detrimental impact since the transition that they feel that journalistic freedoms were, in some respects, better during socialist times. Respondents remarked that before the regime change, the rules were clearer on what could be published, and while having to exercise self-censorship, many have the impression that “before, we had more freedom and greater protection than we have today” (HR-05). Some even argued that “such a severe censorship hasn’t happened in socialism at any point. . . . Not in this brutal manner as people would protest” (SI-17). This perception may stem from the lower expectations of freedom under socialism, where the political “boundaries” of what could be published were well-defined (HU-07), and media professionals did not anticipate the same level of independence as in democratic systems. Additionally, HU-07 noted that political actors recognized it was in their interest to project a good, favorable image of themselves to society, often treating the media as partners, which translated into fewer direct interventions in journalistic work. By contrast, the post-transition era is marked by chaotic pressures, including pervasive political interference and the politicization of media content, characterized by a “single-mindedness to the extent that hasn’t existed in socialism . . . [when] you weren’t so burdened that some are ‘ours’ [our people] and others are not” (SI-17).

Financial Pressures

A third critical mechanism used by authoritarian populists to influence and control media is the application of financial pressures. The financial survival of media outlets in these countries is a topic of much concern for journalists, as outlets rely

most heavily on contributions from public and private advertisers. However, these are vulnerable to manipulation and have been very frequently exploited by economic and political actors alike.

Some journalists have described manipulation by private companies for their own economic benefit. For example, companies have been known to use advertisement money to influence journalists' articles, particularly those that would affect the company's image (HU-03). A Croatian journalist highlighted the example of Ivica Todorčić, owner of *Agrokor*, Croatia's largest advertiser, noting the scarcity of critical articles about Todorčić and *Agrokor* in the Croatian media until *Agrokor* faced bankruptcy (HR-02). However, the predominant form of manipulation mentioned by journalists involved the use of financial tools by political actors, which was most apparent during periods of authoritarian populist governments. In this regard, public advertising in particular—a critical source of income for most outlets—has made them decidedly vulnerable to exploitation. This has taken primarily two forms: leveraging the outlet's dependency on public advertising and outright withholding public advertisements and their associated revenue. Regarding the former, several Hungarian journalists highlighted the use of public advertisement as a quid pro quo; for example, HU-04, who is the editor of an independent newspaper, recounted instances of public advertisements being used as a bargaining chip; despite threats of funding withdrawal, some outlets published critical content regardless.

A much more prevalent issue is the government's practice of withholding public advertising to weaken media outlets they deem "unfriendly." Many Hungarian journalists reported receiving no funding at all, not even for public service advertisements. For example, journalists in one online media outlet explained that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the government refused to advertise basic preventive measures like facemasks or handwashing with them, even though their outlet had one of the highest audience visit rates in the country (HU-05; HU-06). Similarly, during Janša's government of 2004 to 2008, advertising from state-owned companies became politically controlled, leading critical outlets like the weekly *Mladina* and the daily *Dnevnik* to lose state-owned company advertisements, causing significant financial strain (SI-17). Eventually, "this resulted in a first financial break for the newspaper" (SI-07). In Croatia, during the 2000 to 2009 Sanader government, state-owned companies were allowed to advertise only in "obedient" media, excluding opposition outlets (HR-11).

Apart from public advertising, journalists report instances of private advertising funds being used to manipulate the media. In Croatia, for example, the *Feral Tribune*, a political weekly highly critical of the HDZ, faced financial difficulties when foreign foundations support ceased. This was compounded by reluctance from the Croatian business community to advertise in *Feral*, fearing repercussions from the state. Moreover, HDZ-controlled distribution channels severed the magazine's reach, ultimately leading to its closure (HR-11). Similarly, in Hungary, journalists described how under the Orbán government private companies are afraid to advertise in independent or anti-government outlets due to the country's small, highly centralized state, fostering a patron-client relationship between the government and the private sector

(HU-04). In such a small market, thus, it becomes easy for politics to influence companies' advertising choices (HU-02).

Consequences for Journalism: Current State of Affairs

With practices of instrumentalization of the media showing significant parallels among the three countries, we also drew similarities in terms of the consequences for journalism and journalistic work as reported by our respondents. Journalists reflected that efforts to exploit and manipulate the media have had significant negative effects on the current state of affairs in journalistic practice, particularly highlighting issues of polarization, de-professionalization, and loss of public trust.

Polarization

Reflecting on both the past and the present, journalists feel strongly that the media has become polarized, albeit to a different degree in distinct historical periods. A notable finding of interview analysis is that participants expressed considerable criticism and frustration regarding the increasing polarization along the left-right political spectrum. "They divide media and journalists. This is the worst thing that has happened in the media. . . . That the impression has been created that some are left, the others are right" (SI-20).

In both Hungary and Slovenia, journalists agree that media polarization is not a recent trend but has been seen since the end of the socialist regime, with the situation exacerbating over time: "since transition, the media have been established as two poles where one is supposed to be occupied by the left and the other by the right. Media were not established as democratic alternatives but as occupiers of one of the two poles" (SI-18). Hungarian journalists similarly attribute current media polarization to historical roots, noting that "journalism has always been very divided and partisan since the regime change, so there was that tradition on both the right and the left" (HU-15), contributing to the "media wars" of the 1990s. However, in both countries, polarization is seen to have significantly worsened during periods of authoritarian populist rule. For example, Janša exploited the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia to advance his concept of "media wars," publicly criticizing the media, accusing them of "spreading lies," "being part of the conspiracy," and "producing fake news" (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2024). Janša authored an essay titled "War with the media" published on the government website, followed by attempts to change media laws without any professional basis, aiming to suppress media autonomy (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2024). One journalist commented that this political polarization resulted in the "brutalization of the media" and society in general: "public discussions are polarized, everything has become so cheerleading" (SI-08). In Hungary, most agreed that polarization has become much more pronounced since 2010, when under the Orbán government the media system has become "Schmitt-kind" friend versus foes (HU-03), black and white (HU-09), us versus them. Media outlets are divided into pro-government entities owned by Fidesz-allied oligarchs, with dissenting voices necessarily categorized as opposition.

Respondents expressed frustration at being compelled to partake in this polarized duality, saying that “we have to break through this [. . .] bubble” (HU-09), highlighting the absence of “a third party” (HU-03). This was compounded by a degree of annoyance at the difficulty for them to be seen as independent journalists working for independent media outlets, both in the eyes of politicians and their readers: “My guess is that everything in Hungary is terribly politicized, and it is a dual, bipolar politicization. Therefore, the Hungarians are not able to think outside of this category of duality, in gray, or temporarily, or centrally” (HU-06). Respondents expressed frustration with the perception that any negative reporting on opposition parties or positive, or even neutral, coverage of the government automatically labels them as pro-Fidesz. For example, HU-12 complained that “there is a lot of criticism from *ATV* viewers that I am an integrated Fidesz person because I ask the opposition [hard questions] just as I would any other politician.”

Similarly, Slovenian journalists also expressed frustration about their inability to report news professionally, as a polarized perception of the media often frames news as being either left- or right-leaning:

New leadership at the public television started to introduce information program at the second channel that is meant for entertainment and sports. This resembles the old idea of politics to have the left and the right information program which is totally unacceptable. This nullifies our profession. [. . .] You can't have left and right news, news is news (SI-13).

In Croatia, the media landscape revolves largely around the dominant influence of HDZ, with the opposition often following suit. The media finds itself navigating between the pressures of both the government and the opposition, shaping dynamics and power relations. As one journalist commented:

As the HDZ changed, so did the media. For example, when HDZ went to the right, the EPH and *Jutarnji list* distanced themselves. Conversely, when the HDZ adopted a more liberal position under figures like Sanader and Plenković, these outlets aligned with them. Some media outlets positioned themselves for or against HDZ, but ultimately, HDZ dictated the direction (HT-15).

While some media outlets lean left or liberal (like *Jutarnji list*) and others conservative or right (like *Večernji list*), their rivalry and polarization are often driven by more market competition than ideological differences. Due to the wartime context and nation-building process, even progressive political magazines like *Globus* and *Nacional* initially leaned right. Given HDZ's prolonged rule, its influence permeates the media landscape without there being strictly “HDZ media.”

Declining Professional Standards and Public Trust

Another consequence of the instrumentalization of the media reported by journalists is the de-professionalization of the industry. Many journalists have remarked that

journalism has declined in its professionalism and the quality of its content in the past 30 years. “Before the 2000s journalistic standards developed at a higher level. Journalists were respected individuals that knew their work, they knew how to reflect. Now the standards have dropped” (SI-09). This is linked to the exploitation and manipulation of the media: With each crisis, the position of the media, the position of journalists suffered professionally, financially, and in terms of status. So, salaries fell, investment in journalistic work, that is, travel, investment in journalist education, and the like fell. All this had a terrible effect on journalists (HR-04). In parallel, “the professional and autonomous editorial decision-making” has dropped out of journalism (SI-18).

Journalists widely believe that the quality of journalism has sharply declined. One economic driver of this is digitalization, which has created a demand for “cheap entertainment,” and rapid news publication to “break the story” first resulting in reporting inaccuracies, spreading misinformation or disinformation (HU-01). In Croatia, journalists also reported issues of bribery and corruption, where news is produced in exchange for financial favors. A novelty of the last few years is that many media outlets publish paid texts that are actually “hidden advertising”: “in media, you have pressure from advertisers tolerated by editors, for journalists to write stories that are essentially advertising disguised as journalism” (HR-11). This is not only done for economic benefits, but it is also how both politicians and their parties are advertised, especially at the local level.

In fact, instrumentalization by political actors, especially by authoritarian populist governments, has been a key factor in the decline of journalistic standards. Many Hungarian journalists noted that pro-government media outlets often fail to meet the professional journalistic standards. Instead, their content is largely thinly veiled political propaganda, with little regard for facts and a tendency to spread disinformation. Some respondents argued that such work does not constitute “real” journalism, exemplified by one respondent’s view that the two cannot be compared: “it’s like if we were talking about, I don’t know, matchmaking, and then someone would ask how do escort services compare to this field? Well, that’s a different industry” (HU-08).

Journalists also criticized the tendency to blur the lines between political opinion pieces and factual news, particularly prevalent in Hungary. One pro-government journalist justified this by stating that he does not believe that journalists can report objectively, but rather “I have a political opinion on things, but I don’t feel that this would change me. This gives me just as much “playing space” as I can fit into journalism” (HU-14). Similarly, one Croatian journalist observes that “there is a lack of verified, unbiased, balanced information and not propaganda, manipulation and some kind of hybrid journalism” (HR-14).

Gross and Jakubowicz (2013, pp. 6–7) highlight that the professionalization of journalism in CEE has long been undermined by the region’s political and media structures. During the transition period, thousands of new journalists entered the field, many eager to adopt Western journalistic standards but lacking the necessary experience or resources. This led to a myriad of styles and practices, where journalism often became a mix of advocacy, self-expression, and external influence rather than

adhering to unified professional norms. As the narratives of the respondents show, this fragmentation, combined with economic pressures and political instrumentalization, contributed to a decline in journalistic independence.

The legacy of communism and anti-communist elites further shaped this environment, as many media professionals from both camps were accustomed to working within politically charged frameworks rather than professional journalistic standards (Gross, 2002, pp. 92–93). This legacy, compounded by the rise of digital media and economic pressures, is reflected in the respondents' accounts, where journalism has been increasingly shaped by political propaganda, bribery, and blurred lines between opinion and fact. Journalists across all three countries emphasized the challenges of maintaining autonomy under constant economic and political threats, as seen in the declining investment in professional development and editorial independence. These factors have collectively created a journalism culture that is fragmented, economically vulnerable, and susceptible to external pressures.

In their account, journalists argue that one of the more serious consequences of the declining standards of journalism and, more broadly, the instrumentalization of the media, is that journalism has effectively lost its status in society, with a significant decline of public trust in the media—a trend supported by recent empirical research (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2024). In the past, media workers were much more respected and valued, whilst today this has been lost:

Respect and pride for our journalistic values, for that kind of professionalism, was palpable 20, 30 years ago. [Instead,] many journalists nowadays understand that being a journalist is an opportunity to get closer to someone who will hire you later, where you no longer have to grind and bleed in journalism. (HR-02)

HU-14 recounted a recent poll on public trust, which revealed that citizens rank even politicians higher than journalists on the trust index. “With this, many in the profession were shocked that this was the reality” (HU-14). Similarly, in Slovenia, a journalist has observed that while the audiences are increasingly skeptical toward professional media organizations, their trust in dubious, even manipulative sources is on the rise (SI-06). A Croatian journalist emphasizes how the entire profession has lost its status in the public eye: “We don’t really have any social recognition. I don’t feel it.” (HR-12)

Despite these challenges, some improvements have been noted. According to Gross (2002, p. 109), while Eastern European journalists have not yet developed a professional culture strong enough to resist political domination fully, a commitment to impartiality has been growing. Journalists are increasingly distancing themselves from political parties and government influence, and the tendency to view themselves as either for or against those in power is gradually weakening (Gross, 2002). However, the process is incomplete, as economic and political pressures continue to threaten journalistic independence.

Ultimately, the de-professionalization of journalism in CEE is a multifaceted problem driven by economic pressures, political instrumentalization, and a fragmented

professional identity. To reverse this decline, there must be renewed efforts to build an independent professional culture that can withstand external pressures and restore public trust in the media.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article has examined the mechanisms and consequences of media instrumentalization as experienced by journalists in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia. We emphasized the need for a historical perspective to understand media instrumentalization in CEE countries, demonstrating how the legacy of the transition period and the influence of authoritarian populist rule have transformed socialist-era state control into more complex forms of media instrumentalization that systematically undermine journalistic independence.

Our findings align with and extend Mancini's (2012, 2015) analysis of media instrumentalization, particularly in contexts where personalized and clientelistic networks prevail. During the transition period in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia, the privatization of media systems was shaped by these patterns, as political and economic elites established personal networks to control media outlets and use them as tools for influence rather than as platforms for independent journalism. This mirrors Mancini's observation of media in contexts like Italy, where trust is not built on coherent political platforms but on personal relationships and informal networks. Similarly, privatization in CEE often enabled politically connected elites to acquire media outlets, embedding clientelism into the media landscape. Public resources became tied to "friendly" media coverage, with instrumentalization overriding profit motives, turning outlets into channels for blackmail and trading influence (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010).

These dynamics are further compounded by the influence of authoritarian populism, which leverages instrumentalized media to consolidate power. Hall's (1985) concept of authoritarian populism provides a useful lens for understanding how these regimes combine populist appeal with the coercive practices of clientelistic networks. In Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia, authoritarian populist leaders use media as an extension of their political apparatus, ensuring favorable coverage through a combination of financial dependencies, selective resource distribution, and ownership concentration among loyalists. This intertwining of political and economic control is particularly effective in such post-transitions environments where civil society is under threat, trust in institutions is low, and clientelism dominates. The decline in political and institutional trust—shown to be consistently lower in new democracies of Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe (Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2020)—creates fertile ground for populist leaders to thrive. By positioning themselves as alternatives to perceived failing institutional structures, these leaders further consolidate their influence over both political and media systems. The result is a media system that, while outwardly pluralistic, is deeply constrained by informal power structures, aligning the media with interest groups (Coman & Karadjov, 2021, p. 246).

Our findings also illustrate how instrumentalization intersects political polarization, a hallmark of the polarized pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In CEE, as in Southern Europe, media instrumentalization thrives in polarized environments marked by clientelism and weak rational-legal authority. Our study highlights how instrumentalization itself reinforces polarization within the media by aligning outlets with specific political or economic interests, creating a fragmented media landscape where journalism becomes a battleground for competing narratives. The interplay of these factors creates conditions in which media are not primarily driven by profit but by their value as tools for political or economic influence. These dynamics allow authoritarian populist regimes in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia exploit structural weaknesses, undermining journalistic autonomy, deepening media divisions, and reducing opportunities for fair and inclusive discourse.

Despite the contributions of this research, there are limitations to consider. As a qualitative study based on interviews with 50 journalists, our findings are context-specific and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across other CEE countries or regions. Additionally, while interviews provide rich, subjective accounts, they reflect individual perspectives that may vary based on personal experiences. Future research could complement these findings with quantitative surveys to measure public perceptions of trust in media or extend the study to include comparative analyses of instrumentalization across additional post-socialist countries. Longitudinal approaches could also track changes in media landscapes over time, particularly in response to shifts in political regimes.

Ultimately, the polarization of the media landscape, the de-professionalization of journalism, and the decline in public trust underscore the urgent need for initiatives that support independent journalism and foster professional standards resilient to external pressures. The findings of this research also have broader implications for scholars and practitioners across the CEE region and beyond. By highlighting the mechanisms and consequences of media instrumentalization, this study provides a framework for understanding how similar dynamics might unfold in other transitioning or politically volatile contexts. Policymakers and media reform advocates could draw on these insights to design interventions that enhance media independence, resist political and economic pressures, and promote sustainable, democratic media environments. Strengthening these aspects is essential for restoring the public's confidence in media institutions and safeguarding journalistic integrity in an era marked by authoritarian populist influence.

Data Availability Statement

Supporting documents for this study – including the interview guide, participant information leaflet, consent forms, interview notes and the coding scheme – are openly available at <https://doi.org/10.17028/rd.lboro.25975117.v1>.

The participants of this study did not all give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research interview transcripts are not publicly available but remain safely archived and accessible to authors.

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