THE ROUNDTABLE:
Media Capture and Cultural Polarisation

Public service media (PSM) remains a cornerstone of European media systems. In an era dominated by global digital platforms, challenged by the spread of misinformation and deepening socio-political polarisation, there is a renewed urgency to strengthen PSM as a trusted space for social innovation, civic participation, and democratic deliberation across generations, communities, and nations. As part of this effort, scholars from the EU-funded CHANSE project *Public Service Media in the Age of Platforms* (PSM-AP, 2022–2025), in collaboration with members of the Horizon Europe project *Reviving, Boosting, Optimising and Transforming European Film Competitiveness* (REBOOT, 2023–2026), gathered in Warsaw, Poland in January 2025 for a three-day workshop, *The Knowledge Exchange: Reinventing Public Service Media for the Age of Platforms*.

The University of Warsaw organised the event in cooperation with Zachęta – National Gallery of Art and Polish Television (TVP). Within this framework, on 23 January 2025, the TV Studio of the Faculty of Journalism, Information, and Book Studies, located in the University of Warsaw Library, hosted a civic roundtable debate titled „Media Capture and Cultural Polarization."

The debate examined critical obstacles to media pluralism and social cohesion in Europe, while considering how these affect the role and resilience of PSM in the platform era. The debate looked beyond scholarly and industry perspectives by engaging broader civic interests. The TV Studio streamed and made the debate available online to ensure wider public access. Prof. Michał Głowacki (University of Warsaw) as the Chair invited media scholars and civil society representatives from across Europe to share their insights and proposals for reinvention strategies and models that may futureproof PSM against capture and fragmentation. The panel brought together Dr Marius Dragomir (Media and Journalism Research Center), Dr Čedomir Markov (University of Belgrade, Serbia), Jakub Wygnański (Shipyard Foundation, Poland), and Dr Bissera Zankova (Media 21 Foundation, Bulgaria). Below we present a transcript of selected ideas articulated during this civic debate.

Michał Głowacki: As experts on cultural and political polarisation, as well as political parallelism, I would like to ask you: how do you explore and approach the wider context in which public service media functions?

Bissera Zankova: For many years I have been working at the Council of Europe on documents, including recommendations related to public service media. In my view, the problems of public service media are always relevant and can always be discussed, no matter what age we live in. Initially it was public service broadcasting, which then transformed into public service media, and now we speak about the relationship of public service media with platforms and the question of how content produced by PSM can gain prominence and be carried by platforms. Another important issue is the definition of the public service remit in a time of strong competition, not only with commercial media but also with different platforms. Within this broad context, public service media remain a source of educational, informational, cultural, and other types of inspiration. But we can also see the dangers they (PSM) face: questions of funding, independence, and the risks of media capture. I would say that media capture is not only a problem for commercial media, but also for all types of media, and especially for public service media.

Marius Dragomir: Much of what I will say comes from research at the Media and Journalism Research Center, hosted by the University of Santiago de Compostela. Although we are an academic institution, we often engage with civil society, and we try to make our research accessible. There is a lot of literature on media capture, but we wanted to understand how it happens in practice. We mapped patterns in several European countries and identified four key components. First, regulatory capture: when a government wins elections, it appoints members to media councils and regulators, who then act in its interest. Second, public service media: in many countries it is easy for governments to take control of PSM by appointing leadership once they are in power. Third, public funding: governments often use state advertising and subsidies, not transparently, but to reward loyal outlets. Fourth, capture of private media through ownership: often with allied businesses, governments systematically acquire private outlets. Together, these elements create strong control over media narratives. We presented this model in our research, but we are also now looking at a fifth element: technology platforms. Initially, platforms provided a space for independent journalism – as in Hungary, where outlets like Átlátszó and *Direkt36* operate online. But over the past five years, tech companies, driven by commercial interests, have increasingly prioritised government-friendly outlets. Hungary remains a textbook case: since 2010 Orbán's government has captured regulators, PSM, funding flows, and private media. Poland was on a similar path until recent parliamentary elections. The new element, collusion between governments and

tech platforms, is perhaps the most troubling, with far-reaching consequences for public service media and for independent journalism as a whole.

Čedomir Markov: My research background is a bit different, as I don't study journalistic practices or cultures; I focus more on audience-media relations. When I began, I was interested in media trust; or in Serbia's case, media distrust. I tried to distinguish between distrust, as a normative concept, and cynicism, which I felt better described citizens' relations to the media and to other public institutions. A few years ago, I joined the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade, where I worked with a group researching democratic innovations, especially citizens' assemblies. Much of the evidence on their benefits came from Western contexts, so we wanted to test what happens in hybrid regimes like Serbia. Since 2020, we have organised many assemblies on issues such as air pollution, pedestrian zones, school safety, food labelling, and access to social care. From these experiences, we learned that citizens most value two stages: the briefing stage, where they receive impartial and diverse information, often lacking in hybrid regimes, and the structured deliberation, where they discuss in small moderated groups and work toward policy solutions. These assemblies act as "schools of democracy," giving people a chance to practise democratic behaviour largely absent in the Western Balkans. One assembly we organised in 2023, in cooperation with the European Partnership for Democracy, focused on disinformation. It took place in Belgrade, with similar initiatives in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia. Participants began with strong punitive attitudes, such as supporting heavy fines or even imprisonment for those spreading disinformation. But after deliberation, support shifted toward softer measures: civic education, support for professional journalism, fact-checking, media literacy, and self-regulation. Experts involved were initially sceptical but later impressed by the quality and sensibility of the citizens' recommendations. The main challenge remains follow-through. In Serbia, decision-makers typically ignore invitations to participate in assemblies or to consider citizens' recommendations, unlike in some neighbouring countries. Finally, I'd like to mention that our initiative has attracted attention from media practitioners in Serbia. The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia is planning four citizens' assemblies linked to developing a new media strategy. The first, scheduled for April, will focus on public service media and how citizens can be engaged more meaningfully in shaping content and policies.

Jakub Wygnański: My background is in journalism, but most of my work has been in civic participation. At the Shipyard Foundation, we organise deliberative processes, including the first ever civic assembly in Poland: a randomised panel of 100 people on energy poverty. Politicians promised to consider the outcomes, but as always, we will see. Importantly, there is now a promise that even the existence and governance of public media should be discussed in such a civic panel.

I believe democracy cannot survive without such innovations. Even in Athens or in the Italian Republics, governance relied on random selection, not only elections. I served as chair of the programming board of Polish Television until 2014, when I resigned. Even then, before the current manipulations, I saw that the concept of "public" was very weak, reduced to quotas of airtime for left and right, as if equality of microphones was sufficient. That is not public service media. This brings me to the point: the word "public" matters. Public media should not be just about giving a platform to competing voices; it should serve the *public good*, the *res publica*. But our societies struggle with that idea. Too often, "the public" becomes a crowd or a mob, easily mobilised by anger. True public service requires citizens to think beyond their own interest, toward fairness and the common good. Civil society should play a role here; not just as a set of NGOs, but as a culture of civic behaviour, civility, and dialogue. Unfortunately, in Poland civil society is weak, and the oversight of public media is fragile. Without new governance structures that prevent capture after every election, public media risk becoming tools of the ruling party rather than serving society. I often say: either we invent such structures that truly protect public media from political takeover, or it might be safer to abandon the model altogether and invest in private or civic media. Because captured public media, controlled by a party rather than the public, are not just ineffective, they are dangerous to democracy.

Michał Głowacki: Marius, is there a geography of media capture? I know you have conducted research outside Europe, and I think it would be interesting to hear whether this depends on the nature of democracy, or whether it is connected to some other cultural indicators.

Marius Dragomir: One of the studies I mentioned is *State Media Monitor*, which we expanded to 170 countries. It is now in its fifth year. We analyse what we call state-administered media, including authoritarian regimes, based on three criteria: governance, funding mechanisms, and safeguards for editorial independence. Measuring these gives us seven models with different levels of control. We have to distinguish between state-controlled environments like China, North Korea, Venezuela, where the state controls basically everything, even your thoughts, and media capture, which appears in hybrid regimes and imperfect democracies. I believe media capture is essentially economic. Leaders want to keep access to public resources, because those resources sustain their place in the media ecosystem. Examples include Hungary, Turkey, Egypt, Cambodia, Nicaragua; so capture appears in many forms across many regions.

Michał Głowacki: Well then, what is the relationship between media capture and the broader culture of lawmaking in the media field?

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Bissera Zankova: Well, this is a difficult question. I also want to pick up on what Jakub said – for example, in Poland there is a strong expectation of a new media law that would solve many issues. In my country, Bulgaria, we also expected a new law on public service media funding, but after the recent political turbulence the draft was blocked. So the big question is: can we really rely on the law? And the answer is complicated, because the law itself can be captured: not only by parties but also by lobbying groups, or through last-minute amendments that change its purpose. Marius mentioned regulatory capture – this has been a serious problem since the 1990s, and it continues. According to a 2017 Council of Europe report, fewer than half of European states had managed to create independent regulatory bodies. I don't think the situation has improved; in some cases it has become worse. Even when civil society representatives are included, bigger organisations dominate and the problem remains. So we need to look not only at improving laws, but also at the administrative practices of regulatory bodies: their internal work, transparency, reporting, and accountability. For example, what happens if Parliament rejects their annual report? Are they obliged to change their practices? Too often there is no clear guidance. Finally, I would stress that the public should not only "own" public service media but also have influence over regulatory authorities, since they are not purely governmental bodies. Like PSM, regulators should be accountable to civil society and the wider public. Whether this really happens in our countries is still an open question.

> **Michał Głowacki: So, it all goes back to the question of accountability, transparency, and public engagement in lawmaking. I would like to turn to the situation in Serbia: in recent days, large-scale protests have taken place, with civil society activists and students demonstrating against the policies of RTS. Similar movements have been observed in Poland prior to 2023, as well as in Slovakia. Čedomir, could you elaborate on the implications of this current crisis between the state and citizens in Serbia?**

Čedomir Markov: Thank you for the opportunity to speak about this issue. I don't think there has been a more consequential one for Serbia in recent years. Let me first give some brief context. On 1 November last year, a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing fifteen people. This tragedy sparked widespread demonstrations, driven by fears that once again those responsible would not be held accountable. When students in Belgrade were attacked during one demonstration, and some were even arrested, they blockaded their department. Within days, ca. 60 departments across Serbia joined. For the past two months, students have staged daily blockades in memory of the victims, alongside mass protests at key institutions. Twice they demonstrated at RTS, the Serbian national broadcaster. In December, they criticised RTS for ignoring the protests

or covering them only briefly, while airing government claims that students were "funded by the West" without challenge. Later coverage remained unbalanced – for instance, a political talk show hosted four male guests, only one of whom supported the protests, despite strong backing from academics and public opinion surveys. The second protest, on 17 January, drew tens of thousands. This time RTS aired live coverage, read student demands in full, and even showed a banner on its own building: *RTS workers stand with students.* One of RTS's unions formally endorsed the protests, stressing that RTS had long failed to meet its public service obligations. What is new in this movement is that it is leaderless, self-organised, and independent of political parties, which makes it harder to delegitimise and more powerful in reminding RTS of its true role.

Michał Głowacki: Thank you, Čedomir, for bringing the Serbian case into our debate, but let us return to Poland for a concluding reflection. Civil society organisations have been actively engaged in the recent public consultations on the European Media Freedom Act. Jakub, could you briefly wrap up the Polish context? As in many other countries, society here has become deeply divided, yet at the same time there is a growing call for deliberation and for listening to one another.

Jakub Wygnański: I don't know how to solve the puzzle, but some elements give us hope while others bring despair. The first is law. Legal frameworks can be changed overnight, and without civic spirit and integrity inside institutions, rules alone are not enough. We know that better regulation is needed, but law by itself cannot prevent capture. The second issue is governance. Who appoints who is crucial. In Germany, for example, the strength of media councils lies in their size and diversity, limiting political dominance. In Poland, we have proposed oversight bodies that include representatives from politics, NGOs, academia, and journalism, with members selected randomly from large pools. Randomisation can serve as an anti-corruption mechanism. Funding is another challenge. Models such as tax allocation, where citizens directly assign a portion of income tax to trusted organisations, might also be adapted to support media. Measurement of quality is equally important – not only audience ratings, but also independent panels able to assess whether public media serve education, culture, and society. Finally, I believe resilience depends on pluralism and innovation, not on uniformity. Strong journalism must rest on the integrity of individuals, since institutions are often corrupted. Today, people sometimes trust individual reporters or podcasters more than media organisations. How we can rebuild journalism and public media around integrity and civic oversight remains the essential question.

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Marius Dragomir is the Director of the Media and Journalism Research Center, a researcher at the University of Santiago de Compostela and a visiting professor at Central European University (CEU) in Vienna. Over the last 30 years, Dr. Dragomir has specialized in areas, such as media and communication regulation, digital media, public service media governance, broadcasting, journalism business models, and ownership regulation.

Čedomir Markov is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. His research explores audience–media relations in hybrid regimes, focusing on trust, cynicism, and anti-press hostility. He is also interested in the intersection of media and democratic innovation, especially in relation to deliberation quality and media accountability.

Jakub Wygnański is a sociologist and long-time civil society leader, currently serving as President of the Shipyard Foundation. A former "Solidarity" activist and participant in the Round Table negotiations, he co-founded key NGOs in Poland and has collaborated with major philanthropic institutions. He has been recognized with numerous awards for his contributions to civic engagement and social innovation.

Bissera Zankova is a media lawyer specialized in human rights and constitutional law. She is a long-standing Council of Europe expert in freedom of expression and freedom of the media. As a president of "Media 21" Foundation, Dr. Zankova has been working on projects spanning media and new media regulation, equality and journalism.

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