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SUPPRESSION OF POLITICAL OPPONENTS IN HYBRID REGIMES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Abstract

In the post-communist countries that today are referred to as the Western Balkans, processes of democratization began at the end of the twentieth century following the collapse of communist rule. However, instead of fully transitioning to democracy, these countries have developed hybrid regimes, a political systems that blend democratic and authoritarian elements. While multiparty elections are held, they are neither free nor fair. Political opposition exists and can criticize the government, but it is suppressed through subtle rather than brutal methods. One key strategy is legal repression, where political opponents face continuous pressure through inspections, audits and politically motivated investigations. Although these actions are formally justified within the legal framework, they are selectively applied to weaken critics and silence dissent. Intellectuals, writers, journalists, professors, judges, businessman and politicians critical of the government are disproportionately targeted while the institutions remain blind and silent about the abuses and crimes of the supporters of the ruling elites. In some cases, legal repression results in administrative or financial burdens for political critics, while in others, it escalates to criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Beyond legal repression, media control plays a crucial role in hybrid regimes. Rather than shutting down independent media outright, governments co-opt or financially pressure them to promote official narratives while marginalizing independent journalism. This allows ruling elites to use the media to discredit political dissidents, labelling them as traitors, foreign agents, criminals, spies, oligarchs etc. In some countries, such tactics were even institutionalized through lustration policies, further delegitimizing political opponents and reinforcing their exclusion from public life. All of this is happening in a context where state institutions and resources are abused for the party and personal goals of the ruling elites. This creates an uneven playing field, allowing the ruling political elites to grab the electoral legitimacy without facing the risks of democratic uncertainty.

Keywords: *politics, political system, democracy, elections, hybrid regimes, illiberal democracy, stabilotocracy.*

I. Introduction

The end of the XX century was marked by widespread optimism that the XXI century would be characterized by democracy and liberal values. Such optimism was reflected in the fact that post-communist and post-authoritarian countries, following the fall of their non-democratic regimes, began a process of democratization with aim to transit from authoritarianism to liberal democracy. Citizens in these states, at the end of the XX century, enthusiastically embarked on building democratic systems, expecting a governance based on constitutionally limited government, the rule of law, human freedoms and rights, fair and free elections, civil society and economic progress. Yet this wave of optimism gradually began to fade.

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Instead of the XXI century becoming the century of democracy, its early years saw the rise of a new form of authoritarianism, often referred to as hybrid regimes. Terms such as "illiberal democracies", "competitive authoritarianism", "hybrid regimes" and "stabilitocracy" are used to describe these regimes. These systems attempt to blend elements of democracy with authoritarianism rather than reconcile democracy with constitutionalism. Although hybrid regimes can be found worldwide, however, perhaps the most significant cluster of lliberal democracies is found among the 'transition countries' of Central and Eastern Europe.[1] In these countries, the term "transition" has come to symbolize not a bright future but rather grayness and uncertainty. Consequently, many post-communist and post-repressive states, in their pursuit of democracy, have ended up with corruption, weak and dysfunctional institutions, party control of state institutions, fragile civil societies, human rights violations, military conflicts and poor economic conditions. Thus, the initial enthusiasm for democracy in these societies has been replaced by disappointment and a sense of lost years during the transition. As a response to such disappointment hybrid regimes known as well as stabilotocracies developed in Western Balkan countries. These new regimes draw on the failure of reformist governments during the early 2000s to decisively break with authoritarian practices and establish independent and democratic institutions, thus facilitating the return of competitive authoritarian regimes.[2] The most consolidated form of hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans first emerged in Macedonia and Montenegro, later taking root in Serbia, and to a certain extent in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans exhibit the core characteristics typical of such systems. However, due to the strategic external support they receive and the international legitimacy they maintain, they are frequently described as "stabilitocracies".[3] A notable feature of such systems is that the suppression of political opponents operates differently from that in classic authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Accordingly, this paper aims to research the methods and mechanisms through which political opponents are suppressed in hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans. The central thesis is that suppression of political opponents in these systems is exercised subtly and continuously, primarily through the construction of an "us versus them" dichotomy and through unequal access to media and to the law. The analysis employs historical and comparative methods, as well as qualitative political analysis and a review of the relevant literature. The paper begins by defining the key characteristics of hybrid regimes, which serve as the conceptual framework for the subsequent analysis.

II. Basic characteristics of hybrid regimes

When discussing such regimes, it's important to recognize that these are regimes that are in the gray zone between democratic systems and classical non-democratic regimes because in such regimes electoral democracy operates alongside weak checks and balances, and the routine intimidation of oppositional force.[4] Such regimes cannot fit into a consolidated democracy because they show little respect for the 'liberal' aspects of liberal democracy; those that are designed to uphold limited government, such as protections for individual and minority rights, media freedom,

[1] Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, 5th ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), 122.
[2] Florian Bieber, "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans," *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 337.
[3] Bieber, "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism," 338.
[4] Heywood, *Politics*, 123.

the rule of law, and institutional checks and balances,[5] but, on the other hand, they cannot be placed in classic authoritarian regimes either, because, unlike those where opposition political parties are banned or repressed, in the hybrid regimes constitutional channels exist through which opposition groups compete in a meaningful way for executive power.[6]

That means that in such systems there is even a certain dose of uncertainty in terms of who will be the winner of the elections. This is because elections are held regularly and opposition parties can open offices, recruit candidates, organize campaigns, and politicians are rarely exiled or imprisoned.[7] The elections are organized with the participation of multiple political parties through the use of universal, equal, secret and direct suffrage. Formally, the elections fulfill all criteria to be characterized as democratic. However, the substantive analysis reveals that in such systems the elections are far from democratic. This is the case because in such systems we are talking about organizing elections marked by unfair and unequal terrain for competition. Such creation of unequal terrain for competition between the ruling political parties and the opposition political parties can be observed through several aspects.

- Primarily, the ruling political elites are united around a populist leader, while the opposition political parties are divided;
- The ruling political parties use state institutions and budget funds for party purposes.
- Clientelistic functioning of the ruling political elites by providing their party members and supporters with jobs in the public administration, obtaining public tenders and contracts, as well as systematically lowering taxes or increase spending before elections (subventions, scholarships, etc.) in order to attract as many voters as possible.[8] Practically, through such clientelistic policies, the ruling political elites subtly bribe the voters.
- The ruling political elites in the confrontation with their political opponents use one type of "legal repression". Such "legal repression" implies technically correct application of the law, but its use is selective and partisan rather than universal.[9] Practically, political opponents are constantly under the pressure of inspections, audits, and investigations, which on the one hand are formally and legally justified, but on the other hand, are tendentious and purposeful. On the other hand, the institutions remain blind and silent about the abuses and crimes of the supporters of the ruling political elites. This tells us that the judicial system is not independent and is under the influence of the ruling political elites.
- Control of the media expressed by members of the ruling political elites dominating media coverage. The leading figure dominates media coverage, using television to trumpet what are often real achievements in office.[10] Independent media are allowed to exist, but such media are frequently threatened, attacked, and – in some cases – suspended or closed.[11]
- Beside the control of the media, the ruling political parties also try to control and limit criticism of their governance. That is why opposition politicians, independent judges,

[5] Heywood, *Politics*, 88
[6] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Jan Michalik, *Multiparty Elections in Authoritarian Regimes: A Comparative Analysis* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015), 29.
[9] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* 9.
[10] Rod Hague, Martin Harrop, and John McCormick, *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*, 10th ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 283.
[11] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* 8.

journalists, human-rights activists, and other government critics are subject to harassment, arrest, and – in some cases – violent attack.[12]

Practically within the framework of hybrid regimes, we can observe soft and subtle forms of pressure, as well as the bribery of voters through the use of clientelistic policies. Such subtle manipulations are possible because in hybrid regimes there is pressure on the free media and the rule of law and the independent judiciary are constantly being undermined. Through the creation of an unequal and unfair playing field within the framework of hybrid regimes, the role of the ruling political elites is strengthened, and the political opposition parties tend to be weak and fragmented. In other words, competition is real but unfair.[13] Such a situation contributes to the fact that the ruling political parties do not need major election manipulations on election day. Election day in such systems usually passes peacefully because the ruling political elites manipulation is done a subtly way and long before the electoral day. In that respect, the political opponents are suppressed long before the electoral day. Such suppression of political opponents relies as much on the carrot (providing reasons for voting for the dominant figure) as on the stick (threatening opposition supporters).[14] Therefore, the subsequent analysis will examine in greater depth the strategies and mechanisms employed by hybrid regimes in Western Balkan to suppress political opponents.

III. The role of the creation of the 'us vs. them' division in society

At the very beginning, it should be noted that the rise of hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans is closely associated with the emergence of populist politicians, most of whom originate from the right side of the ideological spectrum. The terms state capture, hybrid regime and stabilocracy are most commonly linked to the rise of Aleksandar Vucic in Serbia, Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia, and, to a certain extent, to the leadership of Edi Rama in Albania, Milo Djukanovic in Montenegro and Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina. A recognizable characteristic of such populist leaders is their tendency to embrace a Manichaean worldview: the world is divided into "good" and "bad".[15] Such a worldview fosters the creation of us versus them divisions, which are often transformed into a Schmittian friend–foe distinction in which the "Other" is demonized.[16] Consequently, populist leaders does not refrain from using hate speech and the strategy of blaming political opponents.[17] However, the extent of polarization, hate speech, and demonization of opponents varies. The us versus them division may remain relatively soft and directed primarily at political opponents, but it can also deepen and expand to include anyone who criticizes the government. This suggests that populists construct different forms of us versus them conflicts depending on the political context.[18]

When examining the situation in the Western Balkans, it becomes evident that the rise of populist leaders in these countries was initially marked by a soft us versus them division. At the

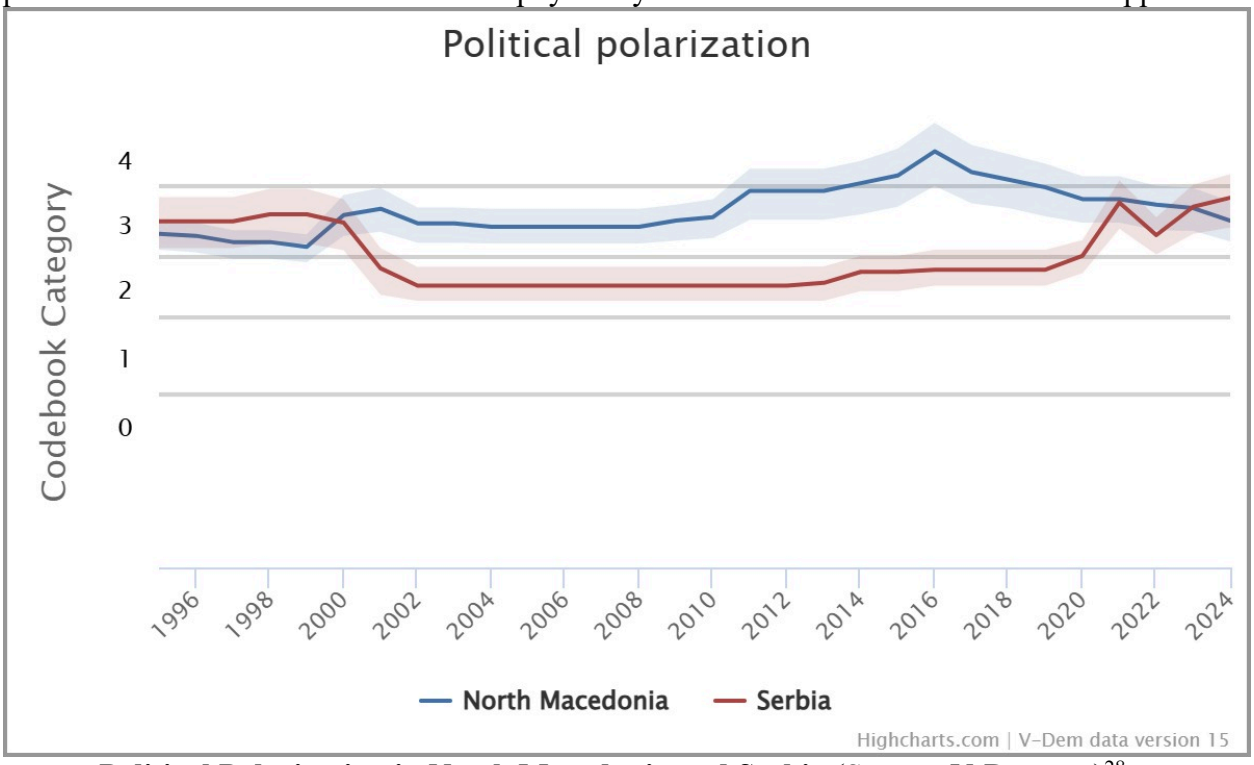
[12] Ibid.
[13] Michalik, *Multiparty Elections in Authoritarian Regimes,* 24.
[14] Hague, Harrop and McCormick, *Comparative Government and Politics:,* 283.
[15] Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Florian Bieber and Marko Kmezic, *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion* (Graz/Belgrade: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2017), 13.
[18] Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin, Populists in Power Around the World (London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2018), 12.

outset of their rule, these leaders sought to appeal to the people as a whole as opposed to the corrupt and impotent political elites.[19] In the early phase, this division was primarily directed toward previous oppositional political parties and the economic transition elites, who were portrayed as criminal and corrupt actors obstructing national progress and reforms. Presenting themselves as reformers battling the remnants of the politically and economically corrupt old political elites became the dominant narrative of the soft 'us vs. them' division during the initial establishment of stabilocracies across the Western Balkans. This softer version of 'us vs. them' appears to have been most enduring in Albania under Edi Rama, where it evolved into a more sophisticated, "Europeanized" form of us versus them politics. This approach is usually described as a moderate and adaptive populist style, where anti-elitist and people-centered appeals are framed within a consistent pro-European stance.[20] Therefore, Rama positioned himself as a modernizer and reformer, leading new politics against the old political elites associated with old politics. He characterizes the 'old politics' as the main source of the problems that Albania is facing during the democratization.[21]

Unlike in Albania, in Serbia and Macedonia the us versus them division became significantly deeper—both in terms of the groups included in the "them" category and in the nature of discrediting and labeling. Over time, in addition to political opponents and economic elites, an increasingly broad spectrum of individuals and groups who dared to criticize the ruling political elites were added to the "them" group. In Macedonia the elites to which the people were opposed consisted of more than just the political establishment of the Social-Democratic Union (SDSM).[22] Also, in Serbia initially SNS designated former ruling parties, tycoons and elites who got rich during the transition as its enemies, but later, its opponents became the independent media and civil society, framed as a 'fifth column'.[23] That is how professors, judges, journalists, students, actors, athletes, NGOs and even international representatives, individuals and groups who had no direct connection to politics or the opposition but were dissatisfied with developments in their country, were portrayed as part of "them." Simultaneously, the labeling and discrediting of political opponents escalated into overt verbal attacks, with critics being branded as traitors, parasites, foreign mercenaries, foreign agents, Sorosoids, snitches, or even Ustashas. In this respects, analysis are showing that every day the media in Serbia publish about 80 articles in which they directly declare individuals or groups as 'traitors', 'foreign mercenaries', 'Ustashas', or 'Shiptars'.[24] In Macedonia government critics were routinely labeled as "traitors," "communists,"

[19] Ljupcho Petkovski, "Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing 'the People' in Macedonia's Illiberal Discourse," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3, no. 2 (2015): 47.
[20] Arben Xhaferaj, Ervis Iljazaj, and Arlind Reli, "Narrating the Nation, Embracing Europe: Populist Markers in Albanian Political Discourse," *International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies* 8, no. 3 (2025): 2365.
[21] Blerjana Bino, "The Constitution of a 'New Politics Beyond Left and Right': From Ideological Ambiguity to Populist Political Communication," *POLIS: Journal of Political Science (University of Tirana)* 16 (2017): 61.
[22] Petkovski, "Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony:," 52.
[23] Dragan Spasojevic, "From Radical to Mainstream: The Ruling Populists in Serbia," *The Loop – of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR)*, February 6, 2024, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/from-radical-to-mainstream-the-ruling-populists-in-serbia/, accessed 24 October 2025.
[24] Dubravka Valic Nedeljkovic and Maja Janjatovic Jovanovic, *The Serbian Media System Marked by a Media That Systematically Spreads Disinformation, Hate Speech and Propaganda (Resilience: For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation, Research Publication 1 – Serbia)* (Belgrade/Ljubljana/Novi Sad: SEENPM; Peace Institute; Novi Sad School of Journalism, 2020), 10.

"Sorosians" and "freaks."[25] Such poisonous rhetoric contributed to the rise of affective polarization, fostering the dehumanization of political opponents, lending a moralistic and zero-sum character to political life, and facilitating in-group mobilization.[26] As a result, in these countries the us versus them division became visibly manifested in the streets through the organization of counter-protests and counter-events aimed at opposing gatherings organized by anti-government movements and forces. This development of events and the rise of affective polarization ultimately created an environment in which political violence became both more socially acceptable and more frequent.[27] In this direction, if the index on political polarization in Serbia and Macedonia is examined, it can be better understand why violence erupted in the streets in Serbia in recent years, while in Macedonia it culminated in the events of 27 April in 2017, when protesters stormed Parliament and physically attacked MPs from the then-opposition.



Political Polarization in North Macedonia and Serbia (Source: V-Dem.net)[28]

It should be taken into consideration that in certain countries, the us versus them division was institutionalized also through the implementation of lustration processes. Such was the case in Macedonia, where between 2008 and 2015 one of the most problematic lustration processes in the region was carried out, in direct contradiction to the recommendations of the Council of Europe. Many of the individuals on lustration list were vocal critics of the ruling political elites and had ties to opposition parties. Intellectuals, writers, journalists, professors, judges, and others who were

[25] Andrew Graan, "Marketing Logics and the Politics of Public Spheres: On Discursive Engineering and Enclosure," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2022): 310.
[26] James A. Piazza, "Political Polarization and Political Violence," *Security Studies* 32, no. 3 (2023):476.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, "Variable Graph Tool," accessed 20 October 2025, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/

critical of the government were disproportionately targeted. [29] Targeted in order to be labeled, discredited and marginalized on the political scene.

What is evident is that in all Western Balkan countries over the last two decades, such divisions have been created. However, the key question that arises is how 'us versus them' divisions contribute to the suppression of political dissent. Several aspects of this dynamic warrant closer examination.

First, the construction of us vs them division has goal to discredit political opponents and their activities/events. For example, during civic protests against the building of a church on Skopje's main square, the earliest protests against VMRO-DPMNE's plan for the reconstruction of the city center media close to the government repeatedly tried to discredit the protest by pointing out the presence of members of the opposition party and employees of the Open Society Foundation. [30] Additionally, in Macedonia anyone labeled as "Sorosoid" looses all credibility and their positions and opinions simply have no value. [31] In Serbia, in addition to promulgating SNS policies, the media served to act as attack dogs for the Serbian government often criticizing and demonizing the opposition while delegitimizing the critical voice of other media and journalists.[32] By trying to discredit and cast doubt on the credibility of individuals who criticize the government, ruling political elites in hybrid regimes effectively marginalize critical voices.

Second, by constructing a black-and-white worldview, populist leaders seek to eliminate neutral ground and silence dissent. Once politics is framed as a zero-sum struggle between "the people" and "traitors," any moderate or neutral position becomes illegitimate. Such division creates situation in which within the people, there cannot be a legitimate opposition, as there is only the people and illegitimate intruders, and there is only one proper common good for the authentic people [33] In practice, this means anyone who steps out of line can be labeled an "outsider" or traitor. Citizens and elites alike learn that silence is safer than dissent.

Third, such divisions contribute to mobilizing supporters through fear and resentment. Research into the communication strategies of populist actors has shown that populists deliberately provoke negative emotions, such as anger or fear, to reach their supporters[34] provoking hostile emotions such as anger, fear, and resentment, populist actors can make their followers feel that they are in a shared struggle and that they need to act quickly and decisively to defend themselves.[35] Through this strategy, populist leaders frame political conflict as an existential "to be or not to be" moment for society. In doing so, they not only mobilize support for themselves but also cultivate followers who are prepared to defend the cause and country. This atmosphere emerges because the ruling party systematically reframes criticism of its governance as an assault

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[29] Марија Николовска, Сашо Митевски, and Христо Ристевски, *Човековите права во процесот на лустрација* (Скопје: Институт за човекови права, 2016), 29.
[30] Borjan Gjuzelov and Marija Ilievska Hadjievska, "Institutional and Symbolic Aspects of Illiberal Politics: The Case of North Macedonia (2006–2017)," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 24.
[31] Mirjana Najcevska, "The Term 'Sorosoids' Is Discriminatory," *Fact-Checking Macedonia*, August 21, 2015, https://factchecking.mk/the-term-sorosoids-is-discriminatory/, accessed 22 October 2025.
[32] Ana Dragojlov, "Influence of Political Clientelism on Media Freedom under Vucic and the Progressive Party," *Nationalities Papers* (2025), 6.
[33] Dario Brentin and Tamara Pavasovic Trost, "Populism from Below in the Balkans," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3, no. 2 (2016): 4.
[34] Edda Humprecht, Michael Amsler, Frank Esser, and Peter Van Aelst, "Emotionalized Social Media Environments: How Alternative News Media and Populist Actors Drive Angry Reactions," *Political Communication*, advance online publication (2024), 4.
[35] Ibid.

on the country itself, portraying opponents as traitors, mercenaries, or foreign agents who endanger the people.

That leads us to the fourth reason – Moral legitimization of repression. Once opponents are defined as "others," harsh treatment of them can be portrayed as virtuous defense. The populist us-versus-them frame turns any enemy into a scapegoat, making repression seem necessary to protect the true people. Having an enemy has a useful cognitive foil because the threat of enemies justifies actions that might otherwise be unacceptable or illegal.[36] Therefore, populist leaders in Western Balkans have been using exclusivist narratives to make repression seem justified and even mandatory.

IV. The Misuse of Media and the Suppression of Independent Media in Hybrid Regimes

The role of creating and spreading 'us versus them' divisions in society is more than evident in the hybrid regimes of the Western Balkans. However, it should be noted that the media play a huge role in creating the 'Us vs. Them' divide in societies. When describing hybrid regimes, we could note that in the grey zone in-between, in illiberal regimes, we find media controlled by the government, but also independent media that serve as a mouthpiece for opposition forces.[37] However, this statement should not be misleading. In hybrid regimes, there is a great deal of media control exercised by the ruling elites. Through such control, the elites deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters or use governmentally controlled media as a mouthpiece of propaganda and glorification of the regime in order to skew the playing field in favour of incumbents so the competition is real but not fair.[38] Government representatives dominate the media space, while opposition politicians usually have limited access and appear only in independent media. In practice media broadcasting is disproportionately in favour of the incumbent, be it by the control over the public media, or by ownership and various way of manipulation of private media.[39] This situation is possible because the position of public broadcasters in the Western Balkans has been downgraded to one of political subordination, where whoever is in power will control the media's editorial output.[40] At the same time, private media is widespread but major media outlets are linked to the governing party – via proxy ownership, patronage and other illicit means. Media ownership is most often concentrated in the hands of businessmen with close links to the government[41] and governments can also use their power to influence the media through advertising, which could have serious repercussions for smaller media

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[36] Psychologists for Social Responsibility, *Enemy Images: A Resource Manual on the Psychology of Enemy Images* (Washington, DC: Psychologists for Social Responsibility, 1989), 20.
[37] Vera Stojarova, "Media in the Western Balkans: Who Controls the Past Controls the Future," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 1 (2019): 181-182.
[38] Stojarova, "Media in the Western Balkans:," 182.
[39] Irena Ristic, "Serbia—A Regime That Only Seemed Gone," in *Illiberal and Authoritarian Tendencies in Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe*, ed. Magdalena Solska, Florian Bieber, and Dane Taleski (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 153.
[40] Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD), *Media Capture in the Western Balkans: From Captured States to Captured Media*, Policy Brief No. 18 (Sofia: SELDI, December 2022),14 https://seldi.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Media-Capture-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf, accessed 22 October 2025.
[41] Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI), *Western Balkans 2020: State-Capture Risks and Policy Reforms* (Sofia: SELDI, 2020), 56. https://seldi.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WB-2020_EN_WEB.pdf, accessed 22 October 2025.

outlets.[42] Through all this, the ruling political elites in hybrid regimes create loyal private media that promotes government propaganda and censors government critics. Therefore, these private yet loyal media are often more effective and less restrained than the still loyal public media.[43]

Practically, the space for independent journalism is considerably reduced[44] often squeezed through indirect pressure. Economic uncertainty for independent media is generated by their exclusion from government advertising, combined with the fact that many companies refrain from advertising in critical outlets for fear of repercussions from the government.[45] In addition to difficulties in securing financial resources, SLAPPs also play a significant role as region's critical media is sued on a regular basis, frequently by highranking local and national public officials.[46] Such lawsuits, which sometimes result in the media being forced to pay court-ordered damages and lawyer fees, combined with the possibility of state authorities may undertake arbitrary financial inspections without warning and bogus checks of administrative documents,[47] create enormous financial challenges for independent media struggling to survive.

Therefore, the independent media doesn't get shut down—it gets starved through advertising boycotts, buried under legal costs, or simply priced out of existence through regulatory capture. In addition, journalists, media and CSOs working in the areas of investigative journalism, human rights and corruption have been seriously threatened by officials in some countries, with civil society activists often being exposed to smear campaigns in pro-government tabloids, branded as "foreign mercenaries" or "enemies of the state".[48] These attacks on journalists coupled with intimidation and indirect political pressure on media outlets and journalists through calls for an open witchhunt result in many media professionals simply dropping the profession.[49]

Although rare, there are cases where hybrid regimes in Western Balkans have directly influenced the closure of media outlets critical of them. One such example comes from Macedonia during the rule of Nikola Gruevski. It concerns A1 Television, the first private and most influential television station in the country in that period. The station was shut down in 2011 after its owner, Velija Ramkovski, and number of his employees were charged and later sentenced for money laundering, tax evasion and criminal association.[50]

V. The role of the carrot and stick technique within hybrid regimes

This brings us to the final point that we need to consider, namely the carrot-and-stick technique within hybrid regimes, i.e., the use of repression and co-optation. First, we should note that in hybrid regimes the ruling elite rules by and through a close network of direct and indirect ties to subordinate actors meaning that patronage, clientelism, and corruption are the most commonly used instruments.[51] Within such regimes, mobilisation capacity and their membership

[42] Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD), *Media Capture in the Western Balkans:* 7-8.
[43] Bieber, "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans," 349.
[44] Marius Dragomir, "The Capture Effect: How Media Capture Affects Journalists, Markets and Audiences," *Central European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 2 (36) (2024): 172.
[45] Igor Cvetanoski and Matteo Trevisan, *Media Capture: Toolkit for 21st Century Autocrats* (Occasional Paper, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, December 2019), 9.
[46] Bieber and Kmezic, *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans,* 64.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI), *Western Balkans 2020,* 56.
[49] Bieber and Kmezic, *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans,* 61.
[50] Gjuzelov and Hadjievska, "Institutional and Symbolic Aspects of Illiberal Politics:,"17.
[51] Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 22.

was and still is largely determined by their clientelist potential to redistribute public goods and serve as important informality brokers that provide their supporters with employment opportunities and privileged access to public services and resources.[52] The main actors of clientelism in the Western Balkans are those who hold or aspire to positions of political power.[53] This is how the obedience of individuals is bought and, in certain situations, even that of critics. If we look more closely, ruling elites in hybrid regimes often decided to co-opting politicians who once openly criticized them, offering political positions in exchange for loyalty and support. In Serbia, for example, some of Vucic's former critics eventually accepted posts within central or local government and became his allies. The same pattern can be observed in Macedonia during Gruevski's rule, when members of several parties that had previously split from VMRO-DPMNE and had been vocal critics of Gruevski rejoined VMRO-DPMNE and his government in 2011.

Joining or rejoining ruling political elites in hybrid regimes has a political and economic logic, because in these systems incumbents are systematically favored at the expense of the opposition.[54] Remaining in opposition in hybrid regimes entails persisting in a position of structural disadvantage, since access to critical resources such as public employment, state contracts, financial credit and administrative support is unevenly distributed. Therefore, while governing parties may use discretionary control over credit, licenses, state contracts, and other resources to enrich themselves through party-owned enterprises, members and companies close to the opposition are deprived of such resource.[55] Situation is much like in 'the good old days' of communism, if you wanted prosperity, you had to be a member of the governing party.[56]

Additionally, the opposition, besides facing uneven access to resources, also confronts uneven access to the law. This approach is often referred to as a form of "legal" repression, or the discretionary use of legal instruments – such as tax authorities and libel laws – to target opposition and the media.[57] In practice, members of the opposition are subject to the scrutiny of state institutions for even the slightest lapse in legal norms, while, on the other hand, the entire apparatus turns a blind eye to supporters of the government. This allows incumbents to engage in illicit acts—including violations of democratic procedure—with impunity.[58] In this sense, the institutions in Western Balkan countries can be seen as functioning like a "mother" toward government supporters, providing protection, resources, and impunity, while acting as a "stepmother" toward critics and opposition actors, subjecting them to surveillance, inspections, lawsuits and other forms of legal repression. This dualism underscores that the state frequently applies its institutional apparatus selectively, rewarding loyalists while punishing opponents.

VI. Conclusion

Some of the most illustrative cases of opposition suppression in contemporary hybrid regimes can be observed in the Western Balkans. Particularly instructive are the governing strategies employed by Aleksandar Vucic in Serbia and Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia during

[52] Gjuzelov and Hadjievska, "Institutional and Symbolic Aspects of Illiberal Politics:,"7.
[53] Bieber and Kmezic, *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans,* 79.
[54] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* 10.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Saso Ordanoski, "The Story of Macedonian Populism: 'All We Want Is Everything!'" in *The Western Balkans and the EU: 'The Hour of Europe'*, ed. Jacques Rupnik (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2011), 97.
[57] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* 28.
[58] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* 12.

their respective periods in power. Although such practices may resemble authoritarian repression, they typically do not reach the overtly coercive intensity characteristic of fully authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Instead, hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans tend to rely on subtler and more diffuse mechanisms of control. Suppression is often exercised through clientelistic networks, patronage distribution and corruption-based co-optation, whereby political loyalty is rewarded and dissent is economically and institutionally penalized. In this context, repression operates less through overt violence and more through the strategic manipulation of access to resources, employment, media visibility and legal protection. Media capture, politicization of public administration, selective law enforcement and the strategic deployment of anti-corruption rhetoric to neutralize opponents while maintaining a façade of procedural democracy are main mechanisms for suppression of political opponents in hybrid regimes in Western Balkan.

While academia has examined the structural role of media control and state capture in limiting political pluralism, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the dynamics of polarization and "us versus them" narratives as instruments of silencing political opponents. In hybrid regimes, such antagonistic framing serves multiple functions. First, it delegitimizes critics by portraying them as traitors, foreign agents, or enemies of the nation. Second, it erodes the possibility of neutral civic space by polarizing public discourse into mutually exclusive camps. Third, it mobilizes supporters through fear, resentment and identity-based appeals, thereby transforming political competition into a moralized struggle for national survival. Finally, it provides normative justification for institutional discrimination and selective repression, presenting coercive measures as necessary acts of defense rather than violations of democratic principles.

Crucially, these mechanisms tend to operate subtle and continuously rather than through episodic displays of overt coercion. Over time, they reshape the informational environment, weaken opposition capacity and normalize asymmetrical competition. As a result, by the time elections occur, the playing field has already been structurally skewed. Electoral manipulation on election day becomes less necessary because the conditions for meaningful contestation have been systematically undermined long in advance. In this sense, hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans demonstrate how sustained informal control and discursive polarization can substitute for overt authoritarian repression while preserving the external appearance of plural elections and democracy.

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