# Governance Capture in a Self-Governing Community: A Qualitative Analysis of Serbo-Croatian Wikipedias

**Zarine Kharazian**
University of Washington

**Kate Starbird**
University of Washington

**Benjamin Mako Hill**
University of Washington

## Abstract

What institutional features make some language projects on Wikipedia vulnerable to *governance capture* by a small group of ideologically motivated users? In this interview study, we examine the factors that facilitated the well-documented capture of the Croatian Wikipedia by a cohort of far-right editors, and discuss why adjacent language editions, such as the Serbian Wikipedia, did not fail in the same way. Our work highlights the role of institutional design in fostering resilience in self-governed online groups to knowledge integrity threats.

**Keywords:** governance, online communities, disinformation, propaganda, wikipedia

## Introduction

Between at least 2011 and 2020, the Croatian language version of Wikipedia was taken over by a small group of administrators who introduced far-right bias and outright disinformation. Dissenting editorial voices were reverted, banned, and blocked (Wikimedia Foundation, 2021). Although Serbian Wikipedia is roughly similar in size and age, shares many linguistic and cultural features, and faced similar threats from actors with similar goals and approaches, it seems to have avoided this fate. So did the Bosian or Serbo-Croatian Wikipedia language editions. What makes some self-governed online groups more vulnerable to systematic disinformation campaigns through *governance capture* than others?

Based on an analysis of interviews with members of the Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia communities and others in cross-functional platform-level roles, we propose that the convergence of three features—high perceived value as a target, limited early bureaucratic openness, and a preference for personalized, informal forms of organization—produced a window of opportunity for governance capture on Croatian Wikipedia. Our findings illustrate that the governing infrastructures through which online communities organize and moderate themselves can play a crucial role in systematic disinformation campaigns and other influence operations.

## Methods

We interviewed 15 participants, drawn from both the Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia projects, as well as the broader Wikimedia movement (Table 1). Qualitative analysis of our interview data followed Charmaz's approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

## Results

Analysis of our interview data yielded three propositions that, together, form an explanation for why and how Croatian Wikipedia descended in to capture, while other Serbo-Croatian Wikipedia language editions did not.

*Proposition 1: Perceived Value*. Through our interviews, it became apparent that the four projects in the Serbo-Croatian language environment were not equally attractive targets for a systematic disinformation campaign that promoted nationalist ideology. Unlike the Serbo-Croatian and Bosnian projects, the Croatian and Serbian projects had *both* a critical mass of editors and readership as well as a community in which national narratives resonated. Together, these two qualities increased the Croatian and Serbian Wikipedias' *perceived value*, making them well-suited targets for motivated actors looking to promote revisionist constructions of national pasts.

*Proposition 2: Bureaucratic Openness*. The Croatian and Serbian Wikipedias, however, diverged on other important characteristics. The first dimension upon which they diverged was the level of *bureaucratic openness*. A high degree of bureaucratic openness in Serbian Wikipedia early on, exemplified by a transparent and open process through which active contributors can ascend to elevated user positions, appears to have played a critical role in increasing community capacity as well as diversity, two resources that helped Serbian Wikipedia deal with disinformation threats it faced later on. In contrast, Croatian Wikipedia appeared not to prioritize openness early on in the project and instead developed an insular bureaucratic culture where leadership positions were granted based on personal relationships and ideological alignment with the core group of admins.

*Proposition 3: Formal Institutional Organization*. A final theme that participants cited as contributing to governance capture concerned the degree to which the project

developed more *formal forms of organization* that provided mechanisms for internal accountability from within the project, as well as external scrutiny from the broader Wikimedia movement. Two sources of formal organizing were cited as particularly important to a project's resilience to capture attempts: (1) formal rules, particularly rules constraining the power of administrators; and (2) the establishment of relationships with external community groups and partnerships related to the Wikimedia movement, such as via the founding of a local Wikimedia chapter. Serbian Wikipedia had developed more of these mechanisms for accountability and scrutiny than Croatian Wikipedia.

Figure 1 represents a conceptual model that outlines four possible configurations of a self-governed community along the second two things (i.e., the two dimensions on which Croatian and Serbian Wikipedia differed): (1) insular bureaucracy but formalized institutions, (2) open bureaucracy and formalized institutions, (3) insular bureaucracy and personalized institutions, and (4) open bureaucracy but personalized institutions. We propose that projects in each quadrant have differing levels of vulnerability to potential capture, with those in the bottom left quadrant (such as Croatian Wikipedia) having the highest risk, projects in the top right quadrant (such as Serbian Wikipedia) having the lowest risk, and projects in the remaining two quadrants having medium levels of risk. We argue that the most desirable configuration for projects, in terms of resilience to project capture, is thus to have a relatively open bureaucratic structure with formalized institutions.

## Discussion

Although drawn from the the experience of only four Wikipedia editions, we believe that our explanation has broad theoretical relevance and that the themes that emerged are likely important to nearly all early-stage wikis and to self-governed online communities in general. For example, on Reddit, where individual subreddits establish their own community guidelines enforced by local administrators, Masanari describes the rise of "mini-fiefdoms"—clusters of related subreddits promoting "toxic technocultures" such as GamerGate—controlled by a very few number of moderators (Massanari, 2017). Mastodon's model, which consists of individual servers each run by an administrator that sets its own policies, (Zulli et al., 2020), also allows for the emergence of similar forms of non-democratic rule at the local level.

Our work suggests that while platforms that enable elements of self-governance may afford greater autonomy to communities, they may also open the door for those very structures to be exploited by motivated actors. We argue that amid increasing interest in decentralized social media as legitimate alternatives to mainstream commercial platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Perez, 2022), more attention should be paid to the vulnerabilities inherent in these various models of online self-governance.

Many of the solutions offered to address disinformation campaigns and other influence operations involve introduction of automated fact-checking tools to detect problematic content (Lucassen and Schraagen, 2011; Sathe et al., 2020; Potthast et al., 2008). While these tools may empower good faith admins to fight "one-off" risks like vandalism more efficiently, they do not take the place of fostering a mature policy environment and providing redress as well as dispute resolution mechanisms for project-level systematic issues, which are more fundamental questions of institutional design.

## Acknowledgements

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| Global/Cross-Wiki | Local |
|---|---:|
| Steward | Editor, admin (hr) |
| WMF staff | Editor, admin (sr) |
| Small Wiki Monitoring Team | Editor, rollbacker (en) |
| Other cross-wiki efforts | |

Table 1: Roles of interview participants. Groups are aggregated in this way to preserve anonymity within relatively small projects.
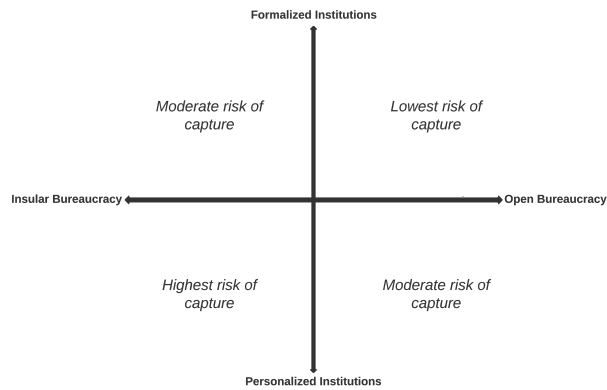


Figure 1: A conceptual model that visualizes four possible institutional configurations for Wikipedia projects along two dimensions: bureaucratic openness and institutional formalization. The bottom left quadrant, representing projects with insular bureaucracies and personalized institutions, opens up the "window of opportunity" for governance capture.