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Road to Europe: discourse analysis of European integration in the Serbian media

SUMMARY

By drawing upon existing research and data, this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive insight into how official politics in Serbia shape narratives surrounding European integration in the media. The main focus of this study is to identify and analyze the dominant discourses within the most influential media, thereby assessing the current status of the European idea. Media treatment of Serbia's EU integration process reflects the attitudes of political elite. While

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the ruling coalition consistently asserts that Serbia's strategic goal is EU membership, it pursues policies that pull the society away from fundamental European norms and values, and most influential media follow such contradictory path, resulting in inconsistent and ambivalent narratives. This prevalence of ambiguity has led to the emergence of a discernible anti-European sentiment, which has been particularly pronounced in the midst of recent global crises, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. In addition, existing narratives about European integration reflect polarization in Serbian society and in the media. The effect of media capture on citizens' views on accession is noteworthy as their views are pimarily shaped by the type of media they consume – either pro-government or critical media. It is concluded that the release of captured media would give rise to a new narratives concerning Serbia's European integration.

KEYWORDS: European integration, narrative, polarisation, media capture, media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advocating for the integration of Serbia into the European Union represents a long-term and officially declared strategic goal of Serbia since the beginning of the 2000s. Governments and political circumstances in the country has changed over the decades, but the path to Europe remained in all official documents as the key direction to be pursued. Despite official strategy, leading political figures in their media appearances often send mixed messages in regard to accession of Serbia. The media dimension of European integration has received an increased attention in research publications in the last decade. The media's role in integration process is relevant in several ways. First, the media represent a very important factor in informing and shaping citizens' opinions about important political issues. The media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning as people's perceptions of reality are selectively shaped by the media (Gofman 1974). People attach meaning to events by using media's interpretation of those events. Second, not only media plays a crucial role in constructing reality in our lives, but it also serves as a lens through which people see society, politics and events. The stories that are covered, the way headlines are framed, and the inclusion of specific details all influence how an audience perceives the information they are exposed to. By focusing on particular aspects of a story and reshaping the narrative, this process can affect public perceptions, which in turn affect how people react and feel about the subject matter (Shaw & McCombs 1972).

The relationship between the media and politics is complex. The mutual dependence of the media and politics is a constant in Serbian society during the

past three decades, largely influencing the topic of EU integration. The role of the media is crucial because journalists have the ability to make the process more accessible to the general public. In other words, the media largely contribute to ongoing discussions about important issues that are relevant for road to Europe, because they could influence public opinion and perceptions of the EU. On the other hand, recent global crises such as pandemic and war in Ukraine have indirect influence on Serbian public perception of Europe in general and particularly the European Union. Therefore, the goal of the paper is to determine the dominant narrative about European integration in Serbia in order to analyze the current state of the European idea in the most influential media.

We could say that reporting on the road to Europe mostly depends on official attitudes about the topic and the issue of media freedom. The overall political context in which the media in Serbia operates is far from being supportive to European integration. It is particularly indicative that media pluralism and journalism as profession are endangered in Serbia. The area of political independence is among the biggest risks faced by the media in Serbia, and the media scene is burdened by pressure from politicians, high concentration of ownership, lawsuits, public name-calling and self-censorship as a result of all these factors (Center for Media Pluralism and Freedom 2022). Consequentlly, media treatment of Serbia's EU integration process reflects the attitudes of political elite. While the rulling coalition consistently asserts that Serbia's strategic goal is EU membership, it pursues policies that pull the nation away from fundamental European norms and values, and most influential media follow such contradictory path. Also, the pro-government media is the most important source of misinformation, often directed against the European Union. To put it another way, the majority of the media conveys to the public a mixed messages regarding Serbia's potential membership in the EU because the rulling pollitician lack genuine interest in the subject. Besides, over the years the audience was offered a wide variety of terms, information and determinants that evoke different emotional attitudes, from elan, Euro-enthusiasm, through Eurorealism, to Euro-skepticism (Marković Tomić 2016, 5–6). Generally, euroscepticism in the Western Balkans is on the raise and deep-rooted opposition to the EU in Serbian society can be related to the fact that recognition of Kosovo is still considered to be the main precondition for EU membership (Juzova, Jana, Burazer Nikola & Aleksandar Ivković 2021). This confusion influence narratives in public and in the media to be inconsistent and ambivalent.

2. MEDIA ALLIES AND OPONENTS IN TIMES OF GLOBAL CRISIS

The last years have been turbulent globally. The COVID-19 pandemic caused social and economic disruption around the world. Many researchers have debated about the possible impact on the future of integration, as the consequences of the pandemic has been evident in numerous areas both in Europe and in

Serbia. In that regard, solidarity during coronavirus crisis emerged as an important narrative closely related to foreign policy issues and even to EU integration process. Generally, Serbian officials did not show equal gratitude to all parties that helped Serbia during the pandemic and majority of the media reflected these official standpoints.

The importance of the media in shaping and experiencing reality grows especially in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the main topics about which the media wrote about the European Union (Center for Contemporary Politics 2020). "Pro-government media openly criticized EU for the lack of support within the pandemic and its own management of the crisis, writing how Brussels left the Western Balkans "in the lurch", how the "Brussels bureaucratic imaginary was exposed" and how "The EU is fatally wounded! It would let the Serbs die!", as well as that "the corona destroyed the European dream" (Center for Contemporary Politics 2020, 6). Tabloids, which were the main media to spread anti-EU sentiment, frequently carried anti-EU messages. "The EU was also criticized for closing its borders to Serbian citizens with headlines such as "EU corona fascism! Scandalous policy by Brussels, they do not like the fact that we are the best!" (Centre for Contemporary Politics 2020, 6).

On the other hand, many domestic experts interpreted the enthusiastic acceptance of Chinese aid by Serbian politicians as a deviation from the proclaimed path to the European Union. Namely, China emerged as the "savior of Serbs in need" during the pandemic and overshadowed the roles traditionally played by Russia and the EU (Sterić & Blejoš 2021). China has become widely regarded as one of the most popular foreign policy actors in the eyes of Serbian citizens thanks to its close partnership ties with the country's political elite and its positive representation in the media, particularly in media outlets close to the government (BIRN 2021). Pro-Chinese narratives displaced Russia as the main non-Western partner of Serbia, while at the same time a negative narrative about the incompetent and hypocritical European Union was encouraged.

When discussing support during the pandemic, the main media narrative could be summarized as: "China is the savior while the EU has failed Serbia". This emotional narrative was evident especially in tabloids Informer, Alo and Srpski telegraf. "Pro-government tabloids heaped praise on China and published emotionally charged content when reporting on Chinese aid, which could have been seen in the headlines: "Serbia, do not cry, China is with you", "Serbia must not forget this: Chinese sent messages of solidarity with Serbia which are tightening up the throat" (Centre for Contemporary Politics 2020, 6). The narrative surrounding the "passive role of the EU" and China's timely arrival "to save beloved Serbia" likely influenced how Serbians perceived the foreign aid received. This is supported by data from the Belgrade Center for Security Policy's public opinion survey, which showed that 69% of Serbians surveyed believe that China gave Serbia the most financial and humanitarian

assistance in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, while 96% of respondents think the same of the EU (European Western Balkans 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis was followed by beginning of Russia-Ukraine war, and new geopolitical circumstances affected official attitudes towards European integration as well as media narratives. Most of the media reported positively about Russia while anti-Western narratives and statements were often present as misinformation and disinformation (Istinomer 2022). The utilization of disinformation has proven to be a crucial tool for both domestic and international actors in their pursuit of political goals and the manipulation of public sentiment. One notable example of this is Moscow's strategic campaign to preserve its influence in the Western Balkans while simultaneously undermining the expansion efforts of NATO and the European Union in the region. The effectiveness of pro-Russian disinformation, particularly in relation to the conflict in Ukraine, has been abundantly evident (Media Capture in the Western Balkans 2022). In addition, pro-government media frequently relied on Russian media as news sources. In a large number of cases, newspapers Večernje novosti, Informer, Blic, Srpski telegraf and Danas transmitted short agency news or published articles in which journalists did not take sides, but about 40 percent of the analyzed texts were qualified as enraged (Raskrinkavanje 2022). Among the enraged texts, by far the most were those that supported Russia and Putin – almost 800. These were often texts in which Ukraine or the West were attacked at the same time. In building the narrative about Putin and Russia as positive, Informer and Večernje Novosti were absolutely leading the way, while simoultaneously presenting the West as absolutely evil (Raskrinkavanje 2022).

Media reporting during Russia-Ukraine conflict only followed the matrix that has been established over the time. Generally, the pro-government media, and especially the tabloids, favor the type of reporting that criticizes the EU with a lot of emotion and glorifies its "rival" actors in Serbia, mostly using the statements of state officials. Such a relationship with Europe, i.e. with Russia, has existed for a long time in the Serbian media. This has been repeated countinuosly since Vladimir Putin came to power as these propaganda constructs folowed up the "age-old sentiment" about "fraternal Ortodox and Slavic people" (Cenzolovka 2022). Contrary to Russia, the European Union is viewed as an entity that often conditions Serbia and asks it to renounce key identity determinants (Tesla, Kosovo), as well as its traditional friends (China and Russia) for the sake of membership in that organization, inconsistently and unjustifiably criticizing it (for purchasing weapons from Russia and China) and leaves it stranded in crisis situations (Center for Contemporary Politics 2020). This type of narrative influenced the views of citizens about the European Union. Serbian citizens are economically oriented towards Europe, while 47.5 percent of respondents believes that Russia is the most important political partner of Serbia (only 30 percent says it is the EU) and 19 percent are convinced that it is China (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2023). It could be concluded that both offi-

cials and pro-government media have built anti-Western (indirectly anti-EU) atmosfere at the expense of the narrative that celebrates Russia and China.

3. THE EFFECTS OF OVERALL POLARISATION

Polarisation seem to be a global phenomenon of our time. Societal divisions are increasingly manifesting as opposing political stances, thereby influencing various consequences on government institutions and the media. More and more Americans do not trust in major institutiuons in United States including in news media industry, and people' political preferences strongly impact their trust in media sources, as the trust has become divided (Pew Research Center 2022). Current moment at global media scene can be described as "new era of polarisation" meaning that polarisation is "double" and encourages bith divisions within countries and division between countries at the international level (Reporters Without Borders 2022) "Within democratic societies, divisions are growing, as a result of the spread of public opinion media following the Fox News model and the spread of disinformation spirals reinforced by the way social networks function" (Reporters Without Borders 2022). In addition, it is often claimed that "media polarization arises as a result of news outlets targeting audiences with distinct political preferences" (Steppat, Castro Herrero, & Esser 2020, 323). The Western Balkans' already polarized societies are in a specific way influenced by these global political and media tendencies. These polarized societies are consequently producing "a deeply polarized media sector" burdened by the political and economic influence over the media and lack of transparency (Reporters Without Borders 2022).

It can often be heard that Serbian society is deeply divided and there is an unbridgeable gap between the "two Serbias" that are irreconcilable in terms of values. The divisions in Serbia frequently appear to be of such magnitude and profundity that the societal entity does not manifest as a unified whole, but rather as a fragmented and perpetually embattled collective. As a consequence, public sphere is also becoming increasingly fragmented. Do media contribute to polarisation? Generally, politicians are often the origin of polarization, but media are the necessary accelerator in the process (Mutz 2007). The news media have impact on political polarization, and many suggest that media exacerbate political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski 2021). Media often present political reality by highlighting aspects of political confrontation and could strenghten existing social divides.

A lot can be concluded about a society based on the existing media scene. The media landscape of Serbia reflects the broader climate of hostility created by the leading politicians in Serbia. It appears to be based in two opposite segments that mirror existing divides in the society. It is split between pro-government and independent media, with the pro-government ones being bigger,

richer, and much more influential, which is why there are significantly fewer of the latter and they have proportionally less coverage and influence on the public (The Media Pluralism Monitor 2022). Particularly, pro-government tabloids are an example of the instrumentalization of the media in favor of the authorities, while many public officials see critical and investigative journalism as an unpatriotic threat to be fought. In that sense, media scene is "heavily polarised between pro-government tabloids and critical media" and that polarity "mirrors a divided political landscape, where critically minded media are often perceived as political opponents" (Milutinović 2022, 286). Tabloidization, disinformation and biased reporting increasingly impair the quality of news content, which is "often placed in a way that favours the ruling coalition and demonizes political opponents and critical citizens" (Jovović Jelena & Dubravka Valić Nedeljković 2021, 4). Media polarization can be situated within the concept of media capture. In many countries, "government 'capture' of news media has become a tool for government influence and persuasion" (Schiffrin 2017, 1). It could be argued that Serbian government has captured some news outlets and punishes others that are not captured. Media capture has had an impact on Serbia's deterioration in global indicators of democracy and media freedom, but it also impedes EU membership prospects in the Western Balkans (Media Capture in the Western Balkans 2022).

There are significant differences in reporting about numerous topics between pro-government and critical media, and this polarity impacts the coverage of the integration of Serbia into the European Union. The media environment in the country is dominated by strong anti-EU narratives (Handbook for Reporting on EU accession: Czech lessons for Serba 2021). Pro-government media report on the conditioning from Brussels, mainly quoting state officials, whereas media that are critical of the authorities have a much clearer pro-European stance (Centre for Contemporary Politics 2021) For pro-government media, primarily the economic effects of joining the EU are thought to be positive. Critical media are more willing to report on initiatives coming from the European Union that have no connection with state officials, using the statements of opposition politicians, civil society organizations and European officials. In this narrative, the European Union notes the deterioration of the state of democratic institutions, which is why Serbia is not progressing on the road to the European Union. Also, there is a certain kind of special role that is given to the EU as someone who is obliged to take care of democracy in Serbia, electoral conditions and punish the authorities for actions that violate the rule of law. (Centre for Contemporary Politics 2021). Three thematic frames are emphasized in recent media coverage of the European union. The main topic situates European Union as negotiator at Kosovo (34,11%), while other important topics – Ukraine conflict and the status of eurointegration from the point of actors in Serbia, are slightly less represented (Pavlica & Perović 2022). It can be said that the most negative messages related to the subject of the European

Union in the majority of media refer to the Kosovo status issue. In Serbia, EU actors appear in almost half of the media announcements about the EU (Pavlica & Perović 2022). President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić is the leading source of information and creator of narratives about the European Union (Centre for Contemporary Politics 2021).

The segmentation of the audience is another consequence of overall polarisation. Media polarization and fragmentation are interrelated phenomena that largely impact media consumption nowadays. Media polarization denotes "the level of political partisanship and ideological extremity of news outlets, while fragmentation refers to the division of the news audience into ever-smaller groups" (Steppat, Castro Herrero & Esser 2020, 323). The audience in Serbia is divided when it comes to trust in the media such as newspapers, TV, radio, or online news sources to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. It is evidenced that "while 51% of respondents tend to trust the media, 48% don't" (Jovović & Valić Nedeljković 2021, 9). There are strong differences amoung younger and older people in terms of media consumption. Young people have less trust in the media and news, they avoid informative content more often and are exposed to it more incidentally, while the elderly are more likely to search for news from well-known/traditional media (Center for media and media research 2020).

Besides these differences that can be atributed to global tendencies in media consumption, there are divides as a consequence of the media polarization. Namely, more fragmented-polarized media environments are often associated with the emergence of non-professional news providers, the weakening of journalistic standards, and the segmentation of audiences along ideological leanings (Steppat, Castro Herrero & Esser 2020, 323). In most of the countries of the Western Balkans the media landscape is highly fragmented. Out of the entire Western Balkan region, Serbia has the highest number of media outlets – with over 2,500 media outlets registered in the country. More importantly, Serbia's media environment is heavily dominated by the ruling party, as the majority of domestic media owners have political ties to President Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), that has practical effects on political pluralism as well, as reporting of such media is highly biassed (Media capture in the Western Balkans 2021).

When it comes to adopting certain media narratives towards the European integation, it depends whether people in Serbia inform themselves through pro-government or critical media. This is another consequence of media capture. Hence, when comparing attitudes towards the EU between citizens who are informed by SBB or MTS cable operators, there are significant differences. Citizens who get information through SBB, an independent cable operator, with predominantly EU and Western-oriented reporting, are more supportive of Serbia's accession to the EU compared to those who are informed by MTS, a state-owned cable operator, which predominantly supports channels

loyal to rulling coalition and foster positive attitudes towards Russia and China (Westminster Foundation For Democracy 2023).

4. THE CHALLENGES OF REPORTING ABOUT EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

It can be said that accession of Serbia to the European union does not represent a dominant subject for the media or, at least, that the media does not pay enough attention to topics related to European integration. As the main problem, we consider newsrooms' orientation to look at the European integration from the perspective of daily reporting. Thus, mostly protocol events such as meetings between Serbian officials and officials of the EU or European countries are covered by the majority of the media. Factography takes precedence over analysis as the media rarely deal with the essence of integrations. In a significant majority of the analyzed media texts (82.5%), the media's methodology predominantly encompasses the transmission of factual information (Pavlica & Perović 2022, 11). Additionally, the statements made by authorities are frequently referenced without delving into the broader framework. This can be explained by the overall political climate in Serbia, as the essential principles upon which the European Union is founded are absent from both the sphere of politics and the realm of media.

Another problem for professional reporting could be anti-EU personal preferences of people in media management roles, particularly in pro-government media. In addition to reporting on daily occurences, these media outlets often generate or endorse narratives regarding the European Union's perceived lack of assistance during times of crisis, as exemplified by the pandemic. Critical media, on the other hand, cover these topics primarily through reports from European correspondents who provide reporting on a broader range of EU issues. However, the capacity of these media to reach the audiences are limited due political and financial reasons. Taking all of the above into account, it is not surprising that a neutral tone still prevails in the narrative about the EU, while the narrative about Serbia's strategic commitment to European integrations dominates all other types of positive narratives (Pavlica & Perović 2022, 12).

A particular issue is the lack of reporting that would bring European values closer to citizens. We argue that citizens seldom encounter the chance to acquire knowledge from the media regarding the operational mechanisms of European societies or the underlying principles and ethics upon which these societies are built. As a consequence, "citizens do not regard media content about the EU integration of Serbia as valuable, nor adequately lucid and understandable" (Marković Tomić 2016, 5). We believe there are two reasons for above-mentioned. First, generally audiences across Europe find stories about the

European Union too boring and technical. Both citizens and journalists view this media content as arid. Even news which significantly impacts on everyday life – a decision which can affect a community in a positive or negative way, and there are many – is delivered in different steps over an extended period, and it can take years before the measures enter into force (Lloyd & Marconi 2014). Second, the coverage of the EU is difficult for journalists because it requires genuine interest, skills and specialization as well as mastery of the subject, and only a handful of journalists are trained to create compelling stories about the EU. A significant number of journalists in Serbia are not interested or not well-versed with the Union's internal affairs, while journalists who aspire to professionally report about these issues face challenges in their newsrooms as a result of overall lack of understanding of integration process in the society.

How could journalists in Serbia report about the EU integration? Instead of being presented as a source of funds or sterile bureaucratic machinery, the EU should be presented as a tool of peace and prosperity for the entire continent, and joining the EU as a path to belonging to such an organization, with standards that should be adopted for the benefit of the citizens of Serbia (Juzova, Jana, Burazer Nikola & Aleksandar Ivković, 2021). The narrative that patriotism and a pro-Europeanattitude are mutially exclusive is strongly present in Serbia, but it could be changed over time into the message that it is possible to belong to a successfull country and to strong Europe. Research in the Czech Republic shows that dispelling myths about EU membership and showing how misinformation works can be important, but just repeating "fake news" and myths means they become even more memorable. Also, debunking myths without a compelling counter-narrative has little long-term effect (Juzova, Jana, Burazer Nikola & Aleksandar Ivković 2021). Serbia's experience also shows that is difficult to fight against such narratives, especially if they are promoted by state officials or influential media. In addition, Czech example shows that although facts are very important for proper communication about the EU accesssion, they are not enough to combat emotionally charged narratives. The solution could be creation of convincing narrative that could eventually prevail.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on desk research, it is evident that the political elite in Serbia does not demonstrate a substantial level of interest in the topic of European integration. Consequently, the support expressed for European integration in numerous spheres appears to be more of a formality rather than a genuine commitment. Having in mind that the government is the main captor of the media in Serbia, majority of newsrooms pays little attention to the subject of European integration, except when it is mentioned in the context of Kosovo. Moreover, discussions on this topic are exclusively led by representatives of the authorities that strongly affects the narratives. The government plays a crucial role in shaping

the narrative surrounding European integration, which is then echoed in the way the media presents the topic. Thus, the media approach is predominantly reactive, wherein the transmission of official information and the monitoring of daily political events take precedence over critical analysis. Accordingly, citizens are left uninformed about the fundamental values underpinning the European Union and lack a comprehensive understanding of the tangible advantages offered by the process of European integrations.

To effectivelly engage the Serbian public, journalists have to explain the functioning of the EU and its basic principles. In addition, in order to make an informed decision about Serbia's accession to the EU, citizens would have to be properly informed about the functioning and main issues in the EU as a whole, and not just observe them through the prism of EU-Serbia relations. Apart from their function as news disseminators, the media also assume the responsibility of initiating public disscusion by virtue of their investigative approach towards issues and their insistence on institutions to communicate in a more transparent and precise manner. This enables them to draw public attention towards European topics and provide quality information. Strengthening the role of the media as a means of transmitting information in both directions is crucial for increasing the accessibility of European topics to a larger audience. Hence, we stress the significance of the media in facilitating robust public debates, which are essential for the development of a European public sphere in the future. The achievement of an effective public space appears to be a challenging objective currently due to various political obstacles. Among these obstacles, the prominent one is undoubtedly the instrumentalization of the media by political elite in Serbia. In such circumstances, the media could at least to improve the relationships with institutions responsible for EU accession and strenghten the capacities of newsrooms to provide their audience with valuable and relevant information about integration process. The guidelines for EU support to media freedom and media integrity in enlargement countries (2014–2020) state that a given accession country should put in place the legal, institutional and political conditions which create a conducive environment for freedom of expression. To counteract the issues of division and polarization, it is essential to empower journalists' associations and support media outlets in enhancing their internal governance. It is crucial that editorial and professional ethics remain uncompromised by any form of clientelism or politicization. When that happens and when the captured media are freed, we can expect that new narratives will appear in the media regarding Serbia's European integration.

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EVROPSKI PUT: ANALIZA DISKURSA EVROPSKIH INTEGRACIJA U MEDIJIMA U SRBIJI

SAŽETAK

Oslanjajući se na postojeća istraživanja i podatke, ovaj rad ima za cilj da pruži sveobuhvatniji uvid u to kako zvanična politika u Srbiji oblikuje narative o evropskim integracijama u medijima. Glavni fokus ove studije je da se identifikuju i analiziraju dominantni diskursi unutar najuticajnijih medija, kako bi se procenio trenutan status evropske ideje. Medijski tretman procesa evropskih integracija Srbije odražava stavove političke elite. Dok vladajuća koalicija dosledno tvrdi da je strateški cilj Srbije članstvo u EU, ona vodi politiku koja odvlači društvo od osnovnih evropskih normi i vrednosti, a većina uticajnih medija sledi takav kontradiktorni put, što rezultira nedoslednim i ambivalentnim narativima. Ova rasprostranjenost dvosmislenosti narativa dovela je i do pojave uočljivog antievropskog raspoloženja, koje je posebno bilo izraženo u vreme nedavnih globalnih kriza, pre svega pandemije COVID-19 i sukoba u Ukrajini. Pored toga, postojeći narativi o evropskim integracijama odražavaju polarizaciju srpskog društva i medija. Uticaj zarobljavanja medija na stavove građana o pristupanju Evropskoj uniji jeste očigledan, jer se građani opredeljuju u odnosu na to da li se informišu posredstvom provladinih ili kritičkih medija. Zaključuje se da će oslobađanje zarobljenih medija dovesti do novih narativa o evropskim integracijama Srbije.

KLJUČNE REČI: Evropske integracije, narativ, polarizacija, zarobljeni mediji, mediji.