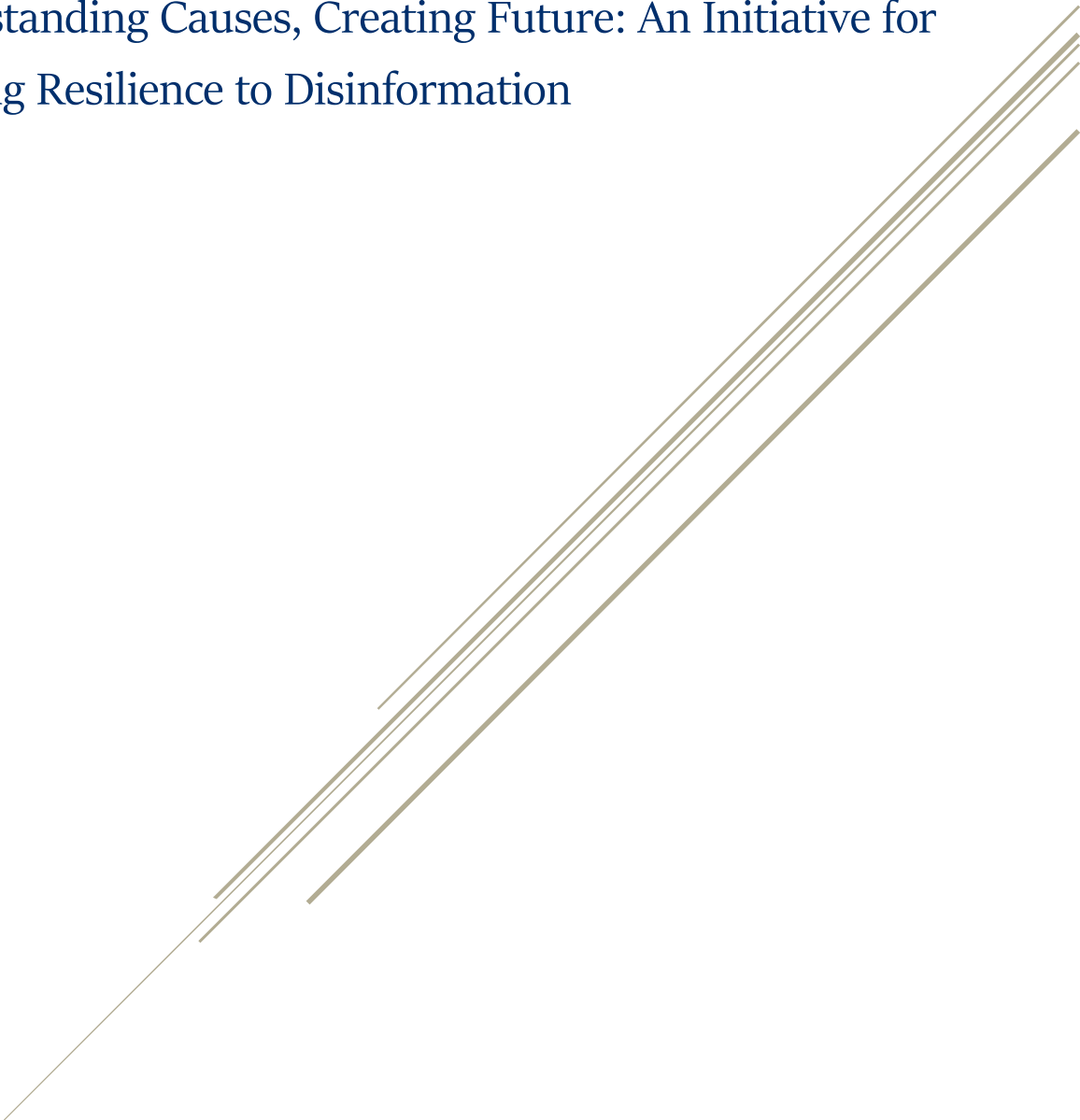


CONTENT ANALYSIS

Understanding Causes, Creating Future: An Initiative for Building Resilience to Disinformation



June, 2021

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1. Background

Two countries that citizens of Serbia perceive as Serbia's [greatest friends](#) are Russia and China. On the other hand, support for the European integration process is relatively small, while the influence of the United States on Serbia over the years is generally perceived as negative, although a research shows that [relations between US and Serbia are improving](#). Also, citizens often mistakenly believe that the Russia and China are among [the biggest donors in Serbia](#) of the past 20 years.

This attitude of the public has been built for decades and assumption is that there are two key sources of promotion of such narrative. **Firstly, the biggest (mainstream) media are generally [more favorable towards Russia and China](#) than towards the EU or the United States.** While certain mainstream media openly promote these two countries and criticize the EU and the USA, others do the same but indirectly - through critical analysis of Western countries and their policies and key social trends, but avoiding these issues when it comes to Russia and China (for instance the character their regime, social, economic and health issues, the state of civil and minority rights, etc.). **The second key source of promotion of the above-mentioned narrative are the public appearances of the public/state officials.** While the EU and the US are mostly seen as "ATMs" and business partners, Russia and China are being dominantly presented as traditional friends and "brothers" with particular positive impact on Serbia.

While most of our findings and narratives are not so new, their context is. Covid-19 pandemic have had a huge impact not just on health or everyday life of citizens, but it strongly affected public opinion when it comes to international actors' influence on Serbia as well as state policies (including foreign policy) and rhetoric. Such [rhetoric](#) was prominent even at the beginning of the pandemic, when state officials especially praised and emphasized China's (and to a lesser extent Russia's) assistance, calling the Chinese president a "brother" and referred to these relations as a "steel friendship." At the same time, the EU was initially the subject of public criticism for "insufficient solidarity", and the later aid was received with completely [neutral and unemotional statements](#). **Aim of the research is to do an in-depth analysis of media coverage and state officials' narratives regarding international actors (China, USA, Russia, EU and NATO) in a new context, one year after the start of the pandemic.**

2. Methodological approach

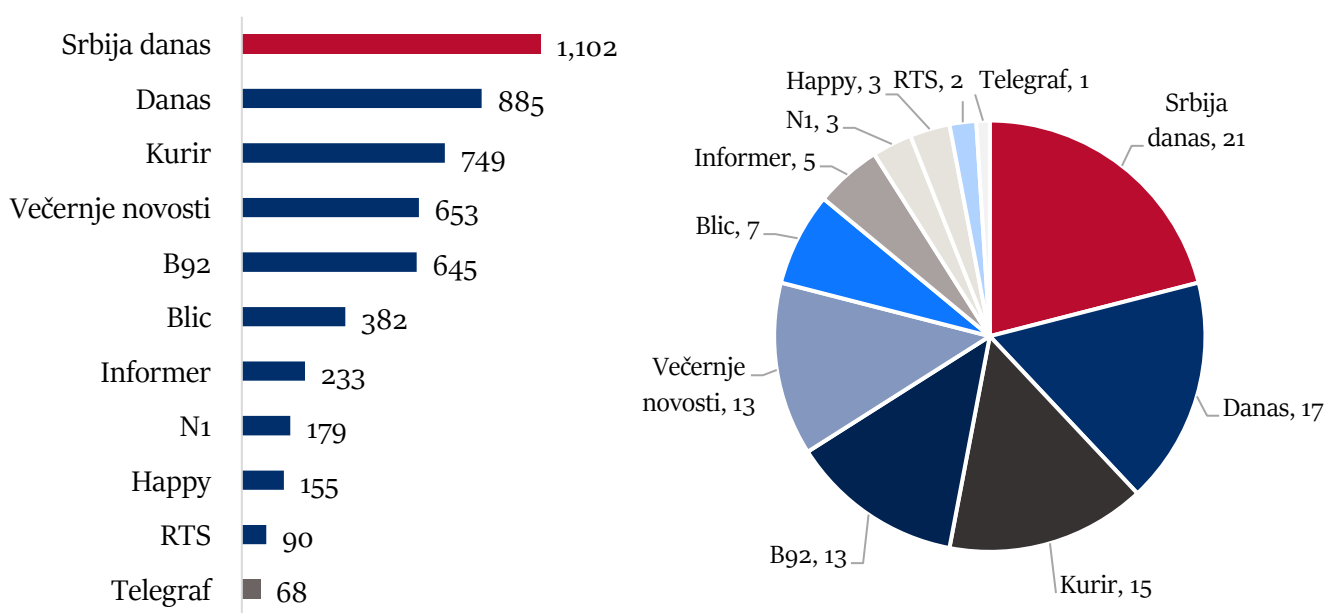
Content analysis was done between March 20 until May 20, 2021 and it includes 11 mainstream online media in Serbia (list below) Tool used for media monitoring and analysis is Pulsar. Based on keywords and additional filters, total of 9.155 texts had been analyzed, of which 5.145 were tagged, i.e. included above mentioned narratives and therefore were considered as relevant. There are six groups of tags that were applied to texts, according to: sentiment towards international actors, reporting style, bias towards international actors, focus of articles (PMESII), attitudes of state officials of Serbia and additional narratives (relations with Kosovo, vaccines).

Complete information on methodological approach can be found in **Annex I**.

3. General Findings

Distribution of articles per media can be found in graph 1. Media outlet with largest share of **relevant** articles from the sample is **Srbija danas** – it has 1.102 articles, which is 21% out of total number. Second most present media outlet is **Danas** with 885 articles and share of 17%. **Kurir** is third with 749 articles (15%). **Večernje novosti** and **B92** have similar number of relevant articles and share – 653 and 645 respectively and share of 13% each. **Blic** has 382 articles with 7% share, **Informer** 233 with 5% share, **N1** 179 (3%) **Happy** 155 (3%), **RTS** 90 (2%) and **Telegraf** 68 (1%).

Graph 3.1. – Number of articles per media and share in percentage



It should be noted that some media outlets primarily focused on TV (Happy, N1) do not produce online content to same extent as some other media focused on online or combination of online and print form.

In addition, more extensive content creation does not necessarily mean greater reach. The **three media with the greatest visibility¹ (estimated by Pulsar) are B92, Danas and Kurir, respectively.**

Based on their reporting style all articles had been tagged as either descriptive or analytical– Unlike analytical articles, descriptive one present information without any analysis or opinions given by interviewees. **Two thirds of all relevant articles are descriptive, while one third is analytical.**

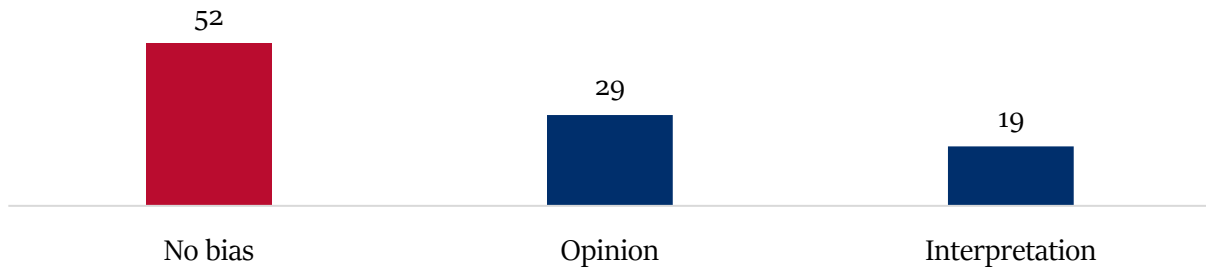
Graph 3.2. – Style of reporting (%)



Likewise, all articles were tagged and sorted according to bias towards international actors. Researchers distinguished two forms of bias - opinion (positive or negative) of an interviewee or a public figure (tag “opinion”) or positive or negative interpretation of information by the media outlet itself (tag “interpretation”). **About half of all articles have no bias in reporting. Other half (48%) has some kind of bias – whether it is opinion (29%) or interpretation (19%).**

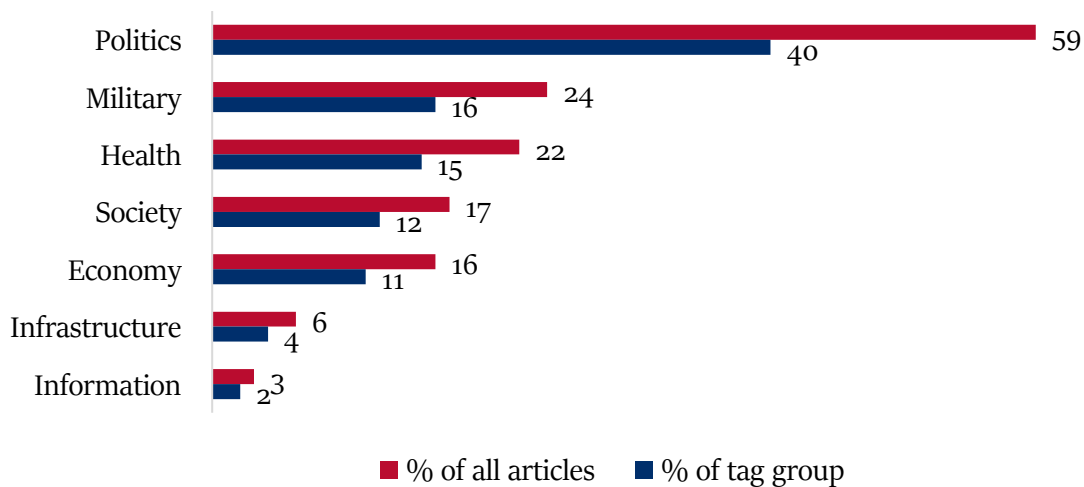
¹ More details on how the reach has been calculated on: <https://intercom.help/pulsar/en/articles/2172737-trac-visibility> .

Graph 3.3. – Bias towards international actors (%)



All articles were classified according to whether the focus on Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure issues (PMESII categorization). The PMESII framework has been used by other researchers and so was applied to this study as well, however, given the importance that healthcare has played in social commentary since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, a healthcare focus was also added. Topic that was unsurprisingly the most relevant is **politics** – 59% of all relevant articles contain it as a topic, which is relatively 40% out of total number of that tag group – focus of articles tags, as an article could contain more than one tag from this tag group. Secondly, **military** was second most present topic after politics – 24% of all articles contain this tag, which is 16% of all tags of this tag group. It is not surprising that the third most present topics is **health**, considering information and debates regarding pandemic and vaccines. This tag was applied on 22% of all articles (15% of the tag group). **Society** tag, i.e. culture, education, trivia, black chronicles and other is applied on 17% of all articles (12% of the tag group). **Economy** is topic that is present in 16% of articles (11% of the tag group), **infrastructure** in 6% (4%) and **information** – topics regarding media – in 3% (2%).

Graph 3.4. – Focus of articles (%)



As it is explained in methodology, all focus of articles tags were applied on basis of graduation of topics. While graph 3.4 contains sum of all tags per topic (e.g. p-3 + p-2 + p-1 = politics), graph 3.5 shows dynamics of articles that only contain **politics as a primary topic (p-3)**. Events that triggered peaks of p-3 tag are European Parliament’s report on progression of Serbia in EU accession process (March 25), “Slovenian” non-paper on border correction in the Western Balkans (April 15), Dialogue of Belgrade and Pristina on Kosovo issue and non-paper regarding Kosovo that was revealed by daily newspaper Koha Ditore (April 29) and President of Czechia’s apology for NATO bombing of FRY in 1999 and Brdo-Brioni summit of Balkan states and the EU (May 18).

Graph 3.5 - Number of articles that contain politics as the primary topic (p-3 tag)



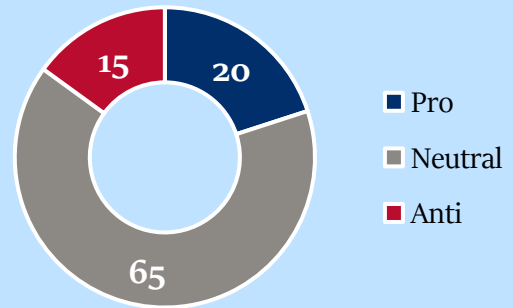
3.1. Sentiments towards international actors

Sentiments are set as a three-tag category. An article could have more than one sentiment, but for different international actors. In this section, frequencies and crosstabs will be presented regarding sentiments towards the European Union (EU), Russia, United States of America (USA), China and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).



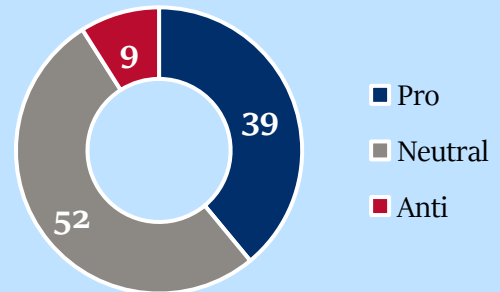
European Union

International actor that was mentioned most times is the European Union – the EU is mentioned in 2.847 articles, i.e. in 55% of all analyzed articles. **Sentiment towards EU in general is balanced:** 20% are positive or pro-EU, while 15% has negative or “anti” sentiment – other articles are neutral, which is 65%. By topic: **most positive about infrastructure and society, most negative about military and health.**



Russian Federation

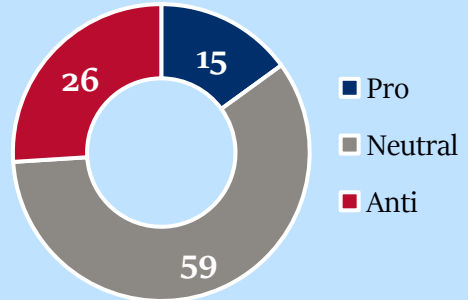
Second most present actor in relevant articles is Russia with 1.643 mentions, which is one third (32%) of all articles. When it comes to Russia, **sentiment is predominantly positive** – 39% of all Russia-related articles are pro-Russian, 9% anti-Russian and other half (52%) is neutral. By topic: **most positive in context of military and health, most negative about information and politics.**





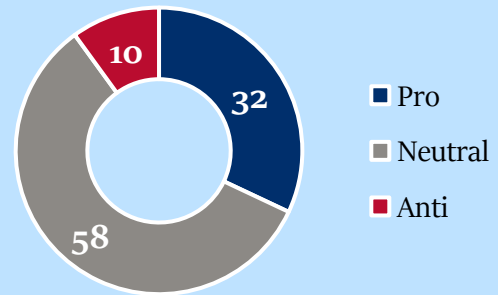
United States of America

About a quarter (26%) of all articles contains United States of America as an actor, i.e. 1.367. Although disproportion between positive and negative sentiment is not dramatic, it is **leaning towards negative** – while 15% are pro-USA, 26% are anti-USA and 59% are neutral. By topic: **most positive in context of infrastructure and society, most negative about military and politics.**



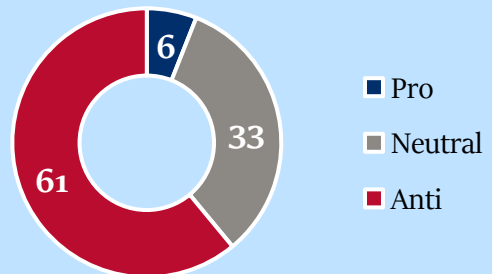
People's Republic of China

Total number of articles with China as an actor is 869. Media coverage of China is **predominantly positive** in comparison with negative sentiments. Almost one-third of all relevant articles are pro-China with only 10% that show China in negative light. Other articles (58%) are neutral. By topic: **most positive about infrastructure and health, most negative about information and society.**



North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NATO as an actor is relevant for 857 articles. Out of that, only 6% has pro-NATO sentiment and as many as 61% articles contain **negative sentiments** towards NATO. Only one-third of articles have neutral sentiment. By topic: **most positive in context of politics and health, most negative about society and military.**



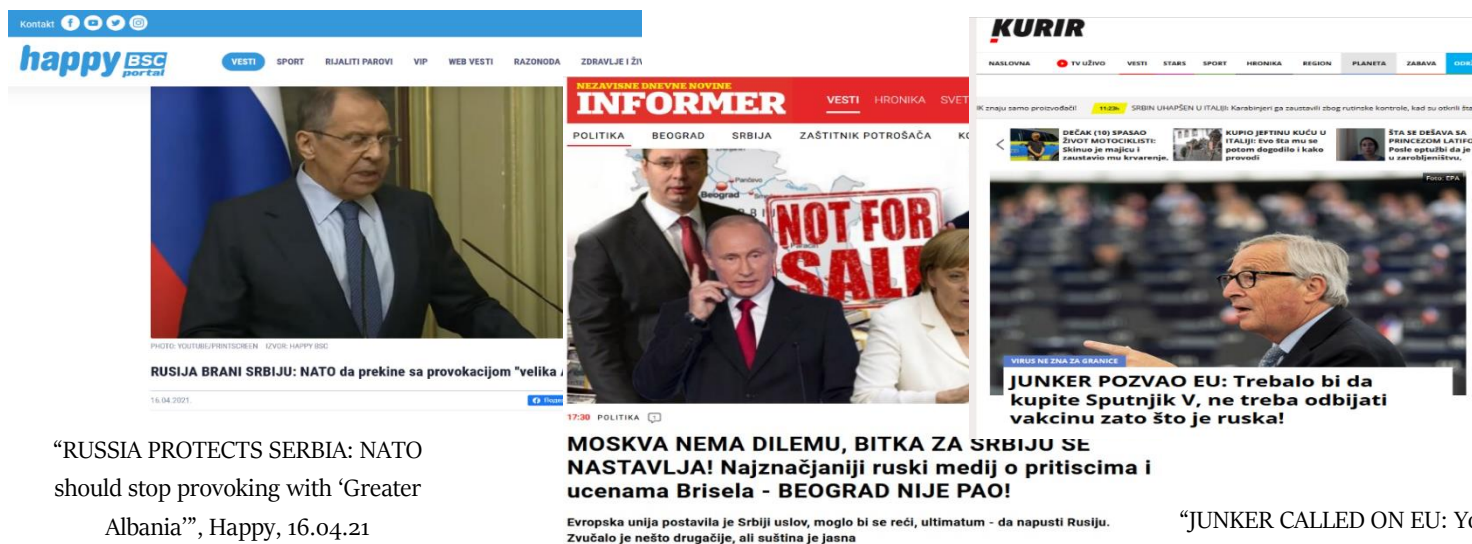
As it could be seen in preview of sentiments per actor, most positive reporting is related to Russia and China – about one-third of all articles are presenting these two countries in a good light. While presentation of EU in media is balanced and primarily neutral, there are more negative than positive sentiments when it comes to USA. Strikingly, NATO is the only actor that was presented in a negative way by majority of all relevant articles.

The greatest number of articles related to **EU** is no surprise, as Serbia is in process of EU integration and of all relevant actors, EU is geographically the closest. Although Serbia is formally committed to EU integration for more than twenty years, sentiments towards EU are balanced and mostly neutral. **Russia** has always been a “traditional ally” in perception of citizens of Serbia, but some media as well. That explains not just a significant presence of Russia in Serbian media, but also predominantly positive sentiment (see illustration 1).

More negative than positive sentiments in reporting about **USA** could be explained by sensitive issues like independence of Kosovo, where interests of Serbia and USA do not overlap and by general distrust towards USA and its global role present in tabloids and pro-Russian media. The research showed that this kind of media outlets had negative sentiments regarding USA on various topics, including geopolitics, intervention in Syria, Libya and Afghanistan, relations with Russia, China, Belarus (“aggressive attitude”), even trivia etc. Relatively small number of articles related to **China** shows that geographical distance and still-developing global role have effect on interest of media to report on China, especially about domestic issues of China. However, coverage of China is largely positive (see illustration 2). Infrastructural projects, role in pandemic, vaccines and political relations between China and Serbia are base on which media positively reported on China. Finally, large disproportion between positive and negative sentiments regarding **NATO** indicates that “scars” from NATO bombing of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 are still present in society and exploited by media. **It should be stressed that monitored period coincided with anniversary of NATO bombing of FRY, which significantly influenced on rise of negative sentiments in all media.**

Style of reporting shows that descriptive articles are mostly positive. They are also more positively oriented towards China (40% pro), Russia (43% pro) and EU (22% pro) than USA (13%) and NATO (6%). On the other hand, analytical articles (with interviewees and analysts) are more balanced then descriptive when it comes to these three actors – China, Russia and EU, but data for actors that are leaning towards negative sentiment in general findings (USA and NATO) indicate that analytical articles do not vary significantly from descriptive ones in terms of sentiment.

Illustration 1 – Examples of pro-Russian reporting



“RUSSIA PROTECTS SERBIA: NATO should stop provoking with ‘Greater Albania’”, Happy, 16.04.21

“MOSCOW HAS NO DILEMMA, BATTLE FOR SERBIA CONTINUES: Most significant Russian media outlet on pressures and blackmails of Brussels – BELGRADE HAS NOT FELL!”, Informer, 04.05.21

“JUNKER CALLED ON EU: You should buy Sputnik V, it should not be refused just because its Russian!”, Kurir, 08.04.21

Illustration 2 – Examples of pro-Chinese reporting



“SERBIA WILL RECEIVE A VACCINE DONATION FROM CHINA: Steel friendship once again in action, our safety will be secured”, Srbija danas, 03/26/21

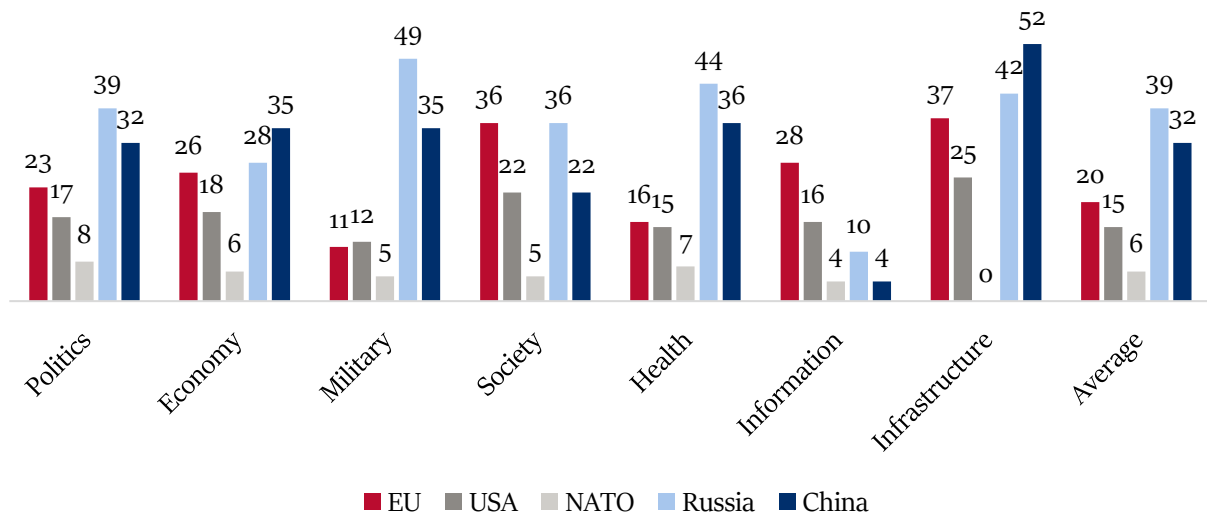
“FANTASTIC COOPERATION! Vučić – Export of Serbia to China has increased for as much as 15 times”, Večernje novosti, 06/03/21

“Almost nobody missed the scene of Vučić kissing Chinese flag, but he won”, B92, 04/14/21

Above average analytical articles that cover USA and NATO proves an assumption of first hypothesis – **media are generally prone to provide whole (critical) analysis of Western actors’ foreign policy and domestic issues, while neglecting similar and even more dramatical issues** like unfair elections, repression towards media or imprisonment of opposition leaders and activists **that are characteristic for authoritarian states**. When it comes to type of bias (opinion, interpretation), it is significant when it comes to different media outlets. **High share of articles with interpretation indicate that a media outlet systematically promotes certain narratives when it comes to international actors**. For instance, 50% of all relevant articles on website of daily Informer contain interpretation of information by media outlet itself in a way that it tendentiously promotes or denounces an international actor or actors (31% more than average). Crosstabs show that these narratives are pro-Russian and pro-Chinese in case of Informer. In Annex II can be found more information on reporting per individual media outlets.

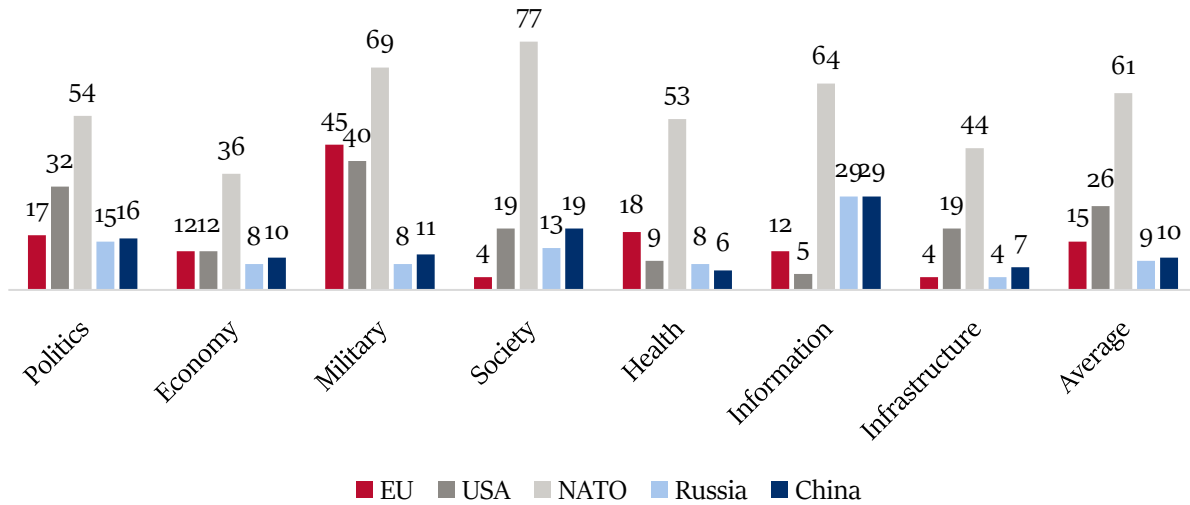
In following graphs are presented sentiments towards international actors per topic. **Positive sentiment towards Russia and China is present especially in context of military, health and politics**. While military and politics are typical areas in which tabloids and pro-Russian media glorify these two countries, it should be noted that their **contribution to fight against covid-19 is seemed to increase positive sentiment in the area of health**. In case of economy and infrastructure, Russia and China are again shown in a positive way more than other actors (especially China). At the same time, there are above average positive sentiments on EU within these topics. **Information (media and disinformation) is the only area in which EU and USA are positively presented more than other actors**. Topics regarding society are most balanced – EU and Russia are presented positively in 36% each, while there are 22% articles related to society topic that are positive towards both China and USA.

Graph 3.7. – Positive sentiment per topic (%)



Negative sentiment follows similar logic. **NATO is generally negatively presented in all areas** – the most in topics related to society and military and least within economy and infrastructure, but it should be noted that there is small number of relevant articles that present NATO within context of these two areas. EU and USA are negatively presented primarily when it comes to military issues. USA is above average presented in a negative way in politics as well.

Graph 3.8. – Negative sentiment per topic (%)



On the other hand, **Russia and China are negatively presented primarily in context of information and society**. In topics like economy and politics, there is more balance for negative sentiment (excluding NATO).

Information and societal issues in which Russia and China are presented in a less positive light than in other areas indicate that media are careful when they report about issues related to domestic state of these countries. In other words, media are not so eager to promote authoritarian practice and values but are ready to put that aside and report positively in other cases – about Russia and China as global actors, their role in international politics and geopolitics, policy towards Serbia, investments and projects in Serbia as well as their role in pandemic (including vaccines).

3.2. Attitudes of state officials of Serbia towards international actors

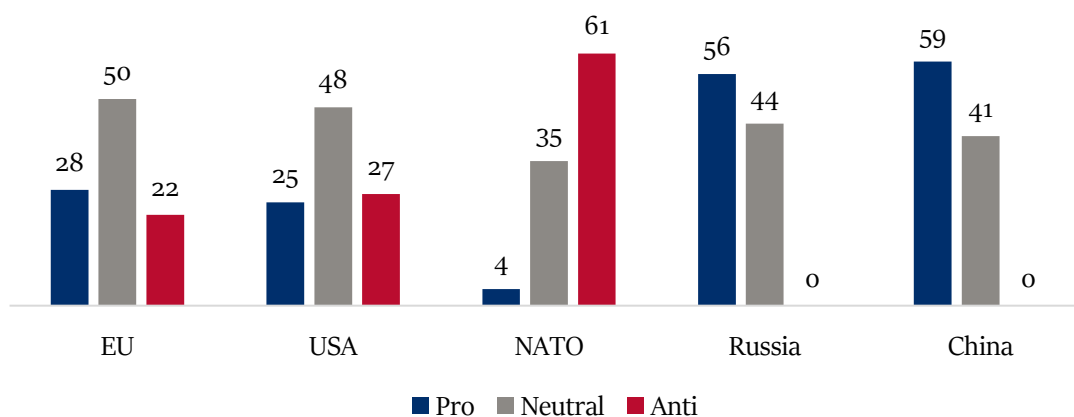
The analysis included additional, non-mandatory tag “official” which indicates if an attitude presented in media come from a state official of Serbia. Reason for this tag is one of our starting assumption – the one which says that state officials promote ambiguous narratives and favor Russia and China disproportionately to formal strategic commitment of Serbia of EU integration and partnership with Western countries.

Graph 3.9. – Number of articles with state officials’ attitudes



There are 994 articles with tag “official”, which is 19% of all articles. It included various state officials, representatives of ruling parties and ambassadors, but the most dominant person was president Aleksandar Vučić. Aside, persons that were present more than others were prime minister Ana Brnabić, foreign minister Nikola Selaković and minister of interior Aleksandar Vulin. In graph 9 are presented sentiments towards international actors that are promoted by state officials in media. **Roughly, attitudes of state officials follow pattern of general findings.** Again, EU has relatively the largest share of neutral sentiments, while positive and negative sentiments are generally balanced, yet more leaning to positive. **Attitude towards USA is more balanced here** – most articles are in neutral tone and percentage of articles with positive and negative sentiments are similar – 26% and 27%, respectively. Pattern for NATO is similar to general findings – most articles contain negative attitude, roughly one-third are neutral, while there are only 4% of cases in which state officials of Serbia said something good for NATO.

Graph 3.10. – State officials’ sentiment towards international actors



On the other hand, **attitude towards Russia and China is even more positive than in general reporting.** Of all mentions of Russia and/or China in media by state officials of Serbia, these two countries were promoted and presented in a good light in majority of cases – 56% and 59%, respectively.

Table 3.1. – Difference of sentiments of state officials in comparison to general findings (%)

	Pro	Neutral	Anti
EU	+8	-15	+7
USA	+10	-11	+1
NATO	-2	+2	0
Russia	+17	-8	-9
China	+27	-17	-10

Especially interesting is positive sentiment towards China, which is higher by 27% in comparison to general findings and makes China the most favorable country in eyes of state officials of Serbia. Besides, it should be noted that there is no single occasion in which state officials mentioned Russia and/or China in a negative context.

As it is shown, state officials have ambiguous approach to foreign policy. Their sentiment towards EU and USA, with whom Serbia seeks strategic partnership, is balanced, yet it should be underlined that anti-EU and anti-USA narratives are present. These are especially related to Kosovo issue for both actors, pandemic response, vaccine distribution and political issues in Serbia for EU and bombing of FRY in 1999 for USA. Contrastingly, narratives towards Russia and (increasingly) China are predominantly positive, without a single case of negative sentiment. Primary topics that build structure of positive sentiments towards Russia and China are pandemic response, vaccines and Kosovo for both countries and infrastructural projects for China.

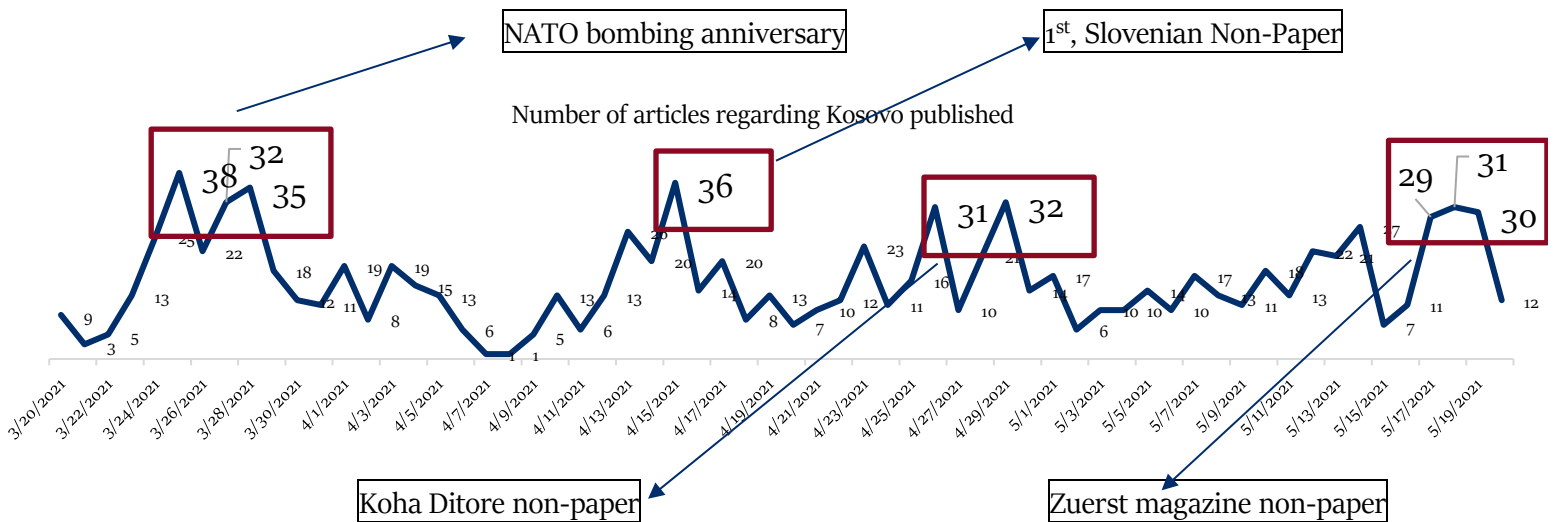
4. Description and analysis of additional narratives (vaccine, Kosovo)

Additional narratives that have been analyzed for the purpose of this report included two tags – Kosovo and vaccine. These “hot” topics now have been monitored in context of international actors and compared with general findings.

4.1. Kosovo narrative

In total, 995 articles have been connected with Kosovo, or 19% of all articles analyzed. When it comes to Kosovo presentation in media scene of Serbia it is important to note that during analyzed period three different non-papers have been published all of them referencing the subject of Kosovo to some extent. Also, anniversary of NATO bombing of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia coincided with a period of media content analysis that have been completed. In the chart below, **it can be seen that the mentioned events coincide with the higher frequency of publishing articles about Kosovo.**

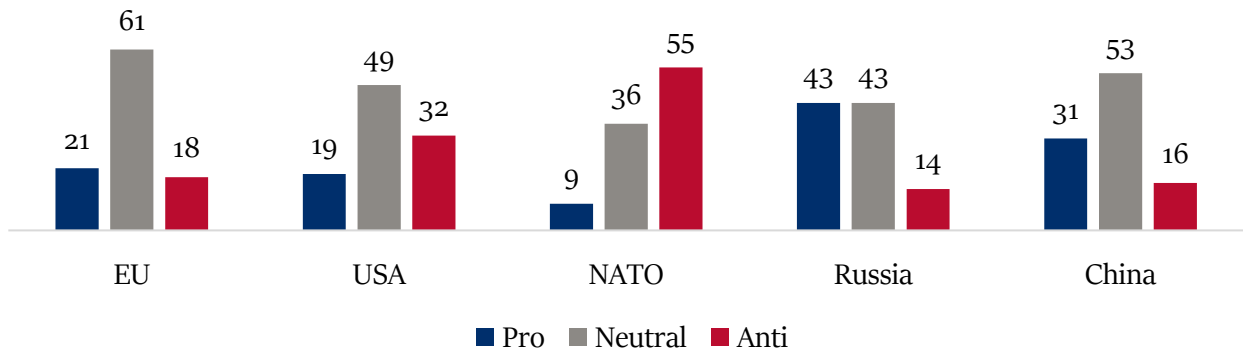
Graph 4.1. – Timeline of published articles featuring Kosovo narrative



When we talk about the basic characteristics of the published articles concerning Kosovo, the following regularities have been noticed. **The features published have been tagged as analytical slightly above average.** We have 37% of articles about Kosovo being analytical while in average 34% of articles have been tagged so. Having in mind the complexity of the situation, ie Serbia's attitude towards the issue of Kosovo, such finding is not surprising. The very story of Kosovo in the public sphere of Serbia is frequently over analyzed meaning it presents not only an information about Kosovo situation, but also comments, analysis, points of view and/or critic of different interlocutors.

Sentiment towards international actors in articles dealing with the topic of Kosovo largely reflects Serbia's international policy in the case of this topic. The highest number of articles which coincides with the narrative also have EU as one of its topics (once again this can be connected with non-papers published in this period which all at the same time included the theme of EU). Also, the issue of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was one of the main topics of the meetings that the officials of Serbia (president Vučić and prime minister Brnabić) had with the representatives of the European Union during April and May. However, it can be noticed that the articles concerning Kosovo and the EU are mostly neutral towards the Union, 61%, while ratio between positive and negative is balanced (18% - negative towards EU, and 21%- positive towards EU). **The perception of Russia as the greatest supporter of Serbia is particularly strong in the media content related to Kosovo.** Russia is only international actor where ratio of positive reporting towards this actor has been the same as neutral one (it has been noticed that articles with Kosovo narrative including Russia have had 43% both positive and neutral sentiment). In case of NATO and USA negative sentiment is prevalent, with note that articles regarding USA and Kosovo in majority of cases have been neutral, but ratio between positive and negative prevails to negative side.


Graph 4.2. - Sentiment towards international actors of articles featuring Kosovo narrative, in %




Articles that are related to Kosovo have been labeled as opinions above the average in comparison to the general findings - 38% of articles have been tagged as opinions which is 9 percentage points more than the average (general findings). When it comes to other tags used, the data do not vary significantly in comparison to general findings.

In general, Russia was seen as the main protector of Serbia’s national interests on Kosovo, EU as a not-so-neutral mediator, USA and NATO as strongmen that give full support to Kosovo independence and China – as a secondary support (after Russia) for Serbian interests.

GENERAL KOSOVO NARRATIVES




Main protector of Serbia’s national interest on Kosovo issue



Strongman that openly favors Kosovar side



Mediator that slightly favors Kosovar side



Friend and a secondary support of Serbia

4.2. Vaccine narrative

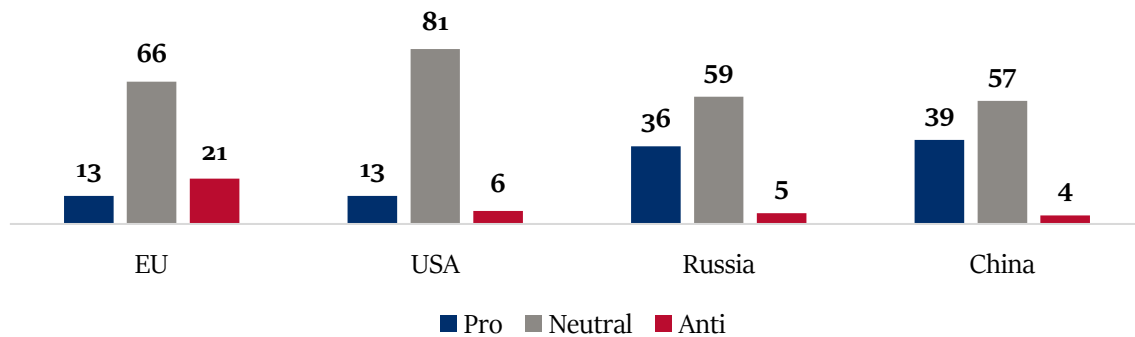
An additional narrative that is to be checked in this analysis are **vaccines** – since pandemic has had a significant impact on everyday life as well as on international politics. A new term was coined – “vaccine diplomacy” that measured success of great powers to develop, produce and provide vaccines to the

world. It is not just health, but also a geopolitical issue. Performance of great powers in pandemic was carefully examined in global media and became a tool for political promotion and denunciation. Same applies to Serbian media – of all relevant articles for the analysis, 17% are relevant for vaccines.

Articles with vaccines as topic are **mostly descriptive** (71%) – which is a slightly more in comparison with general findings (66% descriptive) and **mostly unbiased** (55%). In addition, there are 30% that are biased by opinion of a public figure and 15% are biased by interpretation of media. This do not vary significantly in comparison to general findings.

When it comes to sentiments towards international actors, findings can be found on graph 4.3. NATO is excluded as it is not a relevant actor for this narrative. While there is no dramatic difference in comparison to general findings, some trends should be noted. Firstly, **for all actors – neutral sentiment is more present**. Secondly, **sentiment towards EU is leaning towards negative** instead of positive. Stalls and delays with vaccine distribution, as well as attitudes of state officials of Serbia regarding this issue contributed to rise in negative sentiments. Thirdly, in context of vaccines, **USA has seen a drop when it comes to negative sentiments** by 20% in comparison with general findings. As many as 81% of articles are neutral, **with slight leaning towards positive sentiment**. Development of efficient vaccine influenced media perception of USA role in pandemic.

Graph 4.3 – Sentiment towards international actors, by vaccine tag (%)



Fourthly, **findings for Russia show slight drop in “pro” and “anti” sentiments in favor of neutral sentiment**. Finally, **China was shown in even better light when it comes to vaccines** – there is a rise of 7% of positive sentiments in comparison to general findings and drop in negative sentiments. **China’s role in pandemic and distribution of aid and vaccines to Serbia had a strong impact of general display of China in Serbian media, especially when it comes to health issues.**


Although there have been articles regarding safety and efficacy of Chinese and Russian vaccine, in some media (with predominantly positive sentiments towards China and Russia) these vaccines were actively promoted as safest and most efficient.

Table 4.1. – Difference of sentiments in comparison to general findings


	Pro	Neutral	Anti
EU	-7	+1	+6
USA	-2	+22	-20
Russia	-3	+7	-4
China	+7	-1	-6

In general, China was seen as a global leader in fight against pandemic, Russia have been providing trusted and efficient vaccine (disputed by EMA and EU because of political reasons, EU had poor performance in vaccine distribution and USA acted as an isolationist actor.


GENERAL VACCINE NARRATIVES




Global leader in fight against covid-19 pandemic; main partner of Serbia; safest vaccine



Poor performance in covid-19 pandemic; neutral partner of



Trusted and efficient vaccine; important partner of Serbia; unfairly disputed vaccine in the EU because of (geo)political reasons



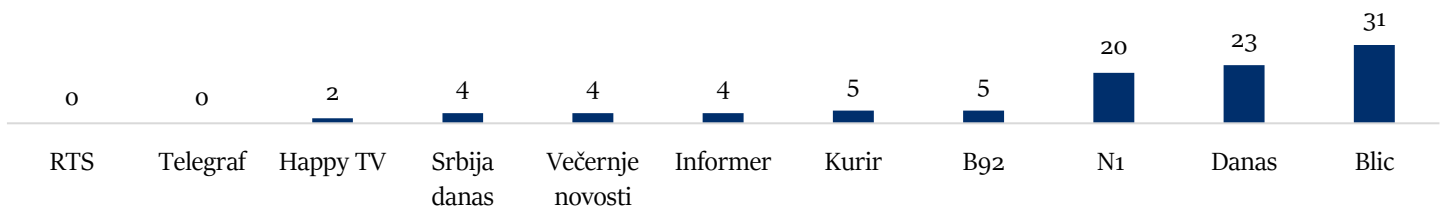
Neutral global role in covid-19 pandemic; fast-paced domestic vaccination campaign

5. Overview findings per media included in the research

As mentioned in previous paragraph of report, in total 12 different media outlets have been analyzed in order to do an in-depth analysis of media coverage and state officials’ narratives regarding international actors in a new context, after a year of the pandemic. In the following paragraphs, we will give brief highlights of the data that stood out when it comes to individual media. More detailed overview of the individual media outlets analyzed is provided in **Annex II** of this report.

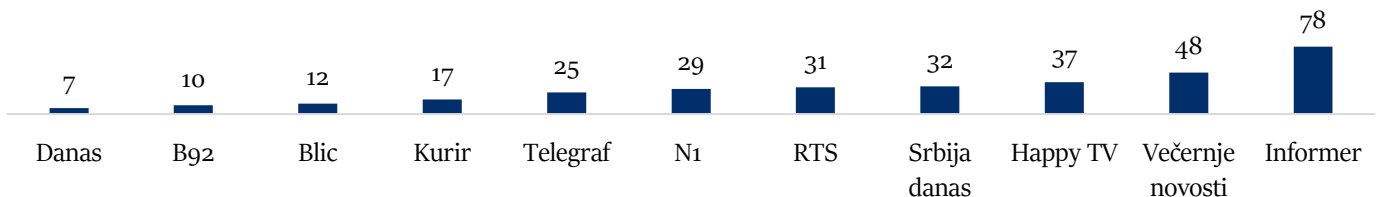
- The highest percentage of articles characterized as **interpretations** was observed in the case of **Informer** (50%) and **Happy TV** (41%).
- In all the media analyzed, in the case of international actors, **the largest number of texts was dedicated to the European Union.**
- Out of the total number of articles dedicated to Russia, most of those that have negative sentiment have been published in Blic (31%) and Danas (23%), while **RTS did not publish a single article that had negative sentiment towards Russia.**

Negative sentiment towards Russia, in %



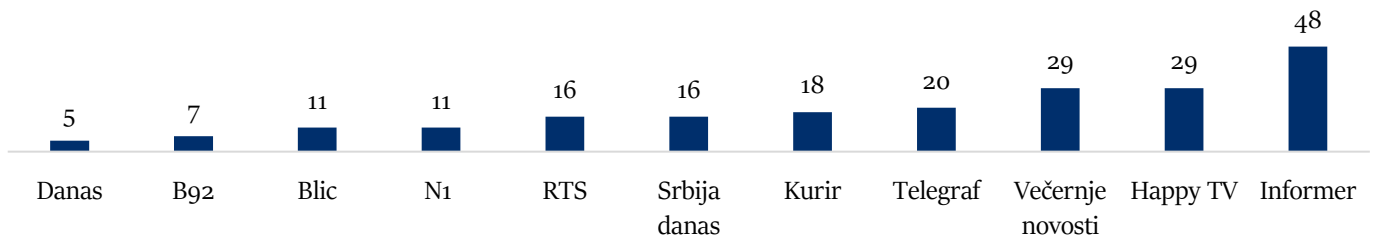
- One fifth of the articles published in **Danas** have had negative sentiment towards China (the largest of all analyzed media).
- The media with highest percentage of articles that showed a negative perception towards USA have been noticed in **Informer** (78% of articles published in Informer regarding NATO have had negative sentiment).

Negative sentiment towards USA, in %



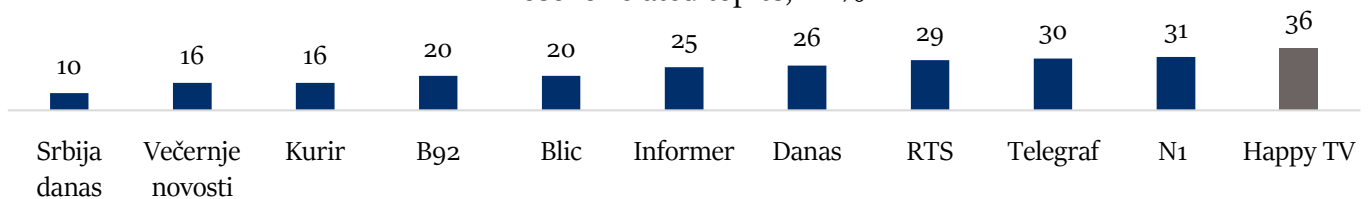
- **All the features published on website of RTS about NATO have had negative sentiment.** In general, articles concerning NATO in all media are related to the anniversary of the bombing of the SRJ.
- Almost half of the articles published in **Informer** regarding EU during period observed have been negative towards this international actor. On the other hand, only 5% of those published in Danas have had negative sentiment towards EU (all of them opinions).

Negative sentiment towards EU, in %



→ **The largest percentage of texts dealing with the narrative of Kosovo was published on Happy TV (36% of all articles analyzed have been related to Kosovo narrative) and on N1 (31%).** In the case of both media, the most attention was paid to non-papers published in the past period, with the difference that the texts published on web site of Happy TV were mostly interpretive, with negative sentiment towards Western actors.

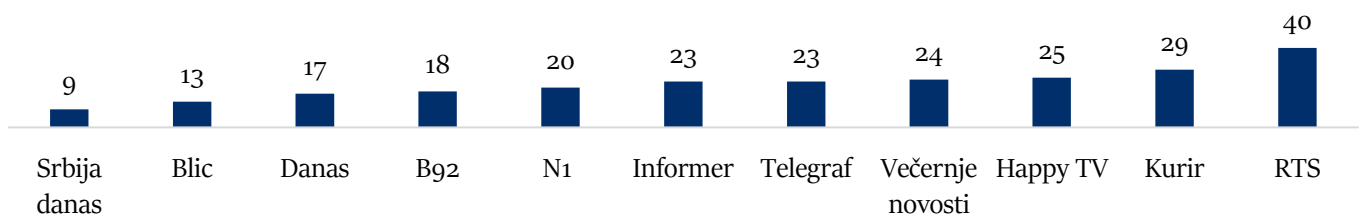
Kosovo related topics, in %



→ The largest percentage of articles focusing on vaccination in Serbia was published in the past period on portal B92 – 23%. **An interesting fact worth mentioning is that RTS (Serbian public broadcaster) published the lowest percentage of texts that correspond to the vaccination narrative.** The texts published by RTS are mostly descriptive and concern the procurement of the vaccines themselves.

→ **Two fifths of all articles that have been tagged on RTS** have been tagged as official, or articles in which attitude of state official is presented regarding an international actor, either in form of descriptive reporting or by interviewing.

Articles focusing on Serbian officials, in %



→ As many as 45% of tagged texts published in **Danas** in the observed period were characterized as analytical articles.

- The largest percentage of articles related to health and medicine was published on the web portal of daily newspaper **Danas** (27%).
- In total, 93% of articles tagged on web portal of **N1** have had some political topics as focus.

6. Analysis of connection between content analysis and public opinion poll findings – Conclusions

6.1. Public opinion as a mirror reflection of media

Findings of content analysis and public opinion poll coincide greatly. Respondents in survey said that Serbia has best relations with Russia and China and that these two countries have predominantly positive influence on Serbia in comparison with EU and USA whose influence was seen mostly as negative. In addition, respondents more trust in “Eastern” science, medicine and vaccines and would rather borrow money from China than EU and IMF for infrastructural projects, and rather study and get treatment in Russia than in EU or USA. Cross-referencing and adding together responses to the ten statements designed to assess respondents’ attitudes towards the West (EU and US), on the one hand, and East (Russia and China), on the other, permitted the development of a synthetic measure to categorise those surveyed into three groups: *a) pro-Western; b) neutral; and c) pro-Eastern*. **There are as many as 61% of pro-Eastern, 31% of neutral and just 8% of pro-Western respondents.**

Our starting assumption was that **mainstream media in Serbia generally favour pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narrative**. Content analysis confirmed the assumption. In addition to sentiments towards international actors present in media coverage, this analysis had another assumption – that **ambiguous attitude of state officials of Serbia cherished similar narrative**. That assumption was proved right as well – while strategic partners (EU, USA) were seen in both positive and negative light, state officials avoided to mention Russia and China in negative context. Moreover, these two countries were praised most of the time and not just as partners, but primarily as friends and brothers to Serbia. While relations with Russia was seen by state officials as “traditional brotherhood”, relations with China became “steel friendship”.

A question arises – is the public opinion a mirror reflection of media (and state) or media reporting (and attitudes of state officials) is mirror reflection of the public opinion? While there must be a feedback or reciprocal influence of these two, **there is no doubt that systematic emission of a narrative by media and state affects and entrenches perception of citizens regarding international actors, their global role and influence on Serbia.**

6.2. “Steel friendship” and “brother Xi” – China is a new Russia

Close relations of Serbia and Russia are not new. Russia was seen as “older Orthodox (Christian) brother” of Serbia throughout XIX century that helped Serbia to establish modern, independent state and as main protector in the World War One. Later on, Orthodox bond was shifted into socialist bond

once both Russia (USSR) and Serbia (SFR Yugoslavia) became socialist countries. Again, after fall of real socialism in both countries, Russia and Serbia preserved traditionally good relations. Serbian public appreciated these relations, especially in a light of new circumstance – Kosovo issue.

On the other hand, relations with China became relevant to some extent in last few decades. **While these relations have been good, they were not very relevant and cordial until recently.** Basically, the only real contact that citizens of Serbia had with China was through Chinese merchants and shops throughout Serbia with broad range of affordable goods. However, strategic course of Serbia shifted in recent years, so **relations with China are being promoted and praised as crucial for Serbian economic and infrastructural development and above all – cordial.** Term “steel friendship” has been used on many occasions by both Serbian and Chinese officials. President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić called president of China Xi Jinping – “brother Xi” several times. Moreover, industrial and infrastructural projects that were financed or built by Chinese loans and companies were promoted with public gatherings and manifestations, which included carefully organized programs and choreography – presence of highest officials of Serbia, Chinese ambassador, banners with messages in Serbian and Chinese language, flags, public, etc. State policy and media coverage certainly had a strong impact on public opinion – **China is the country that has (by opinion of respondents of our survey) the most positive influence on Serbia. That thinks 77% of respondents, which is even higher than for Russia (72%).** When asked which country donated the most to Serbia in last 20 years, by large margin China is the first answer – 33% of respondents said that the second answer by frequency is Russia (19%), while EU is third (17%). Facts suggest that EU and USA respectively are the biggest donors to Serbia in relevant period of time. In addition, most of respondents think that it is better for Serbia to take loans from China than from EU or IMF, see China as the most important global actor in fight against pandemic and as the economically strongest great power in the world.

However, citizens of Serbia mostly would not like to work, study, live or receive medical treatment in China – they would prefer other actors with exemption of medical treatment, that would rather receive in China than in USA, but rather in Russia or EU than in China. This caution when it comes to domestic regime and living standard in China is complementary with media coverage that is above average negative for topics like information (media) and society. In other words, **Serbian public (media and majority of citizens) sees China as a desirable partner and friend, but not as a desirable model.**

6.3. Cold partnership with EU, only necessarily cooperation with USA and undesirable NATO

Although EU integration process has been seen as a strategic goal for Serbia in last two decades, neither within media, state officials or public is present a strong positive sentiment towards EU. **Relations between Serbia and EU are mostly seen as cold partnership in mutual (primarily economic) interest.** Media coverage of EU is mostly neutral and balanced between “pro” and “anti” sentiments,

which applies to state officials attitudes as well. From perception of general public in the survey, EU is dominant in areas of human rights and welfare and would rather live and work in EU than in other relevant countries. In comparison to China, **it could be said that EU is desirable partner (not friend), but also a desirable model.**

On the other hand, media coverage of USA is more negative than positive. That coincide with public opinion expressed through the survey – most of respondents think that influence of USA on Serbia is negative and would rather work, study, live or receive medical treatment in EU or Russia. That is a consequence of political interests that do not overlap between Serbia and USA, especially regarding recent history (break-up of Yugoslavia and subsequent war as well as bombing from 1999) and Kosovo issue. On question in which areas would they primarily like to see improvement of Serbia’s relationship with the EU and the US, most respondents stressed economy (only 9% said improvement is not desirable), which indicates that **citizens of Serbia do support cooperation with the West but sees it primarily through (economic) interest.**

Negative sentiments of media, state officials and public towards NATO is striking, but not surprising. Bombing of FRY in 1999 was a decisive moment in which almost the whole society unambiguously took position that NATO is an aggressor that brings injustice and civilian casualties throughout the world. **These sentiments are always refreshed on anniversary of the bombing, when media and state ceremonies remind of Serbian civilian casualties and economical destruction in the intervention.** Period covered by the content analysis coincided with bombing anniversary, which significantly affected number of articles relevant for NATO and sentiment.

6.4. Pandemic – a game changer?

As it is stated in the background section, from earliest months of the pandemic – there was a systematic presentation of China by both media and state officials as the most important partner of Serbia in hard times. **China has been a friend, but at that moment it became a savior as well** – with provision (paid or donated) of medical supplies such as masks, disinfectants and other, in a moment when the whole world faced shortage and uncertainty about development and outcome of the pandemic. Apart of initial medical supplies and experts provided to Serbia, **China decisively positioned itself as a “trusted friend” and “protector” when it delivered one million doses of vaccines to Serbia in January 2021.** It was another moment of shortage and panic in which the whole world now fought for vaccines. Although a trust in vaccines in general was relatively low in Serbia and despite the fact that Sinopharm vaccine was not approved by World Health Organization at that moment, the contingent allowed initial vaccination for “first priority” groups, such as medical and social workers and elderly population. With other vaccines that came from other suppliers, Serbia surged to top of Europe (beside the United Kingdom) in terms of vaccination.

Having that in mind, alongside state officials' discourse and strategic course of Serbia in international relations, the pandemic indeed acted as a game changer – an event that decisively entrenched positions of China as one of the most reliable partners and friends. **Although relations are described as a “steel friendship” on a political level, further economic and cultural presence of China is to be expected.**

On the other hand, EU was seen as a slow, not-so-reliable partner that failed to deliver medical supplies and later – sufficient and fair number of vaccines in a timely manner. Further disputes included issue of recognition of Chinese and Russian vaccines for covid passports. **Although EU integrations and partnership between Serbia and EU is not in question, the pandemic had a strong impact on course of Serbia as well as of Serbian public that favor alternatives in international relations.**