

SERBIAN MEDIA REPORTING ON UKRAINE CRISIS

- Victim instead of Aggressor -

INTRODUCTION

In its final decision, disclosed on the evening of February 25, Serbia was the last one to join countries in Europe to support territorial integrity of Ukraine, but in this complex decision Serbia will not introduce sanctions to Russia as other countries did, avoiding also to align with the European Union foreign policy.

To grasp Serbia's official position, one should consider the wider political context, which allows tracing Russian influence in Serbia a long way back. According to CRTA's long-term media monitoring, media in Serbia nurture a strong pro-Russian narrative, while its main source is the Serbia's government itself, which is for a decade being run almost exclusively by the Serbian Progressive Party and Socialist Party of Serbia.

The mechanism for strengthening of Russian influence involves official narratives, which are softly built and then distributed and further replicated by mainstream, pro-regime media throughout the years. Official narratives are also being followed with controversial state decisions favoring Russia. Most recently, in December 2021, Serbia used its position as a signatory of the European Convention on Transfrontier Television to help Russia in attempting to bypass German laws by urgently providing Russian state television "Russia Today" a license to broadcast its German-language content in Germany via Serbia.¹ In the past years, Serbia extensively imported military equipment from Russia², established a joint humanitarian center with Russia in Nis³ and organized a "hero's welcome" to Russian president Putin twice (2014 and 2019) with large public ceremonies and a military parade. Ties between Serbia and Russia are strongly reflected in Russia's majority ownership of Serbian Oil Industry (NIS), Serbia's dependency on Russia's gas and favorable access to it⁴ and Kosovo issue.

The same pattern of narrative production also shapes public opinion on other foreign actors relevant to Serbia - the European Union, the United States, and NATO. CRTA records the intention to polarize the public perception of all these actors, as the sentiments following narratives and media reporting on Russia and China are predominantly positive, while Western actors are dominantly negative. In addition, disinformation plays an important role, as most of the possible disinformation media reports portray Western countries negatively and Russia positively.

As an outcome, one-third of Serbia's citizens, predominantly coming from the ranks of the ruling party supporters, would be happy if Serbia abandoned the EU integration and allied with Russia or China (Chart 1).

¹ Radio Free Europe, "German Regulator Says Russian State Media Broadcasting Without A License", <https://link.crtars.org/ussialicence>

² Euronews, "Serbian president praises Russian arms shipment in alleged arms race with neighboring Croatia", <https://link.crtars.org/ussianrmserbia1>

³ Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center, <https://www.ihc.rs/about-us/>

⁴ Balkan Insight, "Serbia president hails incredible gas deal with Russia", <https://link.crtars.org/gasdeal>

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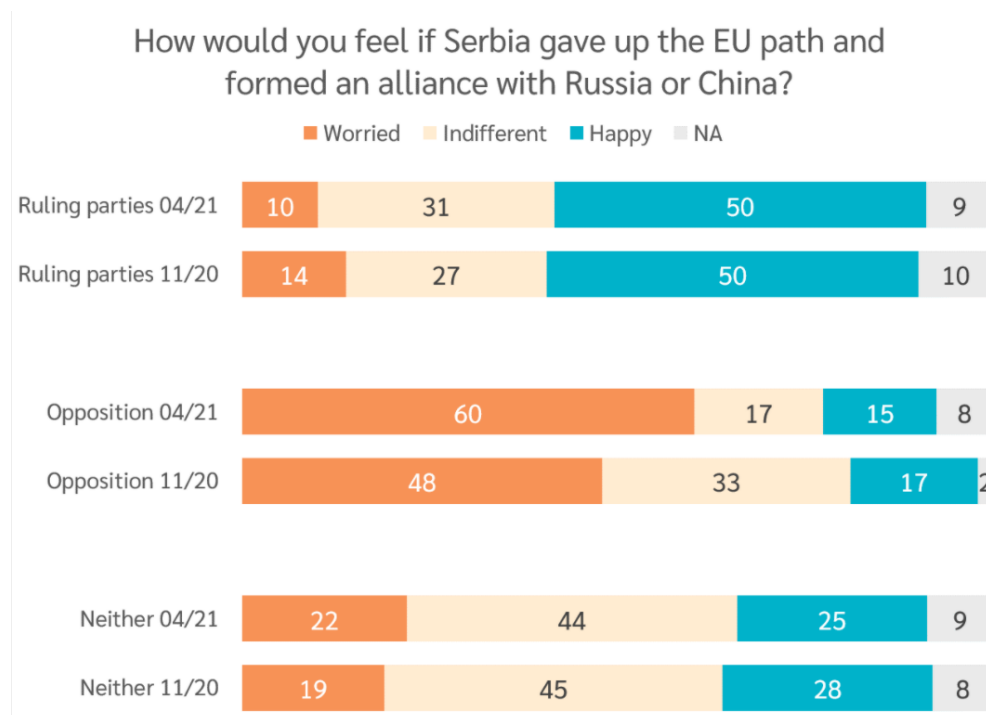


Chart 1. Views of the alliance with Russia or China concerning political inclination, comparing November 2020 and April 2021 (Source: CARTA 2021, 2020)

In such an environment, state officials rarely addressed the public concerning the crisis in Ukraine in the last month. Nevertheless, in the initial absence of official statements, Serbian pro-regime media took a strong position in favor of Russia spreading its usual pro-Russian sentiments. Once again, pro-regime media serve as an announcer of official stance, pointing to a tactic to nurture pro-Russian voters and prepare the public for easier acceptance of any consequence that may emerge once the official policy is made public.

This was extremely visible in the morning shows content of the most influential media in Serbia - television channels with national coverage. Even the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia hosted Sputnik's Serbia editor-in-chief to speak on the topic on the morning of February 24, the day of the Russian attack.

The Russian attack's main narrative is that Russia is a victim and a saviour from the corrupted West and the "Nazi regime in Kyiv". This went even further when one pro-regime daily published a front-page claiming that "Ukraine attacked Russia", while the other claimed that "Putin is sending an army to unite Serbia and Republika Srpska". The disinformation and manipulative content was largely used for production of such narratives, and one-sided media is reflected in using exclusively Russian sources of information.

Further analysis provides detailed data on media reporting about Ukraine between January 20 and February 20, 2022, covering TV, and daily print reporting, including most illustrative front pages of national dailies for February 24 and 25.

METHODOLOGY

Regarding the crisis in Ukraine, CRTA analyzed how mainstream media in Serbia reported about the current events. The analysis covered the sample of four national dailies and four television channels with national coverage. CRTA conducted monitoring of print media covers and inner pages, as well as the central news and morning shows of television channels with national coverage.

Media monitoring was focused on media reporting between January 20 and February 20, 2022. Analysis was based on three indicators:

- tone of reporting (positive, negative, or neutral towards the main foreign actors, Russia, China, the EU, the US and the NATO),
- the title of a media report, and
- the importance and relevance of the media piece.

CRTA analyzed only those media pieces which were related to the Ukraine crisis. The topic covered a total of **469 media pieces**.

KEY FINDINGS

As the crisis in Ukraine intensified, the focus of the Serbian media was increasingly shifting towards it.

Serbian media reporting is focused on Russia, on one side, and the US and NATO on the other. Reporting is marked by biased reporting in favor of Russia, spreading Russian propaganda, and against US and NATO. Media paid little attention to China and the EU when reporting on Ukraine.

Most media outlets tend to present the Ukraine crisis in pro-Russian light, blaming the US, and NATO for posing threats to Russia and Belarus by deploying troops, weapons, and equipment in countries of the Eastern Europe.

Serbian state officials had almost no statement regarding the matter before the final decision was disclosed on the evening of February 25. Even when they did, their statements were about the neutral position of Serbia, pointing out that Serbia was in no way part of the political or any other conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In addition, the Ukraine crisis is used for domestic issues, mostly related to the upcoming elections.

The possible disinformation is dominantly connected to adverse reporting towards the US and NATO. At the same time, possible disinformation is connected with positive reporting about Russia.

The most influential type of media, television, is also the most biased, with morning shows as the main program for spreading disinformation and propaganda.

ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPORTING

The media presented the crisis in Ukraine primarily as a consequence of the conflict of Russia, on one side, and Ukraine, US, and NATO, on the other. Media paid little attention to China and the EU and their role in the crisis - China only appeared in a promotional light as a partner of Russia, which was announced after the meeting between President Putin and President Xi. At the same time, the reports on the EU are neutral, presenting it as an entity trying to prevent conflict (Chart 2).

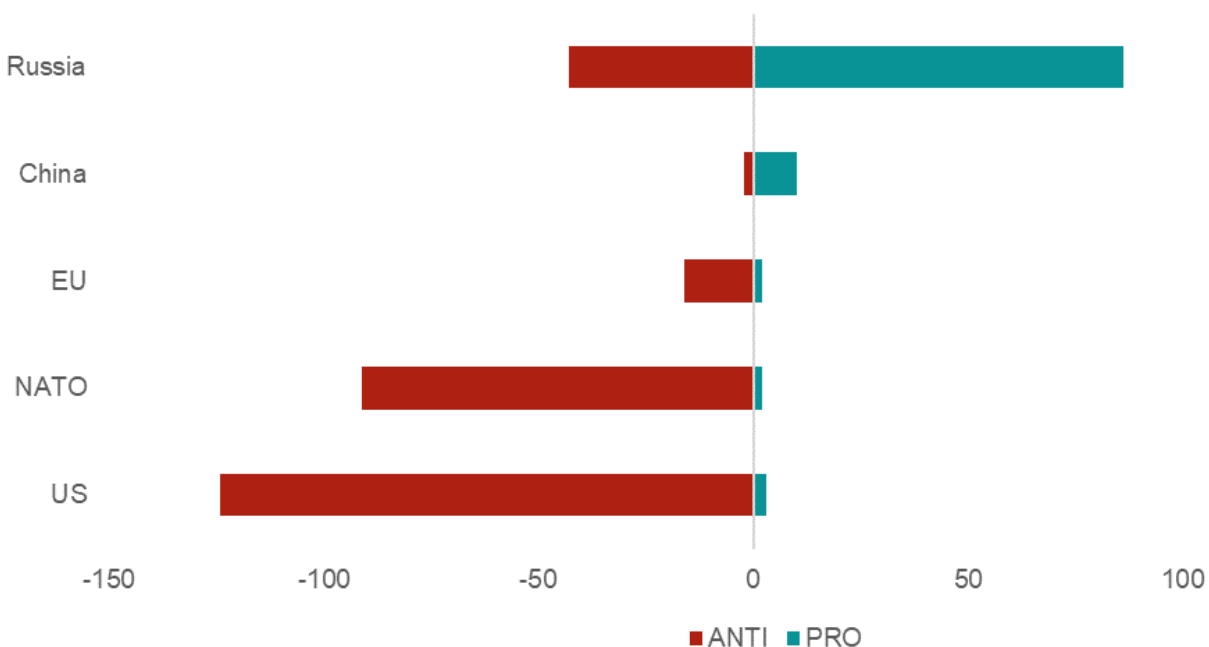


Chart 2. Total number of positive and negative mentions of foreign actors on TV channels with national coverage and dailies

During the observed period, Serbian officials rarely had statements about the crisis. In those rare situations, when they had a statement, they tried to present Serbia as a neutral entity, referring to the existing conflict as little as possible (Chart 3).

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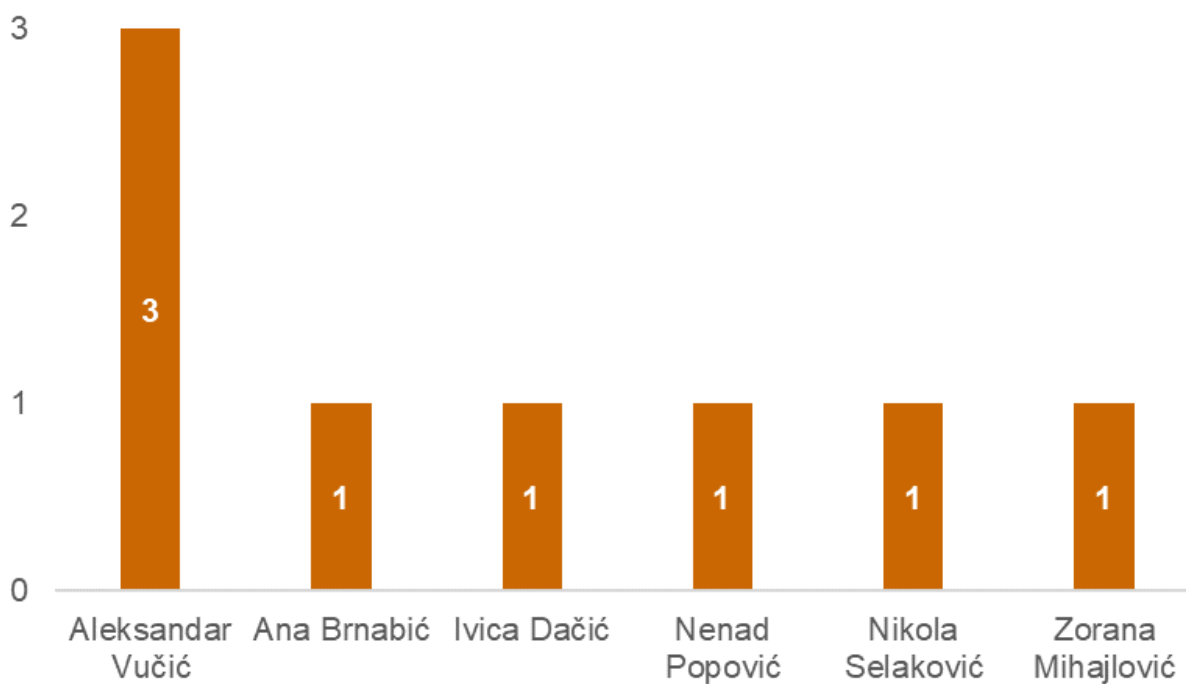


Chart 3. Number of Serbian public official statements where the foreign actors were mentioned

These rare Serbian state officials' comments were either positive or neutral towards Russia and, at the same time, neutral and negative towards NATO and the US (Chart 4). In his statement, President Vučić emphasized that Serbia does not want to spoil "friendly" relations with Russia and does not want to be integrated into NATO.

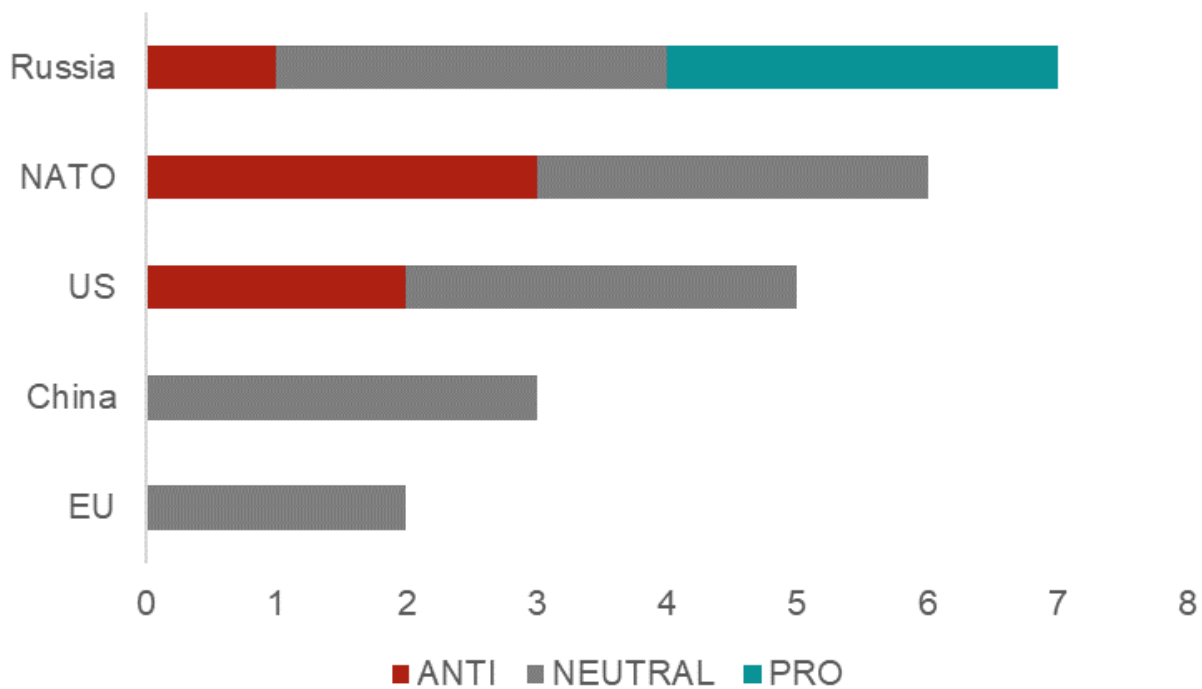


Chart 4. Tone of quotation of Serbian officials towards foreign actors

Media monitoring also shows that the Russian narrative dominated TV channels with national coverage and daily newspapers. Television channels with national coverage were even more biased than the dailies. The main generators of such a narrative are the morning shows on TV Pink and TV Happy (Chart 5).

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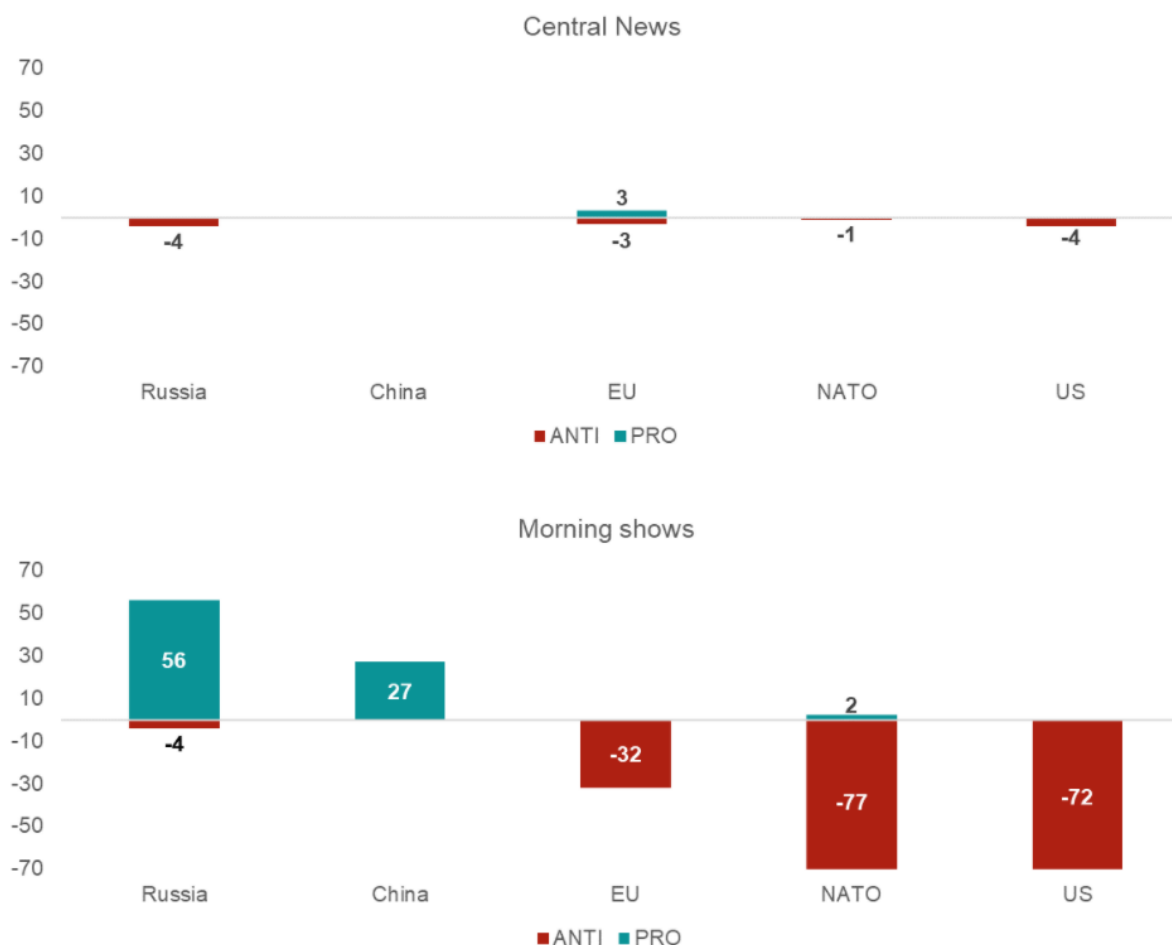


Chart 5. Tone of reporting on foreign actors in Central news and Morning shows on TV channels with national coverage in %

Among the dailies, Informer and Večernje Novosti stood out reporting in favor of Russia. These media spread pro-Russian propaganda by presenting Russia as a victim, and the US and NATO as aggressors who are interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, justifying a possible Russian attack by defending its population from the “Nazi regime in Kyiv”, praising Putin, his determination, tactic and willingness to resist the West.

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Front pages of daily newspapers before the conflict escalation:

Informер, 25th January	Večernje novosti, 28th January	Informер, 9th February	Informер, 14th February
<i>Biden sends 50,000 soldiers in direction to Russia</i>	<i>Russia rejected: NATO is heading east</i>	<i>Putin sent a clear message: There will be war if Ukraine joins NATO!</i>	<i>Americans and Brits want war at any cost</i>

Kurir, 18th February	Večernje novosti, 20th February	Informер, 22th February	Srpski telegraf, 22th February
<i>Harsh words; Ambassador of Ukraine: The Russian state has not existed in history for a long time!</i>	<i>Attack on Donbass Kyiv provokes with saboteurs/diversants</i>	<i>Ukraine attacks Russia!</i>	<i>Putin sends the army to unite Serbia and Republika Srpska</i>

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Front pages of daily newspapers on the day of the conflict escalation:

Informер, 25th February	Večernje novosti, 25th February	Blic, 25th February	Srpski telegraf, 25th February
<i>Putin's blitz strike!</i>	<i>Russia attack as a response to NATO's threat</i>	<i>Putin draws the world into a war</i>	<i>Putin prepares "Satan" for Europe</i>

Kurir, 25th February	Alo!, 25th February	Politika, 25th February	Objektiv, 25th February
<i>Russian invasion</i>	<i>Putin reached Kyiv in a day</i>	<i>State of war in Ukraine</i>	<i>Russians overran Ukraine in a day</i>

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The most significant number of possible disinformation is used in negative reporting on the US and NATO. On the other hand, the possible disinformation towards Russia is dominantly positive (Chart 6).

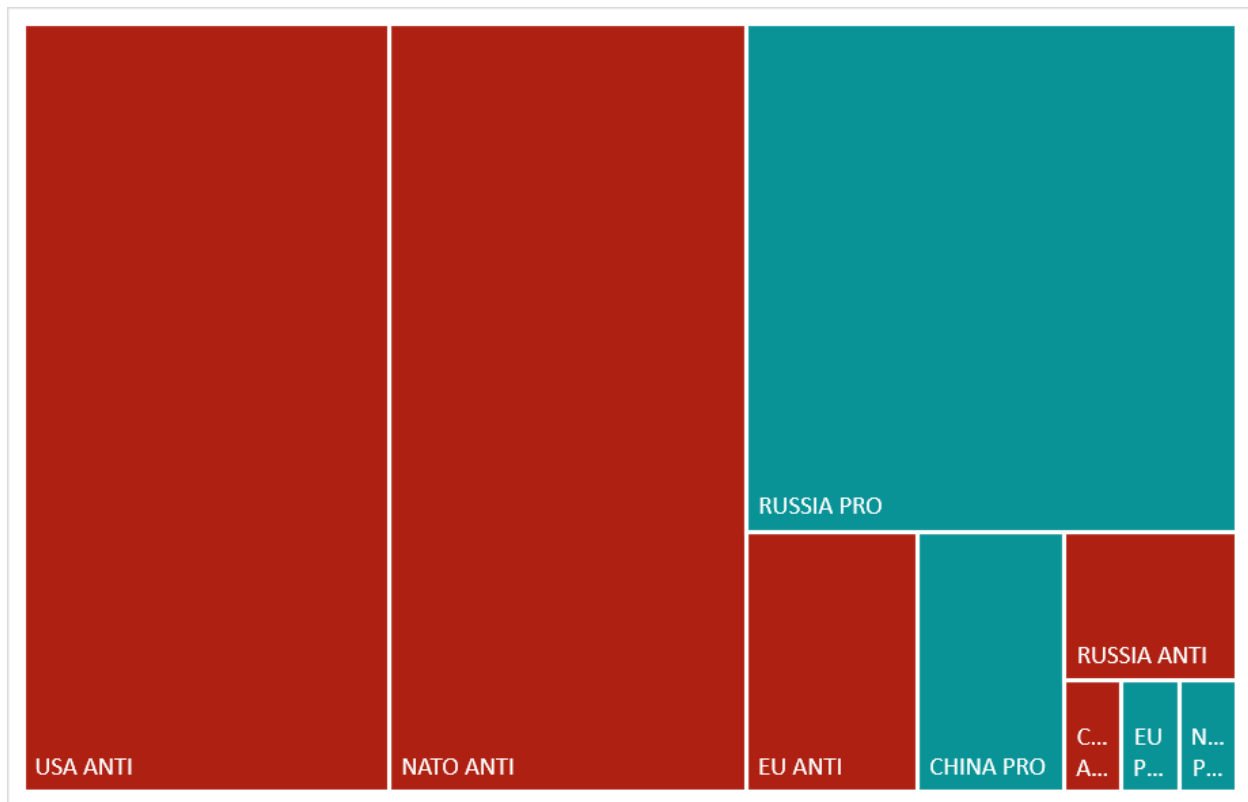


Chart 6. The tone of possible disinformation on foreign actors on television channels with national coverage and in daily newspapers

One of the oldest daily newspapers in Serbia, Večernje novosti, with almost $\frac{1}{3}$ of all recorded possible disinformation about the crisis in Ukraine, is the greatest producer of disinformation and manipulative content. The most watched commercial television channel with national coverage, TV Pink, follows Večernje novosti with almost $\frac{1}{5}$ of all recorded possible disinformation (Chart 7).

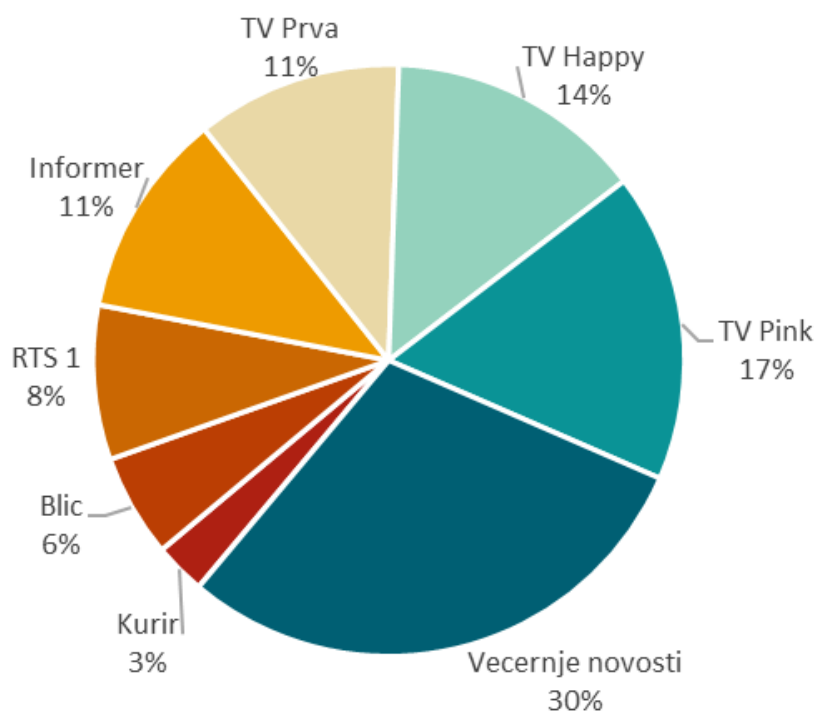


Chart 7. Share of possible disinformation by media outlets