

TRACKING THE PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION ABOUT FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN SERBIA

Case Study



CASE STUDY - SERBIAN MEDIA ON THE UKRAINE WAR***Key findings:***

- The topic of the war in Ukraine dominated the media during the first three months of the war and completely marginalized all other topics.
- The most foreign actor reported on most in the media was Russia, while the countries of the West, the US, the EU, and NATO were far less noticeable.
- Although the initial open support for Russia has softened since the beginning of the war, the media continue to report in favour of Russia, and against the West. Television stations with national coverage (especially their morning news programmes), as well as parts of the daily press, are at the forefront of supporting Russia. Internet portals have a more balanced approach.
- Among state officials, President Vučić has monopolized the discussions of the war in Ukraine, and he is the person most credited in the media for establishing Serbia's neutral stance on this issue.
- Disinformation in the media is placed in such a way as to present Russia in a positive light, and the West negatively. Disinformation was most prevalent on internet portals and the printed edition of Večernje novosti, the daily Informer, and television stations Pink and Happy.

Representation of the war in Ukraine in Serbian media

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, media coverage has been completely subordinated to this topic. News on the war in Ukraine dominated the covers and first pages of the daily press almost every day. Special blocks of news were allocated to this topic within the main news programmes. In addition, TV channels broadcasted President Vučić's addresses to the nation on this topic live, categorising it as breaking news.

The number of news reports about the war in Ukraine peaked in March, and their number gradually decreased in April and May, although it still maintains a distinctly dominant position in relation to other topics. In addition, these other topics are viewed through the prism of events in Ukraine - the energy issue, European integration, independence of Kosovo, exports and imports, etc. The media directly links these issues to the war and its consequences.

Representation of foreign actors

The most foreign actor that was reported on most in the media for the first three months of the war in Ukraine was Russia (7785 mentions). Its representation in the media is far greater than the presence of its opponents in the conflict - the US (2889 mentions), the EU (2461), and NATO (2061). Even collectively these three bodies have a smaller number of mentions than Russia (7551 for the US, EU, and NATO versus 7785 mentions of Russia). China occupies the last place (783 mentions). The media did not directly link China to the war in Ukraine and China had a peripheral presentation in media (Chart 1).

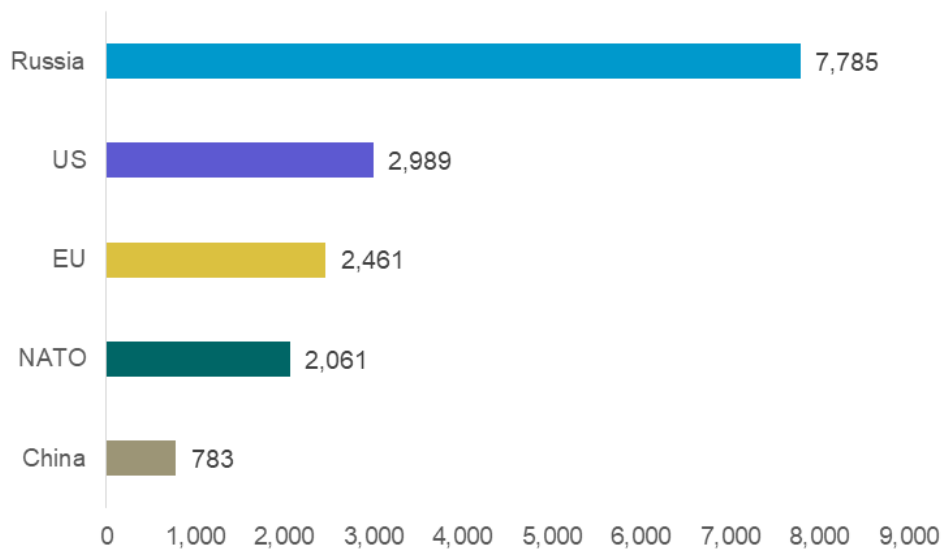


Chart 1: Number of mentions in media pieces in the context of the war in Ukraine, February 24th - May 31st, 2022

The number of mentions of foreign actors has been declining over the past few months following the decline of reports on the war in Ukraine in the news. However, the number of mentions of the EU, and then Russia, increased during May. This trend is a consequence of the more intensive foreign policy activities that these two countries had towards Serbia during May (Chart 2).

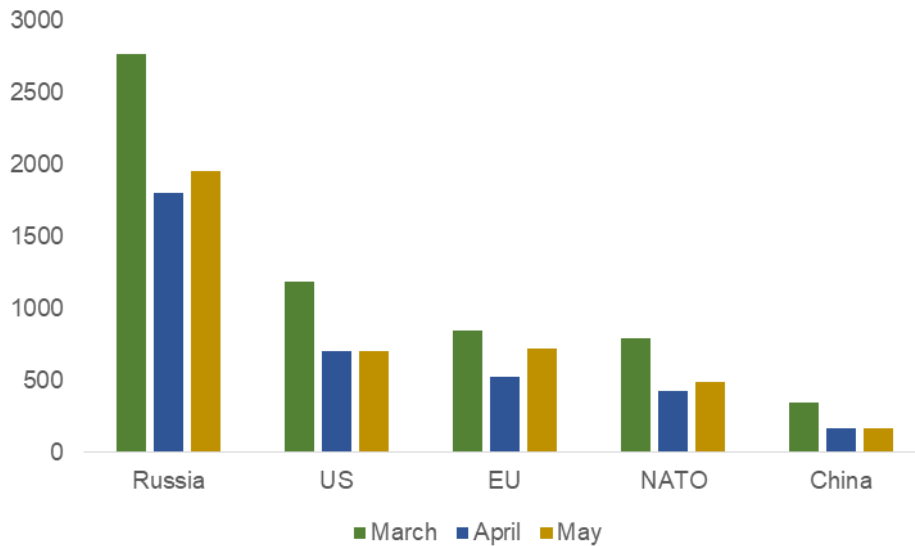


Chart 2 - Number of mentions of foreign actors over three months and in the context of the war in Ukraine, February 24th - May 31st, 2022

The media presentation of foreign actors

Compared to the period before the start of the war, there was a clear dichotomy in the media, with predominantly positive coverage of Russia and negative reporting on the West. The picture changed at the beginning of the war, under the influence of accusations made by both sides. At the same time, the open support for Russia that existed in the media before the war has softened but is still visible. Thus, it is noticeable that the share of negative reporting on foreign actors (except for China) has increased, but the share of positive reporting on Russia, compared to Western countries, is still significantly higher. This finding reflects the noticeable bias of Serbian media in favour of Russia (Chart 3).

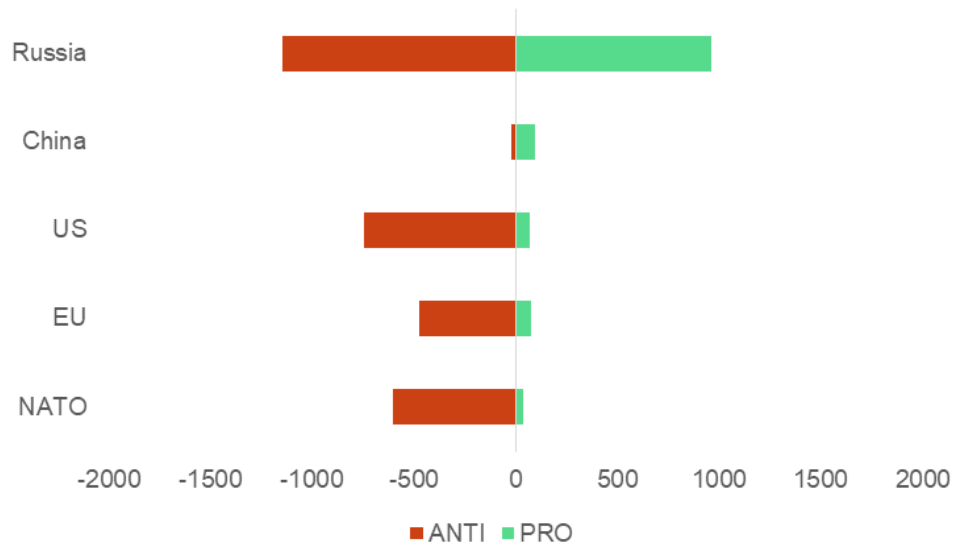


Chart 3 - Media orientation towards foreign actors in the context of the war in Ukraine (when neutral reporting is excluded), February 24th - May 31st, 2022

Media representation of foreign actors in the context of the war in Ukraine can be divided into two aspects: 1. mutual relations between them and 2. relations with Serbia. The representation of Russia in the context of relations between world powers, especially on television and in most of the press, is dominated by the notion that Russia is "involved" in a war that is perceived as defensive. The war was interpreted as Russia's struggle to suppress Western hegemony, deter NATO from Russia's borders, and fight against the Ukrainian regime that was pushed into war by the West. The Russian army is presented as powerful and superior, while the Russian economy is portrayed as resistant to the brutal sanctions imposed by the West, and Russian energy as a key component without which the world, Europe especially, cannot survive. A key point was the media presentation of President Putin, who was perceived as strong, calm, brave, but also a statesman ready to do anything for the Russian side to win the war.

In the context of Serbia, at the beginning of the war, the image of Russia as an important protector and ally, a guarantor of the preservation of Kosovo within Serbia, and the independence of the Republic Srpska, was dominant. During the war that emphasis shifted to more tangible aspects of cooperation and the possibility of obtaining energy, especially gas, at a favourable price (*author's note: Serbia's gas supply almost completely [depends on imports of gas from Russia](#)*).

Although the presentation of relations between Russia and Serbia in the media was positive, there were brief moments of deviation from this rule. When President Putin legitimized the secession of Donbas on the same principle as Kosovo, a negative campaign was launched in the Serbian media, and Putin's words were interpreted as "a knife in the back of Serbia." However, this campaign lasted only two days and did not significantly affect the positive presentation of Russia in the media.

The West was presented in the media above all as a force that directly threatens Russia's security and as the main reason for the conflict. With the outbreak of war, some narratives accused the West of wanting to destroy Russia, and that the sanctions imposed by the West are coming back like a boomerang and leading to economic crises in Europe and the US. The West has also been accused of arming Ukraine's military, thus fuelling the prolongation of the war. The EU and NATO were often seen as weak and instrumentalized by the US, while the media insisted that there were major disagreements within the EU among its member states about their attitude towards Russia.

In the context of Serbia, the EU and the US are presented in the media as exponents of pressure, actors who seek to impose their will on Serbia. That pressure is primarily related to the imposing of sanctions on Russia and the normalization of relations with Kosovo, which is often interpreted in the media as recognition of its independence. Serbia's leadership and the media often bring up the hypocrisy of the West, for invoking international law in the case of Ukraine, but supporting the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the crimes committed by them in 1999, and the secession of part of Serbia's territory - Kosovo.

Although China has seemingly tried to stay neutral and condemn the war, their actions and presentation in Serbian media indicated that they were on the side of Russia and against the West. At the very beginning of the conflict, the Chinese president supported President Putin, pointing to the ["steel friendship between China and Russia"](#) and condemned Western sanctions. During the war, the media communicated that China criticized the West for sending weapons to Ukraine and supported Russia in the vote by the UN Security Council.

The attitude of state officials of Serbia towards the war in Ukraine

President Aleksandar Vučić has been the most-quoted official in media reports on the war in Ukraine. He is mentioned twice as much in media reports about the war in Ukraine than all other state officials combined. The impression is that President Vučić has monopolized this sensitive topic for Serbia and set himself up as the person who has the greatest authority to deal with it, while other state bodies, officials, and political actors are completely marginalized. In addition, the media supported this perception by praising President Vučić, nurturing his cult of personality, and presenting him as the only politician capable of getting Serbia out of the difficult situation in which the world finds itself (Chart 4).

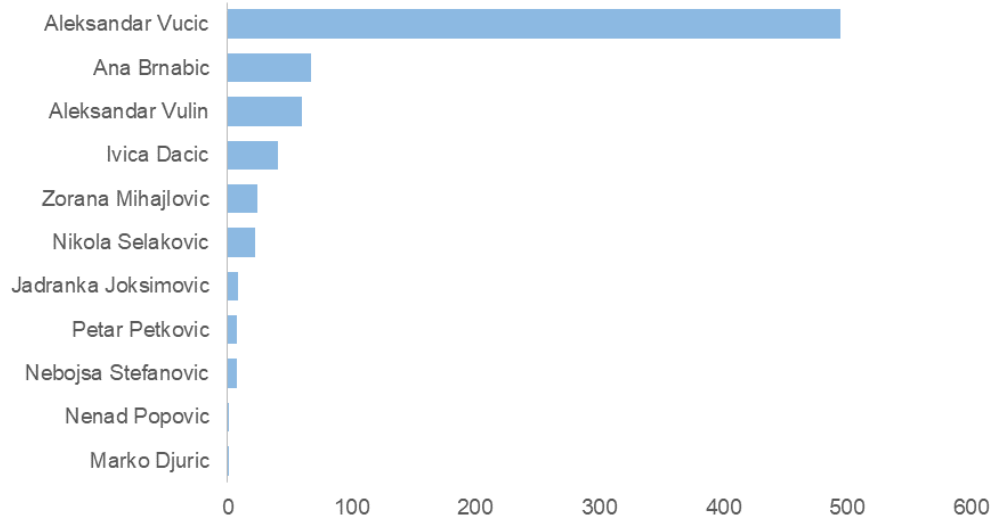


Chart 4 - Number of mentions by Serbian officials on the war in Ukraine, February 24th - May 31st, 2022

If we take the media reports in which President Vučić appears and compare them to reports that quote all other state officials, we see that President Vučić was somewhat "milder" towards Western actors. Other state officials, whose communication was primarily oriented towards internal use and intended for the domestic audience, were more negatively oriented towards the West (Chart 5).

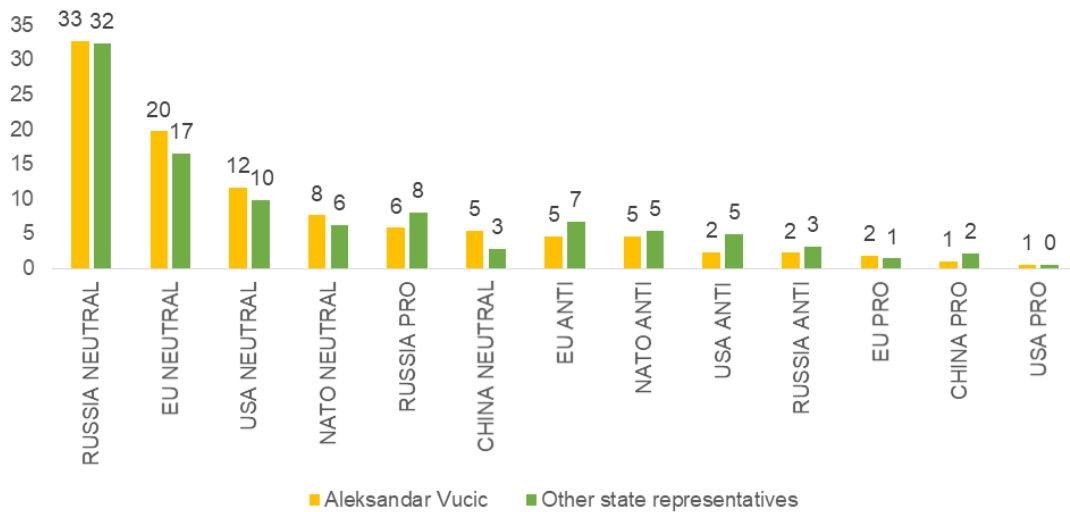


Chart 5 - The attitude of President Vučić and other state officials towards foreign actors in the context of the war in Ukraine, February 24th - May 31st, 2022

President Vučić’s position toward foreign actors did not change significantly during the war. At the very beginning, it was defined as the premise of "[military neutrality](#)" (author’s note: although it de facto meant political neutrality), which is explained by the following statement "Serbia is on the

European path, but also cooperates with Russia and China and will not give up traditional friendships", and "Serbia [condemns](#) the endangering of the territorial integrity of Ukraine" but does not want to introduce sanctions against Russia.

The more positive presentation of foreign actors by the President and the state leadership of Serbia grew during periods of intensive diplomatic communication with them. The positive tone towards Russia went up in April, when President Putin congratulated Aleksandar Vučić on his re-election as President of Serbia and when negotiations on obtaining a favourable price for Russian gas began (which was achieved in May).

The more positive presentation of the US and the EU grew during the visits of their officials to Serbia in April and May. Their visits were interpreted ambivalently by the state leadership of Serbia - Serbia is promised a European perspective, but it is conditional upon the introduction of sanctions against Russia and the achievement of a comprehensive solution in the dialogue with Kosovo.

Characteristics of media reporting

When reporting on foreign actors in the context of the war in Ukraine, Serbian media agencies were the most common sources of information, followed by European media agencies, Russian, American, etc. Although news from Western agencies is the dominant source used by Serbian media, Serbian news chose to present the West in a negative light. For example, among the news in which European media agencies appear as sources, the EU is presented three times more negatively than positively. Among news where American agencies appear as sources, the US is approximately five times more negatively presented than positively. On the other hand, in the news in which the Russian agencies were the source, Russia was presented almost two times more positively than negatively. These tendencies highlight the Serbian media's manipulation of the news in favour of the Russian side.

There are noticeable differences in the manner of reporting depending on the type of media. [The most influential channel of communication](#), TV stations with national coverage, proved to be the most biased when reporting on the war in Ukraine. All television stations reported in favour of Russia, and negatively towards the West. The television stations Pink and Happy were at the forefront of this kind of journalism (Chart 6).

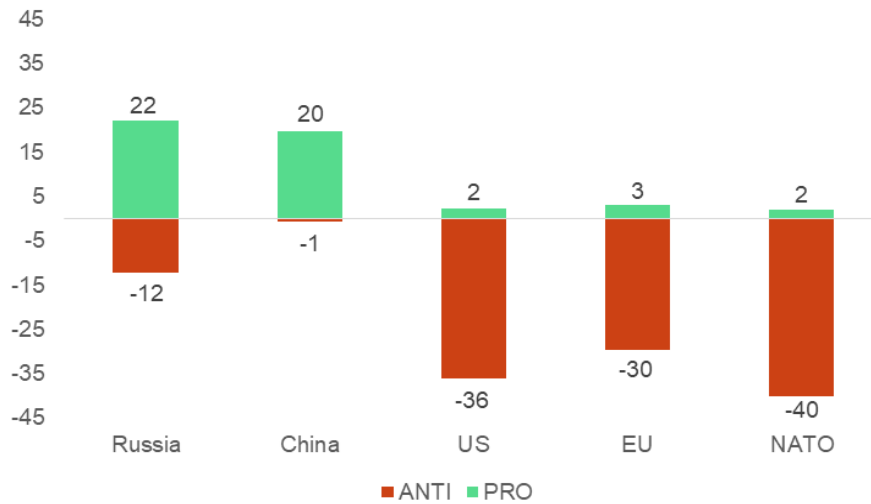


Chart 6 - General orientation towards foreign actors on televisions and in the context of the war in Ukraine (when neutral reporting is excluded), February 24th - May 31st, 2022

On the TV stations, the pro-Russian narrative was subtly woven into the main news. Furthermore, it was expressed far more openly on the morning news programmes, where pro-Russian propaganda was presented daily. The morning programmes were served by analysts who explained current events to the audience - in the field of domestic policy they criticized the opposition and glorified the policy of President Vučić, while in the field of foreign policy they condemned the West and openly sided with Russia. CRTA media monitoring has established a strong link between the morning programmes and the daily press, as the morning programmes analysts are frequently journalists and editors of pro-government daily newspapers (Chart 7).

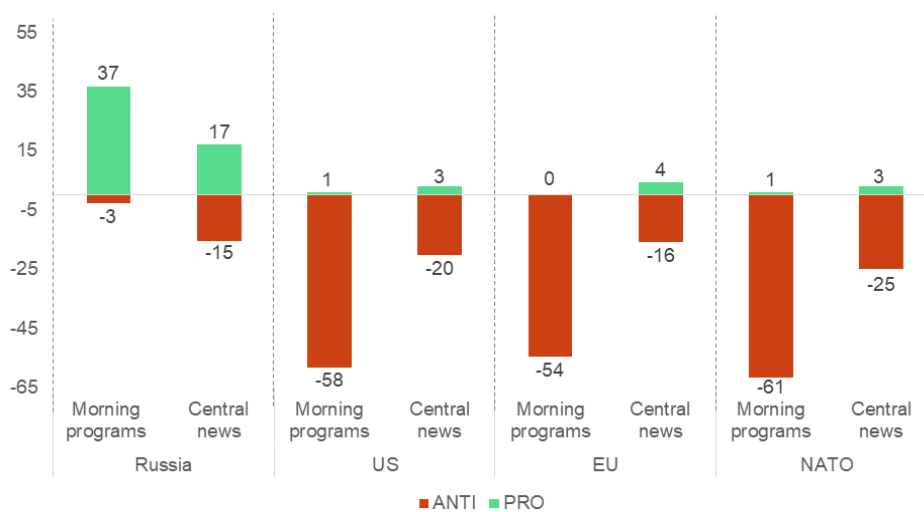


Chart 7 - General orientation of foreign actors on the main news and on morning news programmes in the context of the war in Ukraine (when neutral reporting is excluded), February 24th - May 31st, 2022

The equivalents of Pink and Happy television stations among the newspapers are Informer and Večernje novosti, which also report in favour of the Russian side. However, the overall coverage in the daily newspapers in the sample is somewhat milder than on television stations. This is mainly down to two newspapers, Blic and, to a lesser extent, Kurir, which have a more balanced approach towards foreign actors (Chart 8).

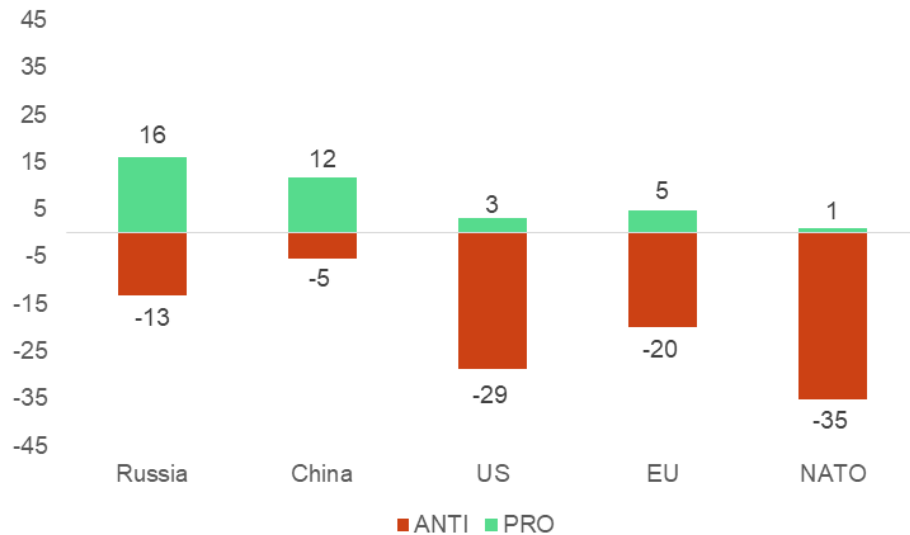


Chart 8 - General orientation towards foreign actors in printed media and in the context of the war in Ukraine (when neutral reporting is excluded), February 24th - May 31st, 2022

The internet portals that were observed offer a slightly different picture. Apart from novosti.rs, where the pro-Russian narrative is promoted, other portals presented Russia's role in the war in a more negative light than traditional media. A more balanced approach by the portals is a consequence of their economic interests, i.e., the desire to rapidly produce news content that drives greater visibility and traffic to these sites. To fulfil this need, they republish news articles from Western and Russian media. The intervention of a journalist to suggest to the reader how they should interpret the events is noticeably absent from these articles. This lack of interpretation of news that was already published in the West and Russia thus creates a kind of balance (Chart 9).

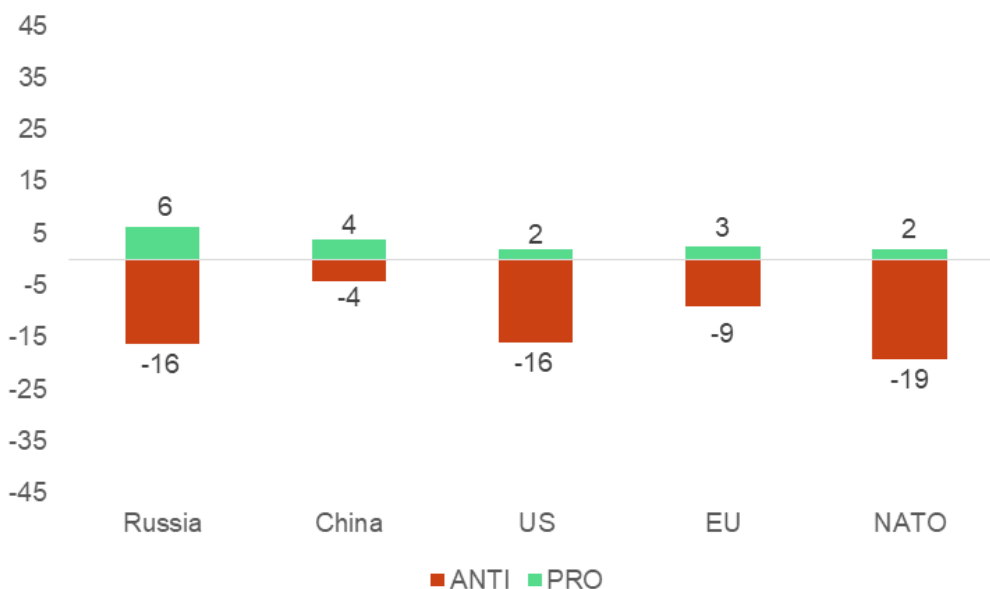


Chart 9 - General orientation towards foreign actors on internet portals and in the context of the war in Ukraine (when neutral reporting is excluded), February 24th - May 31st, 2022

Potential disinformation

The disinformation in the media was aimed at causing shock and intimidation and is most often the product of journalistic exaggeration. The most common channels for pushing disinformation were daily newspapers and morning news programmes. The media sought to increase the audience reach of disinformation using these outlets. CRTA's media monitoring showed that most of the disinformation was placed in such a way as to present the US, EU, and NATO in a negative tone, while on the other hand, showing Russia in a positive light (Chart 10).

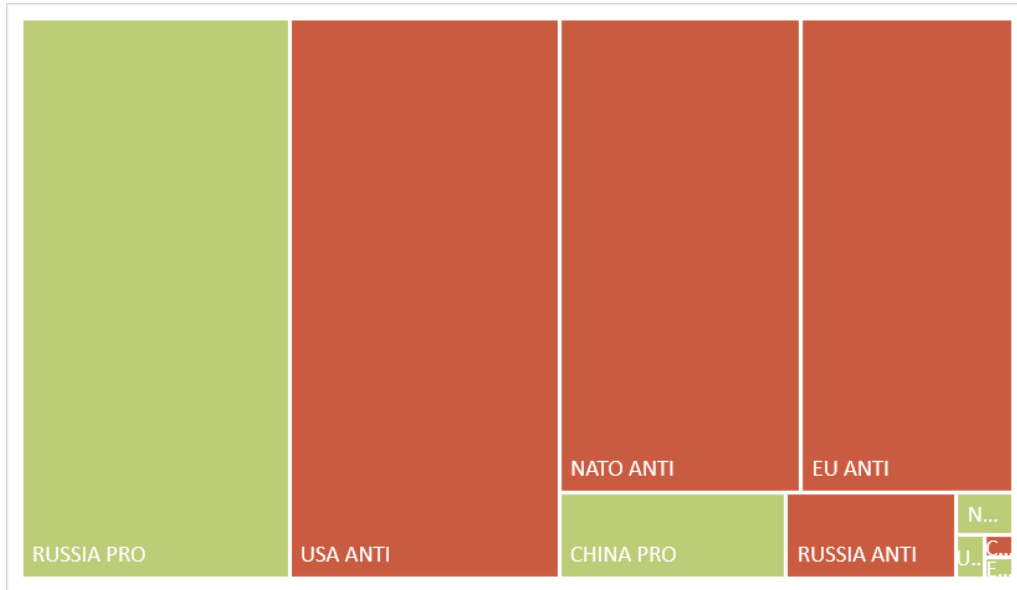


Chart 10 - Possible disinformation on foreign actors in the context of the war in Ukraine, February 24th - May 31st, 2022

Disinformation placed by the Russian side is readily accepted by the Serbian media, elaborated upon, interpreted by analysts and journalists, and spread further. Pro-government daily newspapers and the Večernje novosti portal, the daily Informer, and the television stations Pink and Happy are at the forefront of disinformation distribution (Chart 11).

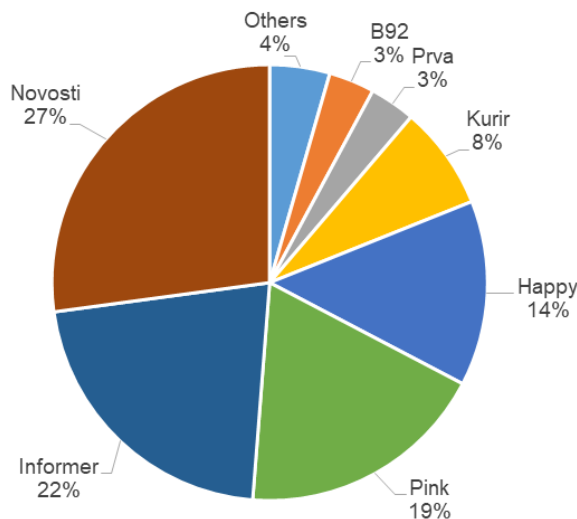


Chart 11 - Distribution of disinformation in the media in the context of the war in Ukraine, February 24th - May 31st, 2022




By following these media at the beginning of the war, audiences would get the impression that Russia was fighting against the Ukrainian Nazi regime, and that the attack was a response to the genocide that took place in Donbas ([CRTA May 2022 public opinion poll](#) showed that this disinformation was largely accepted by the Serbian public). During the war, among the most common disinformation was the stories of the staged massacre in Bucha by the West, special bio-laboratories developed by the US in Ukraine, super-secret Russian laser weapons capable of burning all of Ukraine's territory, and chaos in the most developed European countries caused by shortages of basic food products, etc.

The disinformation that was placed in the context of Serbia was aimed at glorifying the policy of the state leadership, but also to point out the pressures put on Serbia by the Western centres of power. The West was accused of waging a hybrid war against Serbia, that their secret services were behind false bomb reports in Serbian schools and institutions, but also of pressuring President Vučić to impose sanctions on Russia and that if he refuses the West are ready to destroy the whole state.

Disinformation on the front pages of daily newspapers in the context of relations between foreign actors, February 24th - May 31st, 2022:

Večernje novosti, March 12 th	Informer, March 21 st	Informer, March 26 th :
<p><i>"Bats with viruses ready to strike at the Russians"</i></p>	<p><i>"Sanctions on Putin are tearing Europe apart?!"</i></p>	<p><i>"Bread more expensive than gold – war for food is underway"</i></p>

Disinformation on front pages of daily newspapers in the context of Serbia, February 24th - May 31st, 2022:

Informer, March 19 th :	Večernje novosti, April 15 th :	Informer, May 17 th :
		
<p><i>“They are destroying Serbia just like Ukraine!? The goal of the powerful people is no longer just to overthrow the government, but to destroy the entire state, which dares to pursue an independent policy”</i></p>	<p><i>“The European Council decision includes a threat to Serbia: You will have gas only after you impose sanctions on Russia”</i></p>	<p><i>“They are bombing us with fake bombs!”</i></p>

Methodology

The CARTA organization observed how the media in Serbia reported on the war in Ukraine. The sample included four television stations with national coverage (TV RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Prva, and Happy TV), and four daily newspapers (Informer, Blic, Večernje novosti, and Kurir), and four internet portals (blic.rs, kurir.rs, novosti.rs, and b92.net). CARTA conducted monitoring on television of the main news programmes and the segment of the morning programmes related to reviewing the press, analysed the front pages and news within the issue in the daily press, and observed the news that was published in the sections dealing with domestic, regional, and foreign politics and economy on internet portals.

The time interval of the analysis covered the period from February 24th to May 31st, 2022.

The analysis was based on monitoring three indicators:

- Tone of reporting - it was observed whether the foreign actors Russia, China, EU, US, and NATO are presented in a positive, negative, or neutral tone
- Contents of headlines on the front pages of the daily press
- Importance and relevance of the media report

The analysis included all content and media reports that were related to the crisis in Ukraine. There was a total of 8,147 of them.