

CRTA:

Media Audit

Uncovering the relevance
and importance of media

December 2023



This research is supported by Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. The opinions expressed in this research are those of the CRTA researchers and do not reflect the opinions of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

The preliminary manuscript was completed on December 2, 2023.

The current, revised version was completed on December 30, 2023

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA - Analysis of variance

ATS - Average Time Spent

AVMS - Audiovisual Media Services

AVMS - Audiovisual Media Services Directive

CATI - Computer assisted telephone interviews

CRTA - Centre for Research of Transparency and Accountability

EU - European Union

EXR – Exclusive Reach

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

RCH – Reach

RDD - Random Digit Dialing

RDD - Random digit dialling

REM - Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media

RTS - Public Service Broadcast (Radio-television of Serbia)

US - The United States of America

ZEM - Law on Electronic Media (Zakon o elektronskim medijima)

ZJIM - Law on Public Information and Media (Zakon o javnom informisanju i medijima)

1 SUMMARY

1.1 MEDIA IMPORTANCE

Diverse media platforms – television, newspapers, and online portals, reveal nuances that hinder a direct comparison of their impact due to distinct modes of audience engagement and information dissemination strategies. Nonetheless, certain indicators from our public opinion survey suggest that **television is the most influential media channel when it comes to information from the country and abroad.**

National coverage notably amplifies the reach of TV channels. Among the analysed channels, Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)¹, TV Pink, and TV Prva – recognised as **channels – emerge as the ones with the highest coverage.** Following closely behind is another commercial TV Happy, securing the fourth position. Although it has national coverage, TV B92's reach is more akin to that of cable television. All five TV channels with national coverage are pro-government oriented. Among cable TV channels, such as critically oriented N1 and Nova S, there is none that can come close in reach to any TV with national coverage, not even to TV B92.

Regarding online portals, the most influential ones are also on the pro-government spectrum. Kurir Online, Blic Online, and telegraf.rs stand out as the top three contenders. On the other hand, one government-critical portal, nova.rs, manages to secure a spot in the top five.

1.2 MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

The primary sources of information for citizens are still television stations and online portals of traditional media outlets. That is particularly important given that all television stations with national coverage have pro-government affiliations. In such a constellation, citizens generally have limited access to reporting critical of the government. The rating of the Nova S internet portal ranked fourth in importance, suggesting a demand for critical information and reporting. However, the reality shows that **pro-government media**

outlets, both on television and in online portals are those of the highest media importance.

The media consumption habits are often influenced by demographic factors. A generational divide is particularly evident in the type of media consumed and source diversification. This divide is more prominent among those aged 65 and above who rely on just one or two media sources, whereas those between 18 and 34 are more likely to use more than five media sources. The latter group also stands out as the most inclined to consume digital media exclusively, while those 65 and above tend to favour traditional media.

Individuals who primarily consume government-critical media outlets tend to feel closer to opposition parties rather than those in power. Moreover, individuals who primarily consume critical media outlets and those who feel aligned with opposition parties are likely to favour Serbia's EU membership. Conversely, those who consume pro-government media feel more aligned with the parties in power, and are less likely to favour Serbia's accession to the EU.

When it comes to attitudes toward Russia, people tend to prioritise maintaining positive relationships with Russia rather than enforcing sanctions against the country. Among this group, the majority predominantly **engage with pro-government media** sources, a pattern also shared by most who are against joining the EU.

1.3 TRUST IN MEDIA

Citizens generally exhibit low levels of trust in media outlets, regardless of their political preferences. TV channels garner the most trust when compared to other media types, such as internet portals, radio, and newspapers. **Public Service Broadcaster (RTS) stands out as the most trustworthy media outlet**, with every other person in the sample

expressing explicit trust. Pro-government TV Pink ranks last in trustworthiness among TV channels, with every fourth person expressing trust.

A notable disparity exists between individuals' personal trust in media and their perception of the trust other people have in media (perceived trust). An inverse correlation exists between the two: **citizens believe that, in general, the most trustworthy outlets to others are the ones in which they personally trust the least.** The exception to the rule is the RTS, whose levels of personal and perceived trustworthiness are almost the same.

1.4 INFORMATION MANIPULATION

People older than 65, those with only a primary education, those living in rural areas, housewives, farmers, and pensioners exhibit a very high risk of being a victim of information manipulation. People older than 35, those with secondary education, unemployed, and those living in South or East Serbia exhibit a moderately high risk of being affected by information manipulation.

In relation to specific strategies that can help counter information manipulation, two positive patterns emerge. First, a slight majority of citizens claim to follow news pieces in their entirety with the goal of gaining a greater understanding and second, the absolute majority of participants' report having a feeling that they have encountered misleading and inaccurate information.

However, even though almost half of the participants' report verifying information they encounter, the vast majority of them – **7 in every 10 – report verifying information entirely incorrectly.** Among the incorrect verification procedures, relying on common sense or discussing the topic with friends and family are particularly identifiable.

1.5 EXPOSURE TO COUNTER-ATTITUDINAL NEWS

CRTA also conducted an experiment, hoping to isolate the influence of one-time exposure to counter-attitudinal news. The topic of the news piece was the role of the EU in the development of Serbian agriculture given that the accession to the EU is a highly contested topic in the Serbian public sphere. **There was no evidence that the single exposure to counter-attitudinal messages influences attitudes significantly.**

Nonetheless, even though citizens read a piece of news that they did not agree with, they still evaluated the supposed writer of the news fairly. Furthermore, they **correctly recognised the sentiment in which the EU was presented.**

Our analysis concluded that short-term improvements in the media reporting are unlikely to sway the entrenched media landscape characterised by persistent bias, polarisation and information manipulation.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Changes in the overall political context

The media landscape in Serbia is marked by substantial political influence and media polarisation, coupled with limited media diversity. The work of the Regulatory Body of Electronic Media (REM) does not reflect the role of an oversight body aimed at regulating electronic media in the public interest. Instead, it is non-transparent, often demonstrably biased, and operates in favour of pro-government media. Additionally, the lack of transparency in financing media companies raises concerns about their integrity. All five national television channels are labelled as “pro-government.” They exhibit a consistent pattern wherein parties in power receive more media attention and representation compared to opposition parties. CRTA has continuously measured that 95% of airtime was reserved for the ruling parties. Furthermore, while the reports on ruling parties tend to be predominantly positive or neutral, those concerning the opposition are largely negative.

Inadequate mechanisms of financing or co-financing the media were recognised as the main reason for the increasing presence and influence of the Serbian ruling majority¹. CRTA's previous assessment that the political influence "started becoming dominant in comparison to the previously pronounced influence of the business elite" remains unchanged. The same could be said about the general state of the media landscape which, besides the political control, is characterised by self-censorship, media manipulation, eroding professional and ethical standards, threats to media personnel, volatile media market, and noticeable polarisation.²

When it comes to the media landscape in Serbia in 2023, there are three elements worth mentioning. The first is the media legislature, with a special emphasis on two new media laws introduced in October 2023.³ The second element concerns media pluralism, or more precisely, the lack thereof. Finally, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, media narratives about foreign actors have become radicalized in the Serbian media sphere.⁴ The recent conflict in Gaza (October 2023) further amplifies the importance of understanding the portrayal of foreign events in the media.

2.2 Legal aspect

In the last days before the parliamentary elections in 2023, with a delay of more than a year compared to the planned deadlines, the Parliament adopted two new media laws – the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media. The primary reason for enacting two new laws was to realise the objectives outlined in the 2020 Media Strategy and to further align with the legal framework of the European Union, particularly through compliance with the AVMS Directive. As stated in CRTA's previous report, even before the modifications, the legislative framework in the field of media was satisfactory. Nevertheless, the laws were not consistently applied because the competent institutions,

¹ CRTA (2022), Mapping the Media Landscape in Serbia 2020-2021, available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/k8> , Last access: 22/12/23

² Ibid.

³ Sl. glasnik RS", br. 92/2023

⁴ Crta (2023), Nothing is true, and everything is possible. Available at: <https://link.crtars.rs/ka> . Last access: 26.12.2023

and above all the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM), looked favourably on violations of the law. Precisely for this reason, the key changes that should have been made by these laws refer to the creation of conditions for increasing the independence of the REM; specifying and increasing the transparency of the procedures for allocating budget funds to the media, increasing the transparency of data on the media. However, contrary to the media strategy in the legislative framework, after a decade of formal commitment to withdrawing the state from the media, the possibility for a state-founded company to once again become a media owner has been reintroduced. This has cast a shadow over the positive aspects of the changes brought about by these two laws.

2.2.1 Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media

Increasing the independence of the REM is one of the main goals of the Media Strategy for the period 2020 - 2025. The intervention in the legislative framework, carried out through the adoption of the new Law on Electronic Media, foresees the exclusion of the National Assembly Committee and the Assembly of AP Vojvodina from the process of nominating members of the Council. Instead of parliamentary committees, which have so far nominated a total of 3 candidates, civil society organisations will have greater representation in the nomination process. Nonetheless, one member will be jointly nominated by the Commissioner for information of public importance and personal data protection, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and the Ombudsman, who are elected by the National Assembly.

Another important novelty is the prescription of stricter professional criteria for candidacy for Council member.

In terms of organisation, the new Law on Electronic Media introduced the function of director of the REM. The role of this authority is primarily administrative. Nevertheless, as a significant shortcoming of the new Law on Electronic Media, the expert public points out the fact that sufficient functional independence of the REM was not achieved, i.e. that its emancipation from the state administration system was not carried out. Thus, the position of the REM is not compliant with the standards of the AVMS Directive.

Finally, the Law also provides that after one year from the date of entry into force of the law, the mandate of all current members of the REM Council will end by force of law. The members of the next convocation will be elected for terms of different durations: 2, 4 or 6 years, which will be decided by a draw.

2.2.2 Allocation of budgetary funds

With the adoption of the new Law on Public Information and Media, significant modifications were made in the legislative framework aimed at increasing the predictability and transparency of bids for the allocation of funds for the co-financing of projects in the field of public information in order to serve the public interest.

The modifications include a more precise definition of the concept of public interest, stricter criteria for the selection of members of the commissions that conduct bids, the establishment of a Single Information System for the implementation and monitoring of project co-financing, in which all relevant data on bids and projects will be kept.

Moreover, data on state advertising should be more transparent: it is foreseen that data on funds paid to the media in the name of advertising by public authorities be registered in the Media Registry.

A useful novelty is also the fact that, in addition to the Media Registry, the Register of Media Content Producers will also be established. It will contain data on the amount of funds allocated to producers of media content who are not registered as media and who also receive significant funds through public bids.

2.2.3 Reinstatement of state-ownership of the media

Contrary to the Media Strategy, the state is regaining ownership of the media. An exception to the rule that the Republic, autonomous province, or local government unit, as well as other entities in public ownership, cannot be media owners, is provided in a way that this prohibition does not apply to legal entities whose founder is engaged in electronic communications activities. This provision will legalise the situation in which

Telekom Srbija, state-controlled telecommunication provider, establishes legal entities that, in turn, establish media outlets.

2.3 Lack of pluralism: Is opposition truly a statistical error?

CRTA's yearlong monitoring of media⁵ showed that pluralism truly is foreign to the Serbian media. Main findings speak of such a low level of opposition representation in central news on televisions with national coverage, that they could be characterised as a "statistical error". Of all air-time dedicated to political actors, the ruling majority routinely gets 95% of air-time. This trend is only interrupted during the election period when the media outlets are obliged to mention the opposition, but even then they do it disproportionately.⁶ Social crises seem to open up media space for opposition, given that in turbulent and challenging times opposition receives 12% of the time in central news. However, it was precisely during those periods, when the opposition received a bit more attention, that it was portrayed most negatively. Furthermore, the sentiment analysis shows that the ruling majority is reported on in a positive or neutral light, while the representatives of the opposition are presented in an overwhelmingly negative light. The entire opposition regularly receives significantly less coverage than the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić alone. CRTA's analysis indicates that the Serbian President addresses the nation live on TV on average almost once a day.

2.4 Foreign influence: The good, the bad, and the West

Serbian media outlets, and predominantly television channels, foster proximity to Russia by making sure it is the most mentioned country, overwhelmingly in a positive light. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the share of critical mentions has indeed increased, but they remain in the minority. On the other hand, Western actors, such as the EU, NATO, or

⁵ CRTA (2023). Media monitoring of political pluralism June 2022 - May 2023. Available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/kb> . Last access: 22/12/2023

⁶ CRTA (2023). Second interim report of long term election observation. Available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/kc> . Last access: 22/12/2023

the US are predominantly presented in a negative light. Anti-Western rhetoric has become increasingly prevalent in Serbian media, while pro-Western reporting has been on the decline. Western actors are predominantly associated with the topic of Kosovo, and when it comes to the type of media outlets, they often receive significantly unfavourable portrayals. Notably, the most widely-watched television channels with national coverage tend to report on Western entities in a highly critical manner. For instance, the negative coverage of the EU on television is nearly nine times more frequent than positive coverage.⁷ TV, online news portals, and printed newspapers all play a role in perpetuating negative sentiments and hostility towards the West, given that from July 2022 to June 2023 period, approximately 69% of all media content suspected of containing manipulated information exhibited an anti-Western bias.⁸

Another report by CRTA⁹ recognised particular anti-West narratives surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Among the prominent ones, recognising the West as the culprit stands out. Also present is the justification of the invasion by alleged Nazism of Ukrainian states. Western actors, either individually or grouped, are recognised as a threat to Russian existence and are (or were) working together with Ukraine on a common goal. Some of the mechanisms of information manipulation include the usage of years-old or even fake video footage that served as proof strengthening the pro-Russian narratives. When no doomsday scenario took place and when it became evident that Ukraine would enjoy “only” the continuous economic and military equipment support, anti-West narratives started getting another shape: the EU sanctions, according to the majority of Serbian media, hurt only the EU citizen – because Russia is energetically and economically superior.

In conclusion, the media landscape in Serbia is marked by lack of pluralism, concentrated ownership, limited transparency (although, as of October 2023 the functional requirements for the transparency improvement are met), close ties between media and

⁷ CRTA (2022). Media monitoring: The war in Ukraine cast a shadow over all other topics. Available here: <https://link.crtars/bk> . Last access: 22/12/23

⁸ CRTA (2023). CRTA monitoring medija: Priča protiv zapadne strane – monitoring stranog uticaja, jul 2022 – jun 2023. Available here: <https://link.crtars/kd> , Last access: 22/12/2023

⁹ CRTA (2023), Nothing is true, and everything is possible. Available here: <https://link.crtars/ka> , Last access: 22/12/23

political structures,¹⁰ the continued presence of the state in the ownership, as well as strong anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda in dominant media, particularly in TV channels with national coverage. In the context of Serbia's intricate media landscape, understanding the dynamics of media consumption and its consequential influence on individual political opinions becomes of paramount significance.

2.5 Research structure

In light of the above context, CRTA conducted a public opinion survey aimed at understanding media consumption habits and additionally conducted an experimental study aimed at understanding the influence counter-attitudinal news may have on attitudes. Besides media consumption habits research, CRTA obtained data from two companies measuring the size of the audience for television (Nielsen) and online portals (Gemius). By combining various indicators, CRTA has singled out the most significant television channels and portals covering political and societal topics.

The report is organised in six chapters. Chapters are organised in accordance with the main topics identified over the course of this research. The research methodology will be discussed in the third chapter.

The chapter Media Consumption Habits offers deep insight into viewership habits, the question of trust placed in both the media and the political actors, and the general public's resilience to information manipulation.

Within particular viewership habits, with respect to television, the report puts a special emphasis on morning shows, political talk shows, and central news. When it comes to online portals, the report delves into data regarding total visits, as well as visits to the homepage and news regarding politics and society.

¹⁰ CRTA (2022), Media ownership maps cover the period from 2020 to 2021. Available here: <https://link.crtars/kf> . Last access: 25/12/2023

For data obtained from the public opinion survey, the report follows the following logic: firstly, when appropriate, the overall results are discussed. Secondly, the analysis focuses on differences between demographic factors and political factors that yield statistical significance (at 95% or 99%). The first such section refers to the usage of diverse media sources, followed by insights on media consumption frequency.

The section regarding the trustworthiness of the media and various actors follows. Here, the report offers an overall result regarding trustworthiness but also delves into demographic and political characteristics of citizens, who to different extents, place trust in the three media outlets: RTS – the public broadcaster, TV Pink – openly pro-government television, and the TV N1 – a cable TV channel which gained the status one of the most government-critical television.

When it comes to information manipulation, the report presents findings regarding correct and incorrect information verification procedures, as well as insights about the most commonly recognised source of disinformation. Within this section, the report offers a list of demographic factors that, to various degrees, can suggest increased vulnerability to information manipulation.

The public opinion survey also provided information about various political attitudes, particularly regarding the EU, the positioning about the war in Ukraine, and the recognition of foreign actors as the most important partners of Serbia. These views were analysed separately on the basis of media consumption preferences.

The sixth and the last chapter focuses on the media experiment, in which the participants were divided into groups. Each participant was exposed to an article that expressed a counter attitude to the one that participant has towards the EU. The variable that was varied was the source of the article, half of the participants saw their preferred media as the source, and the other half received an article that had no source. This chapter offers detailed insights into the experiment objectives, methodology, and results.

2.6 Research relevance

The significance of this research transcends mere analysis, as it uncovers specific challenges individuals and society encounter when combating information manipulation. The research delves into individuals' perceptions of information sources, exploring in detail their fact-checking habits, and pinpointing demographic groups that necessitate targeted policies to bolster resilience against manipulation.

Confirming earlier observations, the present study underscores media polarisation¹¹ in Serbia and the absence of the media and political pluralism.¹² As a matter of fact, citizens' political attitudes significantly correlate with their choice of information sources. However, this correlation is intricate and bidirectional, intertwining individuals' political standpoints, preferred media outlets, and the trust vested in them. Consequently, addressing this multifaceted issue requires a concerted effort involving relevant institutions, civil society actors, and the media themselves.

A noteworthy revelation is the widespread vulnerability to information manipulation among citizens, irrespective of their political leanings, contingent upon specific demographic traits. Advocating for an institutional framework that disincentivises at least the most egregious violations of this nature emerges as an imperative within this media landscape. Ultimately, this research calls for raising awareness about institutional accountability while concurrently fostering a stronger dialogue among citizens, media, and political actors and entities.

¹¹ CRTA, (2022). Opinion poll: Political attitudes of citizens of Serbia – autumn 2022. Available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/kg> . Last Access: 22/12/23

¹² CRTA (2023). Media monitoring of political pluralism June 2022 - May 2023. Available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/kb> . Last access: 22/12/2023

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The CRTA's comprehensive media audit consists of two different research projects and three different sources of information. Data regarding the "Importance of Media" is bought from Nielsen Television Audience Measurement¹³ (television data) and from the Gemius¹⁴ audience (portals' data). CRTA conducted an original analysis of the provided data and integrated it in the first section of the report "Media consumption habits". That section, however, builds on CRTA's original research of public opinion regarding media consumption, trust in media, information manipulation, and political attitudes.

Delving deeper into the topic of media influence, CRTA then conducted an experimental research uncovering the relationship between political attitudes and exposure to counter-attitudinal messages. The results of this experiment constitute the last part of the report.

The current chapter outlines two methodological approaches used for research sections of the report respectively.¹⁵

3.1 Nielsen and Gemius data

- Target group: Population of Serbia (18+)
- Time frame: April 2023
- Source: Nielsen Television Audience Measurement and Gemius Audience

3.2 Public Opinion Survey

- Population: Population of Serbia (18+)
- Sample size: 1009 respondents

¹³ Nielsen, available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/kh>. Last access: 25/12/2023

¹⁴ Gemius Audience, available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/ki>. Last access: 25/12/2023

¹⁵ More detailed descriptions of the experimental research can be found in the section concerning the experiment.

- Data collection method: computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI)
- Data collection period: 8 to 12 April, 2023
- Sample type: One-stage random stratified sample: RDD telephone numbers (random digit dialling)
- Margin of error: 3.1%
- Response rate: 21%
- Questionnaire length: 16 minutes

3.3 Experimental study

- Sample Size: 563 participants (representative sample for Belgrade)
- Sampling Procedure: Snowballing procedure and according to quotas related to the municipality, settlement type, age, and gender to represent the city of Belgrade.
- Data collection period: 13 to 27 July, 2023
- Geographic Representation: Recruited from all seventeen municipalities of Belgrade, with proportional representation from urban (86.7%) and rural (13.3%) settlements.
- Gender Balance: 49.2% male and 50.2% female participants.
- Age Range: From 18 to 90 years of age, with a mean age of 47.96 (standard deviation 18.67).

4 MEDIA IMPORTANCE

Media importance - Chapter overview

- **Television channels rank first in overall media importance** when it comes to informing the public about social and political topics. **Online portals come in high second place**, while social media channels are used as a source of information by more than half of citizens.
- National coverage is a distinctive feature of television channels with the most far-reaching coverage; **five television channels with national coverage constitute the group of top five television channels ranked by overall importance. All five are pro-government oriented.**
- **RTS1 stands out as the most important TV channel for overall socio-political content. TV Pink ranks second, while TV Happy and TV Prva share third place.**
- **RTS1** also leads the segment of **morning shows**, but the advantage over TV Pink is lower in this segment.
- **TV Happy has no contenders in the segment of political talk-shows. The most watched TV show – Aktuelnosti – regularly reaches almost twice as many viewers as the second most watched political talk-show “Ćirilica”, which is also shown on TV Happy.**

RTS1 claims yet another top spot in the segment of central news reaching every second person in the country.

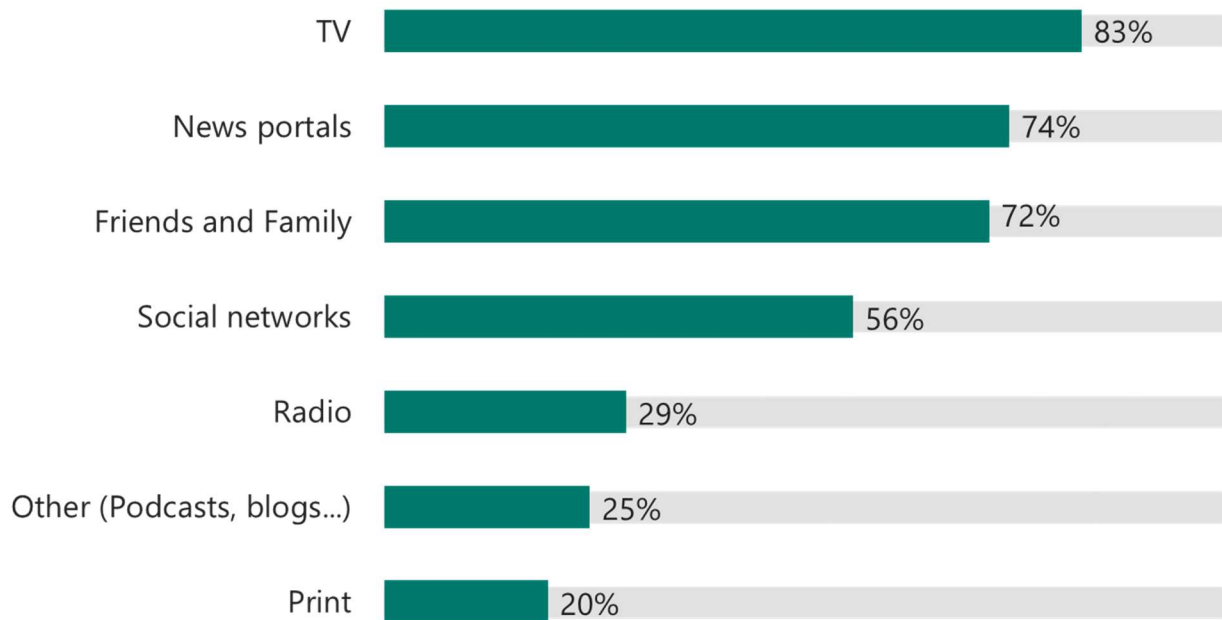
- **Three pro-government oriented internet portals, Blic online, Kurir online, and telegraf.rs stand out in their overall importance, with one government-critical portal (nova.rs) being able to parry in total reach.** Constellation marginally changes when excluding visits to non-political topics.
- **Blic online and Kurir online stand out in the homepage visits segment, both reaching twice as many homepage visitors as the third placed “nova.rs.”**
- **In the segment of socio-political news, Blic online stands out** while nova.rs loses its advantage and drops to fifth place.

4.1 Type of media

The following analysis provides a comprehensive breakdown of findings related to media consumption habits in Serbia in 2023. We initiate our examination by categorising the media consumption habits based on the type of media. The respondents were allowed to provide multiple responses, enabling us to identify insightful consumption patterns. Notably, the results exhibit a relative consistency with data obtained from previous media audits.

The majority of individuals, 83%, claim that they receive information about the country and the world through television, while 74% acquire it from online editions of daily newspapers. (Chart 1) Only one in every five citizens, precisely 20%, relies on print media for their information. Given the prevalence of discussions related to domestic and international news in daily conversations, it is noteworthy that 72% of the citizens reported obtaining information through discussions with family and friends. Additionally, approximately 56% of the population also Utilises social media to stay informed.

Chart 1: Where do you get the information about the current events in the country and abroad?



This information forms the basis for our subsequent analysis, where we delve deeper into TV channels and news online portals.

4.2 Context – Media Importance

Our starting assumption revolves around the notion that the media plays an important role in shaping public opinion attitudes.¹⁶ We employ this assumption as a contextual framework and define media importance through three primary parameters: reach, attention and loyalty.¹⁷ To gather comprehensive data, we acquired official information from two third-party vendors, namely Nielsen for TV and Gemius for online portals.¹⁸

The significance of the media is calculated through three indicators:

¹⁶ David Giles, "Psychology of the Media", 2010.

¹⁷ CRTA, The importance of media - is the reach sufficient, and why isn't it?, Available here: <https://link.crtars/kk>. Last Access: 22/12/23

¹⁸ The N1 and Danas portals do not allow a segmented measuring of visitors on their portals, thus making it impossible to compare them with other portals in the sample in all segments.

Reach: The number of people within a specific target group who spent at least five minutes with a particular television content (morning shows, news, political talk-shows) or was in contact with the content (articles) in case of internet portals.¹⁹

Attention: In addition to reach, the significance also includes attention, represented through the average time the target group spent with a particular media content.

Loyalty: The significance also takes into account loyalty, depicted through the number of people who followed media content on only one channel or online portal. This factor indicates how much the audience remained loyal to a particular information source.

We defined these three indicators using the following variables:

ATS – Average Time Spent, average time spent with certain content on television or internet portals.

RCH – Reach, part of the population of the analysed target group that came into contact with the analysed content on television or internet portals. In the case of television, this contact was supposed to last at least five minutes.

EXR – Exclusive Reach, part of the population of the analysed target group that came into contact with the analysed content on televisions or internet portals, and which did not follow other channels or internet portals during the duration of the show in the case of television or during the day in the case of internet portals.

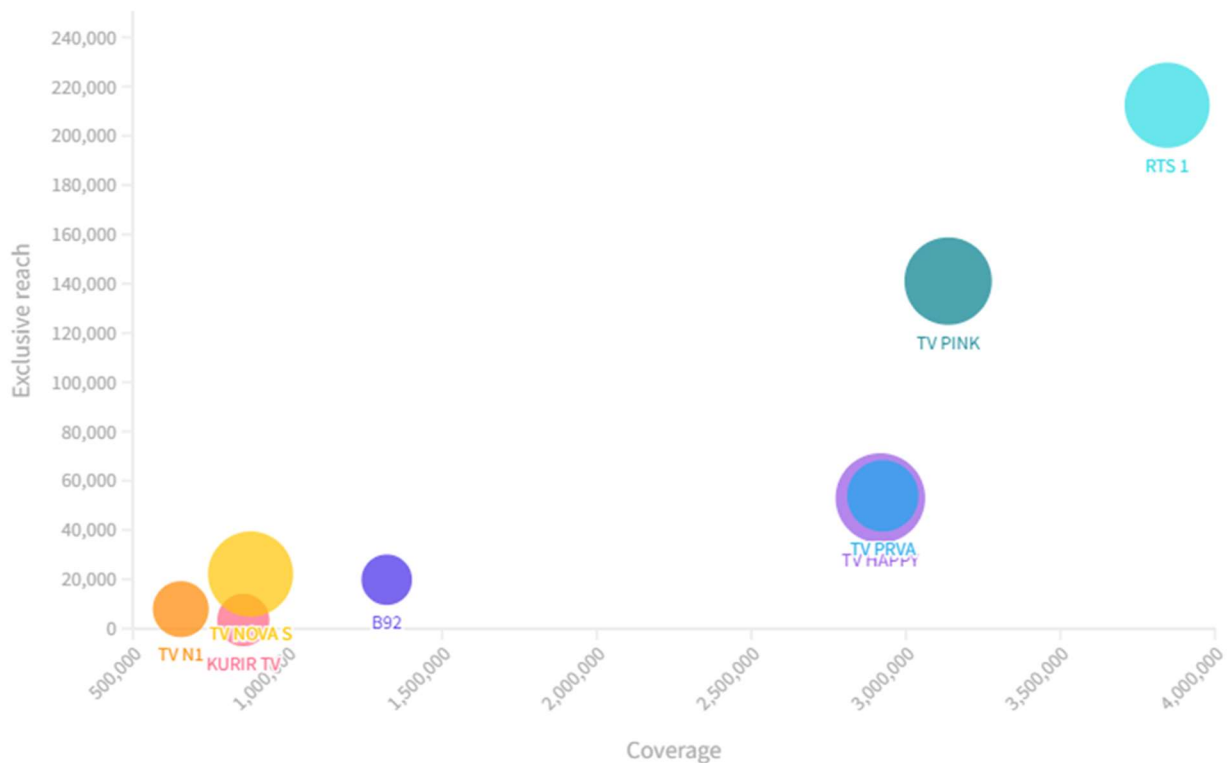
Coverage – Cumulative Reach the total cumulative population of the analysed target group that came into contact with the analysed content on television or internet portals. In the case of television, this contact was supposed to last at least five minutes.

¹⁹ Although the market standard for measuring reach on TV is often set at at least a minute of viewing, the focus here is on a longer duration, specifically a five-minute retention, due to the uniqueness of socio-political and informational content

4.3 Importance of Television

As our data presented in Chart 1 (above) suggests, television is the most consumed type of media. Consequently, we commence our analysis by exploring the data obtained from Nielsen, shedding light on reach, attention and loyalty. (Chart 2)²⁰

Chart 2: Presentation of the importance of TV channels on the overall socio-political content



The overall importance of individual television channels measured through reach, attention and loyalty on television channels is visible in the chart above. TV Pink takes second place with a smaller number of loyal viewers and less audience coverage, while the attention measured through average time spent with this television is approximately the same as RTS 1.

²⁰ Interactive presentation of all charts is available on the following link: <https://link.crt.rs/kk>

TV Pink takes the second place with the only comparable parameter being the average time²¹ spent on the channel. In comparison to TV Prva and TV Happy, both of which have similar coverage as TV Pink, the latter has significantly more loyal viewers as indicated by the higher number of exclusive reach. While TV Prva and TV Happy have similar numbers of loyal viewership and similar coverage results, TV Happy manages to keep its viewers glued to the programme more than any other channel in the sample: on average, 41 minutes.

Speaking of the pro-government vs. critically-oriented television results, the discrepancy is obvious. None of the government-critical television channels reaches a coverage of 900,000 viewers in a whole month, and neither has more than 30.000 loyal viewers. However, TV Nova S is a top contestant when it comes to the average time spent on a channel, given that it is tied for third place with RTS in that regard. Such findings indicate that there is a demand for government-critical media and the way of reporting; however, their reach remains limited.

4.3.1 Morning shows

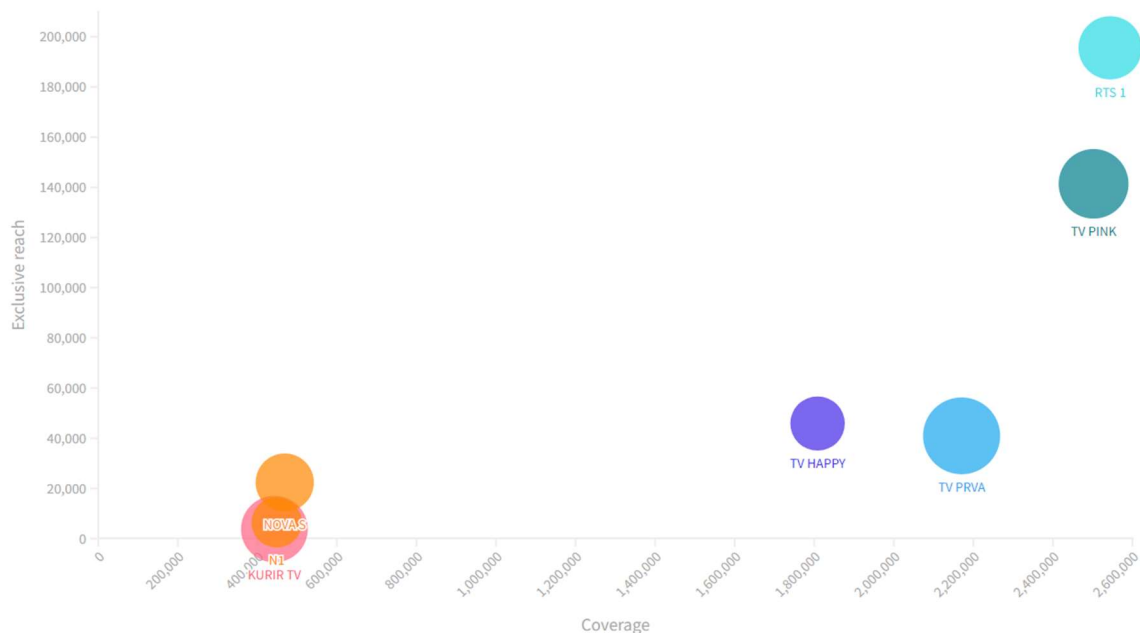
Morning shows play a significant role in informing citizens about political and everyday social topics in Serbia. In that sense, the analysis of this segment of viewership could possibly tell a story a bit different than the one where all numbers are gathered and compared.

²¹Average Time Spent (ATS) is represented on the charts by the size of the circle. The larger the circle, the more time people spend with specific media content, particularly on certain television channels.

Chart 3: Presentation of the importance of TV channels in the segment of morning shows

Morning shows

Presentation of the importance of TV channels in the segment of morning shows



A strong division in habits regarding morning shows is visible in the chart above (Chart 3). All TV channels with national coverage are placed in the lower right and top right corner of the graph, indicating that their coverage is unmatched. While TV Prva is the best at keeping viewers' attention, amassing 28 minutes of average time spent, it still fails to build a loyal audience that would not switch the channel. RTS1 is the champion in that regard, with more than 200,000 people exclusively watching RTS1's morning show. TV Pink's morning show reaches almost as many viewers as RTS1's, even surpassing it in average time spent on the channel. On the other hand, cable TVs, including NEW S, N1 and TV Kurir are located in the lower left corner indicating low both exclusive reach and coverage.

4.3.2 Results of individual political TV shows

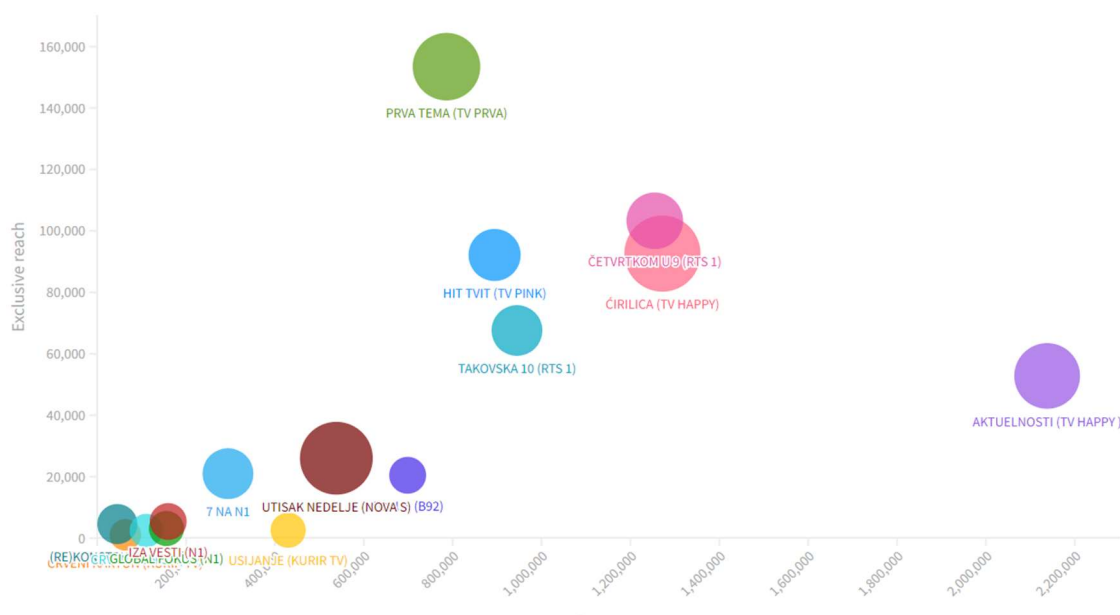
Political talk-shows are very popular TV format in Serbia. Our analysis included 16 most watched political talk-shows on different TV channels. Political talk-shows on television

are particularly interesting in the context of pro-government and critical television channels distinction, given that government-critical opinions almost never occur on pro-government television channels.

Chart 4: Presentation of the importance of TV channels on all socio-political content

Socio-political talk-shows

Presentation of the importance of TV channels on all socio-political shows



Concerning coverage, TV Happy has no contenders. (Chart 4) TV show “Aktuelnosti” produced by TV Happy, is by far the most watched political show covering almost twice as much of the audience as the second show in the entire sample, “Ćirilica”. TV show “Ćirilica” is broadcast on the same TV channel, TV Happy. “The show “Četvrtkom u devet” broadcast on RTS 1 has a similar coverage and number of loyal viewers as “Ćirilica”, but the average time spent watching “Ćirilica” is far greater than that for the show “Četvrtkom u devet”.

“Prva tema” from TV Prva has no contestants when it comes to loyal viewership and is the third in the entire sample when it comes to average time spent on that TV show.²²

²² This show is unique in that during the period between two electoral cycles, the parliamentary elections of 2022 and the extraordinary parliamentary elections of 2023, it was broadcast only in instances when an interview was conducted with Aleksandar Vučić, as was the case in April 2023.

However, it still needs to find a broader audience given that it is only sixth in overall coverage.

Political TV shows where one could hear some criticism towards the government are placed in the lower left corner, meaning that their coverage is subpar as well as the loyal viewership. The only exception to this rule is “Utisak nedelje”, broadcast by Nova S. Although it does not garner high coverage and does not have as many loyal viewers as the aforementioned TV shows, this programme still maintains the second place in terms of average time spent on this channel during “Utisak nedelje”.

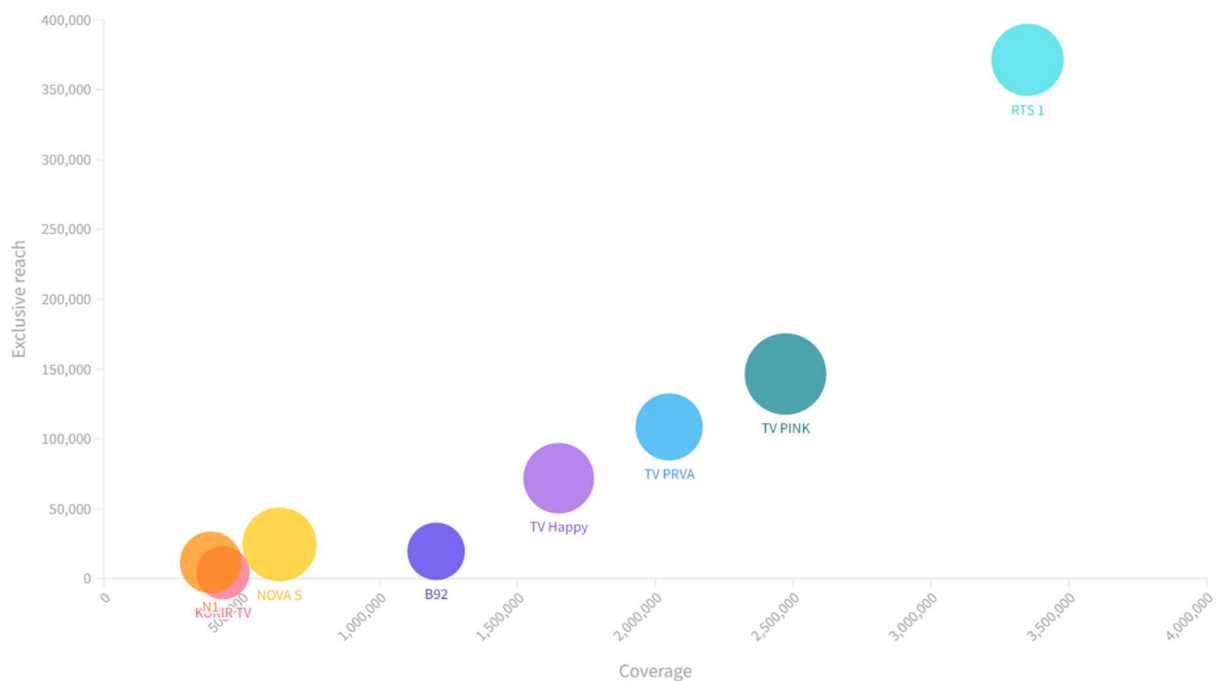
4.3.3 Central news

Finally, we look into central news. Unlike the previously analysed format in which shows cover one or a few topics in detail, a format of central news generally assumes bite-sized information from the country and the world.

Chart 5: Presentation of the importance of TV channels in the segment of central news

Central news

Presentation of the importance of TV channels in the segment of central news



As Chart 5 suggests, RTS1 is by far the most relevant TV channel, with coverage nearing 3.5 million, of which 400,000 are loyal viewers. To put this in perspective, this number is more than two times larger than the loyal viewers of TV Pink and TV Prva, and four times larger than the loyal viewers of TV Happy. At the very bottom of the Chart 5, in the lower left corner, with a low coverage and number of loyal viewers, are three cable television channels: N1, Kurir Television, and Nova S.

4.4 Importance of online portals

Internet portals of mostly traditional media are the second most common source of information for citizens. Given that the internet offers virtually infinite space for news production, and in pursuit of clicks (and revenue), portals often resort to information manipulation strategies, most prominently sensationalism. In that light, research uncovering portals' influence is of utmost importance.

To assess the importance of the news portals relevant for this research, we segmented data, whenever it was possible, so that it do not include articles related to entertainment and sport. We firstly look at the total visits (on socio-political content) to a portal in a month, its total coverage, the loyal readership, and the average time a visitor spends on the portal.

Our second part of the analysis concerns two more specific segments; the first involves direct homepage visits, and the second, the news segment.

4.4.1 Total visits (socio-political content)

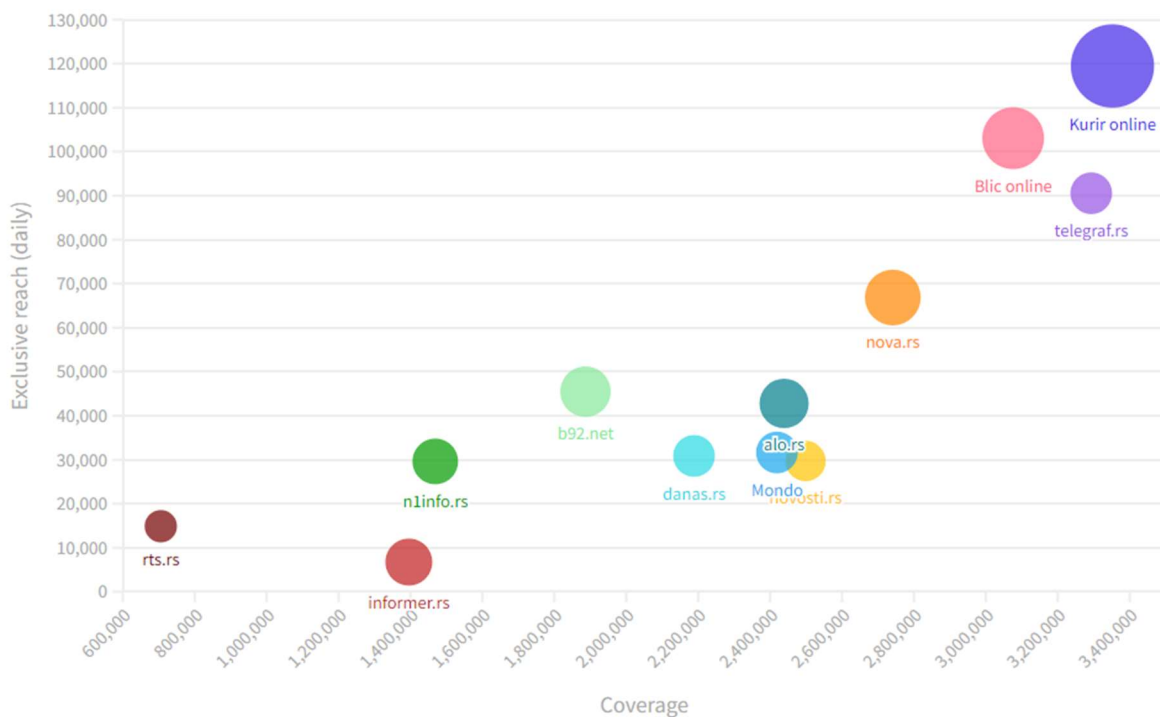
Within the sample, Kurir online stands out as the portal with the largest coverage, the highest number of loyal readership, and the portal with the highest time spent. Regarding the overall influence, Blic online and telegraf.rs are the strong second-place contestants: while telegraf.rs reaches larger coverage per month, Blic online manages to keep the visitors longer on their website and has more loyal visitors. Nova.rs stands out in fourth place, with a somewhat higher time spent on its portal in comparison to other portals

excluding Kurir online and Blic online. Informer.rs’s ability to keep the visitors’ attention is not negligible given that this portal has lower coverage and exclusive reach when compared to all other portals except for rts.rs. Danas.rs and n1info.rs have almost an identical number of loyal visitors and the time spent on their websites, yet danas.rs is doing significantly better when one observes coverage (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Representation of the importance of internet portals on the overall socio-political content

Total internet portals

Representation of the importance of internet portals on the overall socio-political content

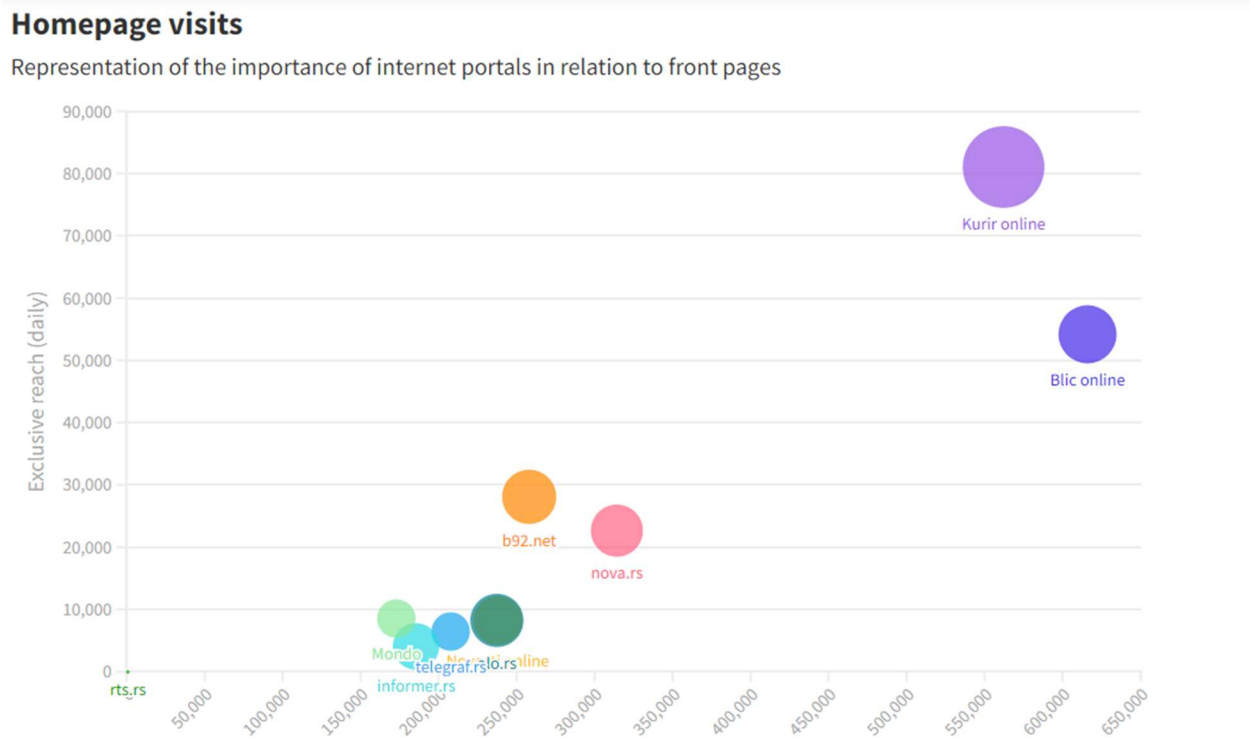


4.4.2 Homepage visits

Gemius’s data indicates that Kurir online and Blic online are two most influential portals across all observed parameters. In the Chart 7, we notice that while Blic online has a slightly bigger coverage compared to Kurir online, Kurir has significantly more loyal visitors who also spend more time on its homepage.

The coverage on the homepages recorded by Kurir and Blic online fails to surpass any of the remaining portals. The only exception is novas.rs, which approaches these values (314,000 visitors). Although b92.net records slightly lower results in coverage compared to novas.rs, it compensates for this difference with a higher number of loyal visitors. Interestingly, regardless of the coverage and differences in the number of loyal visitors, the time spent on homepages is relatively similar for most of the observed portals, ranging from 20 to 30 minutes. Significant exceptions are Kurir online where the time spent on the homepage approaches a full hour (59 minutes), while mondo.rs and telegraf.rs record only 13 minutes. (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Representation of the importance of internet portal in relation to the front page visits

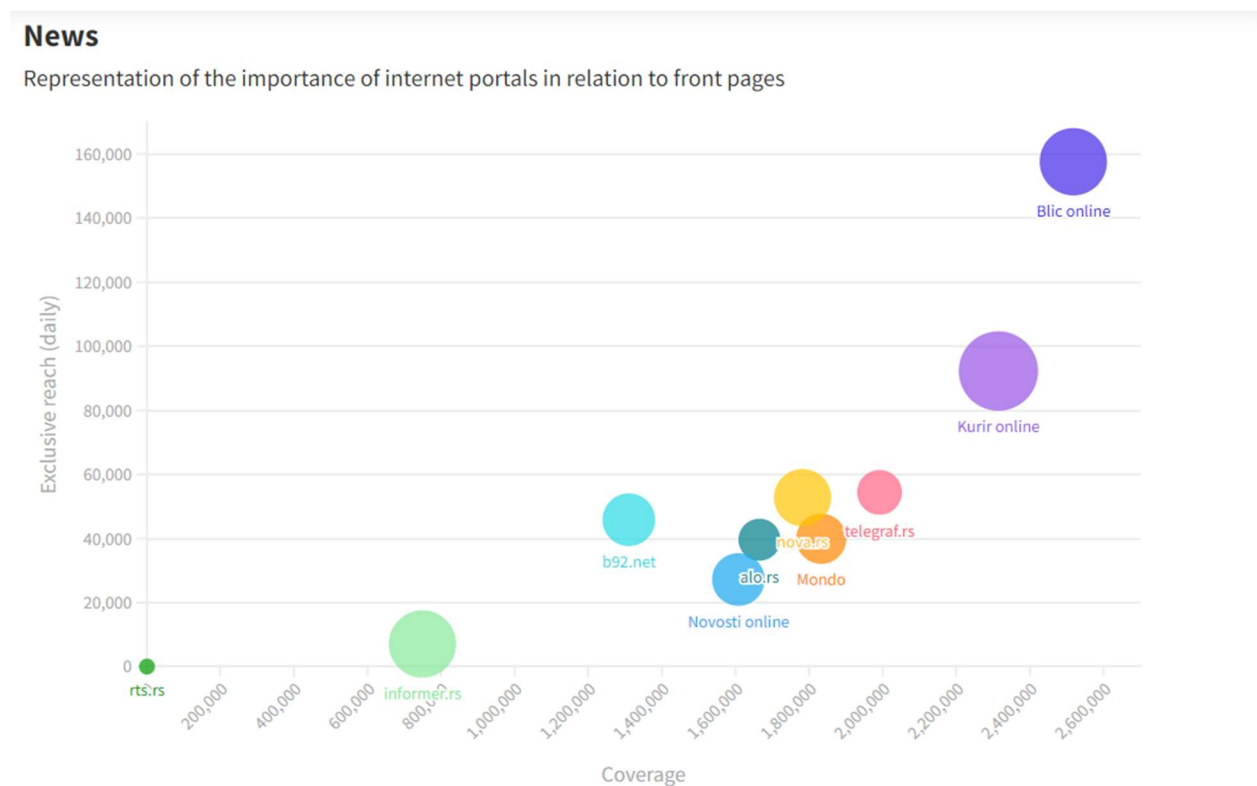


Nevertheless, looking at the homepage visits paints only part of the bigger picture given that such data do not account for content types. To combat this, we looked at the same parameters regarding the segment of news.

4.4.3 News

After excluding non-socio-political topics from the analysis, Blic online took over the first place and stood out as the portal with the largest coverage and the highest number of loyal readers (Chart 8).

Chart 8: Representation of the importance of internet portals in relation to news content



Kurir online remains the portal which the audience reads for the longest time. That, accompanied by the great coverage and significantly more loyal visitors in comparison to other portals excluding Blic, puts Kurir online on the strong second place. Interesting results are visible for informer.rs, which gets the third place at keeping the visitors' attention (18 minutes). However, coverage of less than 800.000 visitors and exclusive

reach (around 7.000 visitors) are far below the average for internet portals. It is important to highlight the phenomenon of RTS as a media company that, on the one hand, has an undisputed leadership position when it comes to television, while on the other hand, the importance of its portal is so small that it can be said that it is non-existent.

5 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

Media consumption habits - Chapter overview

- **Demographic features of citizens significantly influence their media consumption, including the frequency of information consumption, the number of sources from which they obtain information, and the types of media they most frequently consume.**
- **Approximately half of citizens Utilise 3-4 media sources, with one fifth relying solely on one or two outlets, while a third access five or more sources.**
- **TV is the primary source of information for the majority of daily media consumers.**
- **Younger citizens are more likely to exclusively consume digital media, while the oldest individuals are the one to exclusively follow traditional media.**
- **Political affiliation plays a significant role in media consumption habits; specifically, 40% exclusively rely on traditional media for their information.**

5.1 Source diversity and media type preference

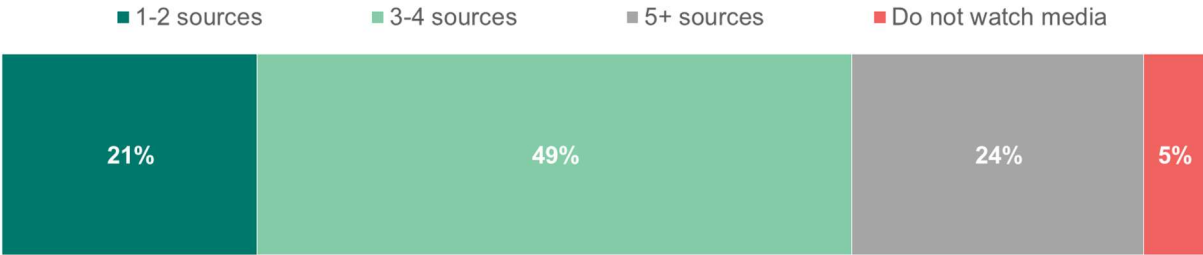
Diversity in media sources is highly desirable because it fosters a well-rounded and informed perspective.²³ Utilising multiple sources provides a broader range of viewpoints and information, reducing the risk of bias and misinformation. Combining traditional and modern media allows for a comprehensive understanding of events. It also encourages

²³ UNESCO. Media diversity. Available here: <https://link.crta.rs/kl>. Last access: 26.12.2023

critical thinking, enabling the audience to engage with news from different angles and make more informed decisions.

As indicated below (Chart 9), around half of the population (49%) report following three or four media sources, while 21% rely on only one or two media sources. About 24% of the citizens Utilise five or more sources for their information.

Chart 9: How many different sources of information do they use?

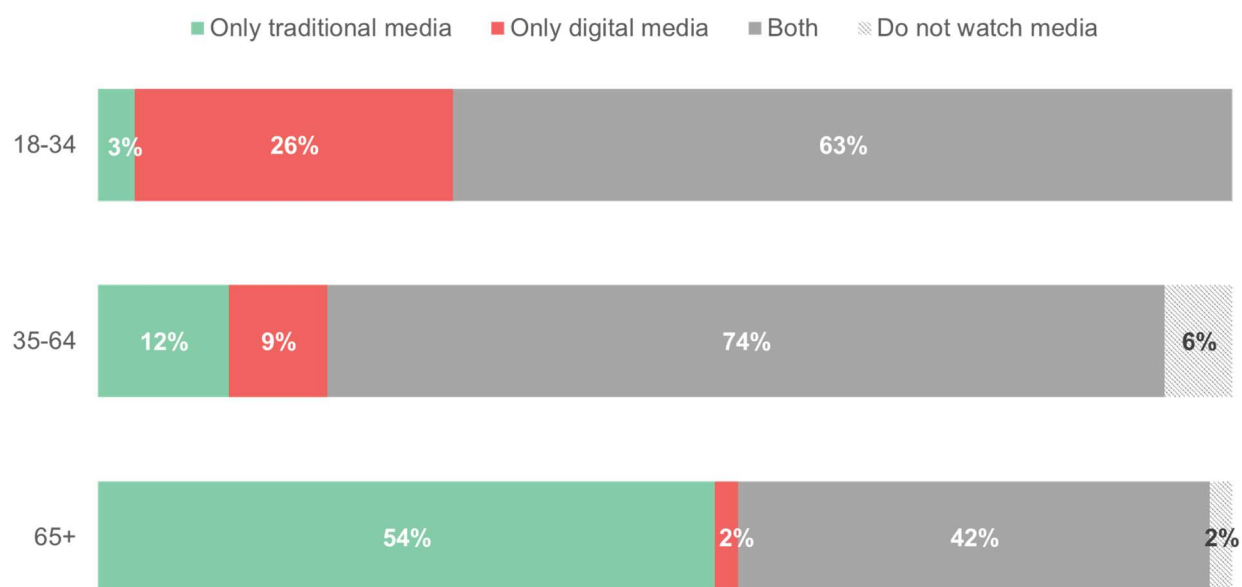


5.1.1 Demographics

The influence of age on source diversity is striking. A notable 39% of citizens aged 65 and above Utilise no more than two sources of information. Conversely, among those who use five or more sources, young individuals in the 18 to 34 age group are the most prominent (31%).

Nevertheless, media consumption habits reveal even more pronounced polarisation particularly the distinction between traditional (legacy) media and digital media. Over half of the sample population aged 65 and older (54%) exclusively relies on traditional media, including television, radio, and daily newspapers. In contrast, 26% of citizens aged 18 to 35 solely rely on digital media, such as social networks and internet portals. However, apart from the oldest demographic (65+), the majority of citizens across all age groups consume both traditional and digital media (18-34 years: 63%; 35-64 years: 74%, 65+ years: 42%). (Chart 10)

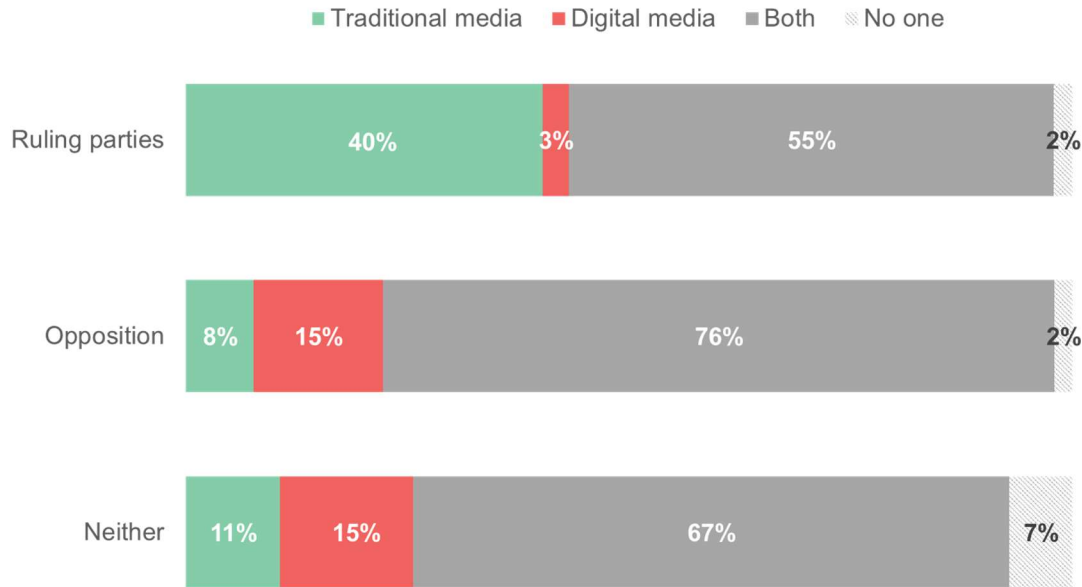
Chart 10: Consumption habits concerning various media types across three age groups



5.1.2 Political attitudes

Among the citizens aligned with the ruling parties, 40% exclusively consume traditional media, representing a significantly higher percentage compared to those aligned with opposition parties (8%) or neither (11%). The largest number of individuals closely aligned with the ruling government also consume both modern and traditional media, accounting for 55%. Nonetheless, this figure is statistically significantly lower than the percentage among those aligned with opposition parties (76%) or those who are not aligned with either the government or opposition (67%). Although exclusive consumption of modern media is rare within the total sample, both of the latter two groups exhibit significantly more individuals doing so (15% each) compared to the group aligned with the ruling majority (3%). (Chart 11)

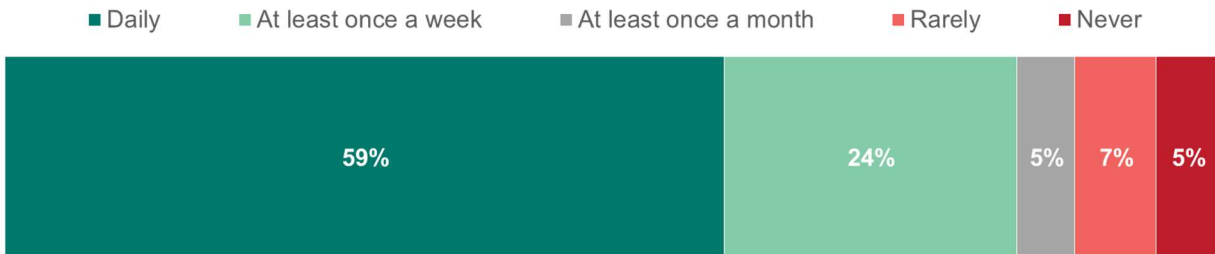
Chart 11: Media type preference among citizens with different political affiliations



5.2 Consumption of different types of media content

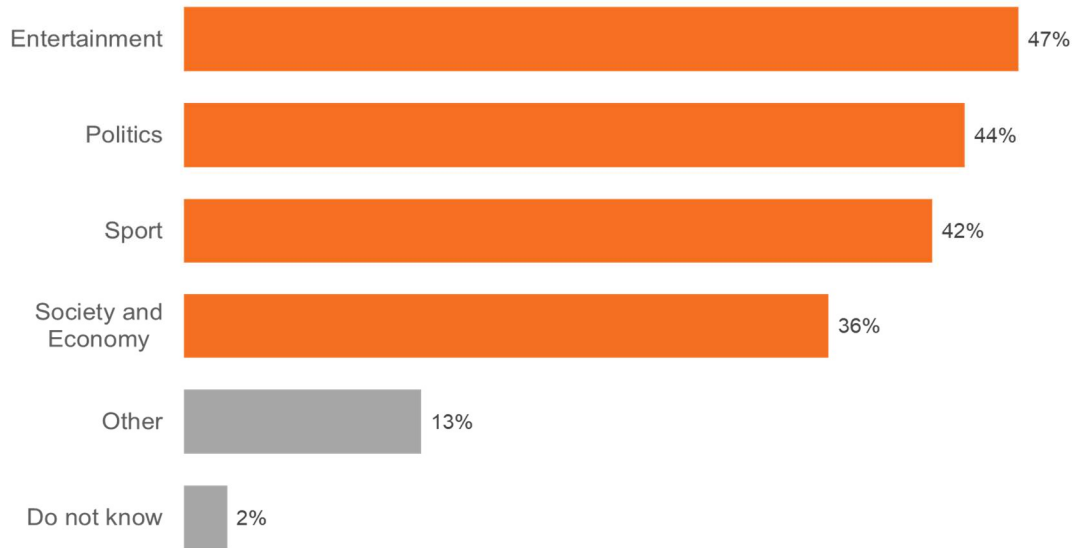
Six out of ten citizens (59%) follow the news every day, with one in four (24%) doing so at least once a week, and one in twenty (5%) at least once a month. 12% of citizens report that they follow the news rarely or never (7% and 5% respectively). (Chart 12)

Chart 12: How often do you follow news about the country and the world?



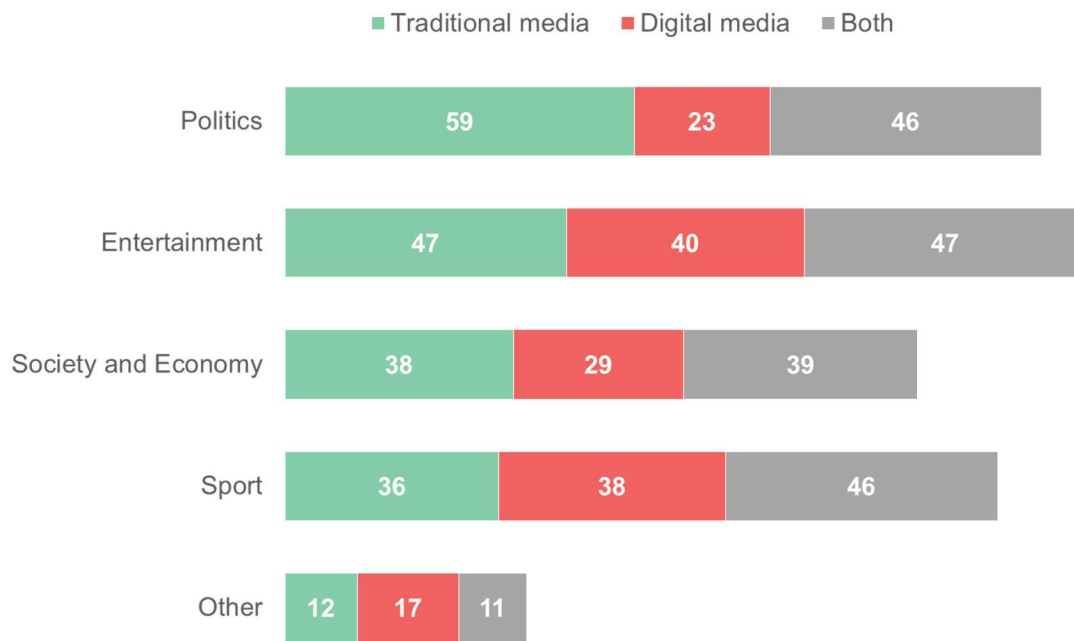
Our data indicates that the most popular content type is entertainment (47%). In the second place comes politics with three percent less (44%), then sport (42%), and the content referring to society and economy (36%). (Chart 13)

Chart 13: Which topics do you follow most often in the media?



Citizens who mostly consume traditional media tend to follow politics significantly more often (59%) when compared to those who consume digital media exclusively (23%) (Chart 14).

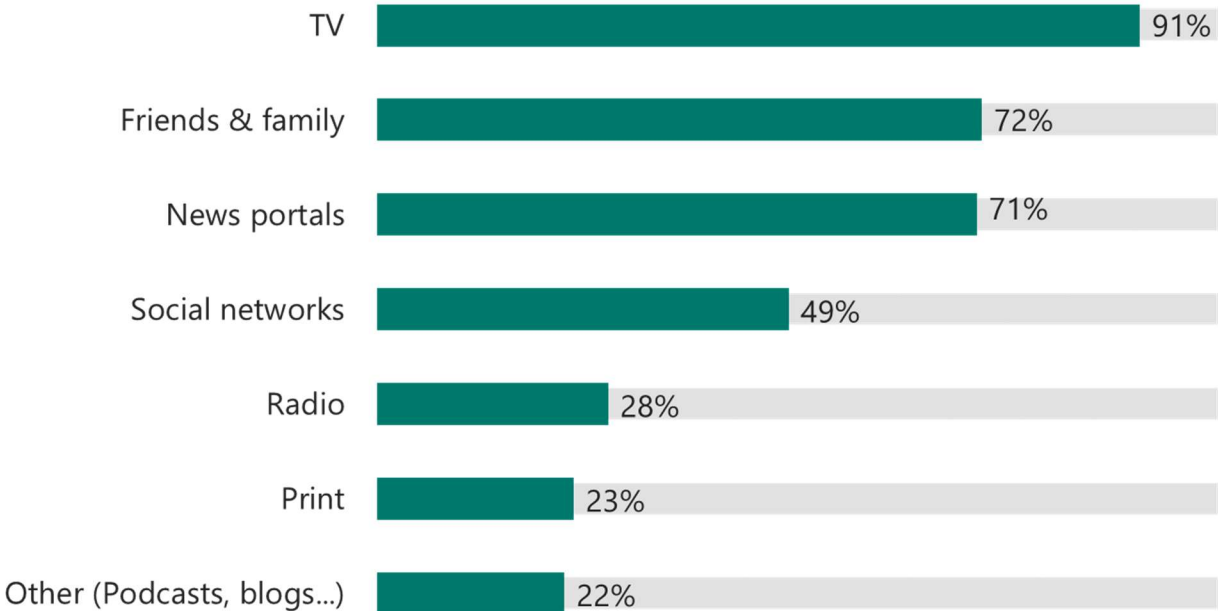
Chart 14: Topics people follow based on dominant type of media



5.2.1 Media types among the most frequent media consumers

Among those who follow the media every day, the huge majority (91%) obtain their information through television, while almost ¾ rely on conversations with family and friends and internet portals (72% and 71% respectively). Almost a half of daily media consumer also utilises social networks among other sources (49%). In comparison to the general population, print media exhibit slightly higher representation among this group (23%). (Chart 15)

Chart 15: Preferred media among most frequent media users



5.3 Trust in Media

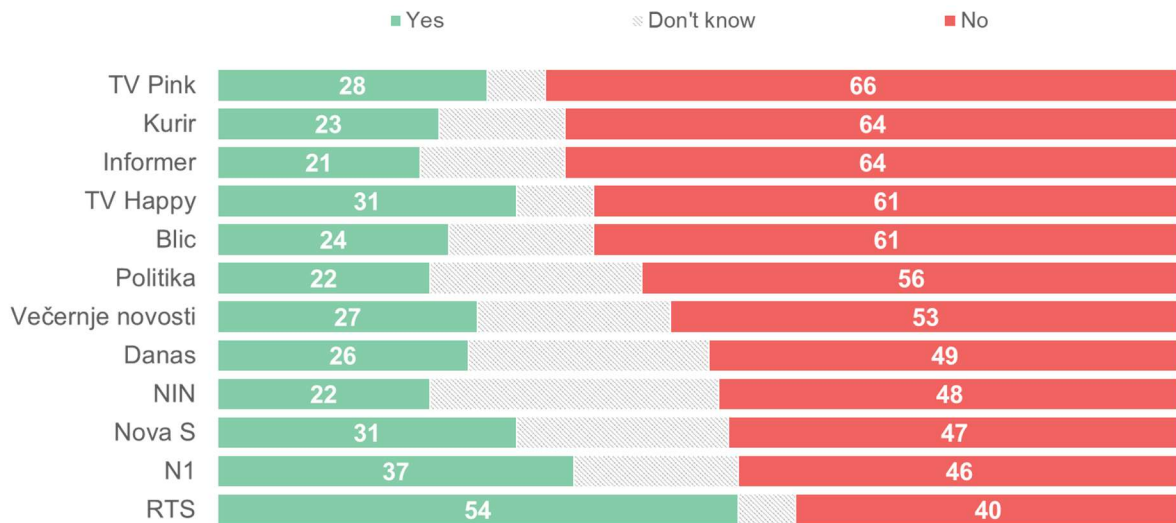
Trust in media - Chapter overview

- **People generally do not exhibit trust in the media, but the older generations are more likely to trust what they consume.**
- **Public broadcasting service (RTS) is the only television service whom more people trust than do not trust.**
- **Political affiliation highly correlates with the trust in specific media outlets**
- **The least trusted TV channel is still more trustworthy than the perceived most trusted daily newspaper.**
- **While people generally express low levels of trust in pro-government media outlets, at the same time they believe that the same outlets enjoy the trustworthy status among the others.**
- **When it comes to trust in different interlocutors in media, the majority of citizens state that they do not trusting anyone, followed by experts, political actors, friends and family and professors.**

Citizens generally exhibit a lack of trust in the media (Chart 16), regardless of whether they are pro-government or critical media outlets. Notably, RTS is the only media outlet in the study in which citizens place more trust than mistrust (54% yes, 40% no).

TV Pink is the least trusted media outlet among citizens at 66%, followed by Kurir and Informer (64% each), and TV Happy and Blic (61% each). All the mentioned media have the highest audience reach. Conversely, citizens express the most trust in RTS 1 (54%), followed by N1 (37%), Nova S and TV Happy (31% each), and TV Pink (28%). Večernje Novosti and the daily newspaper Danas follow at 27% and 26% respectively.

Chart 16: Personal trust in specific media outlets

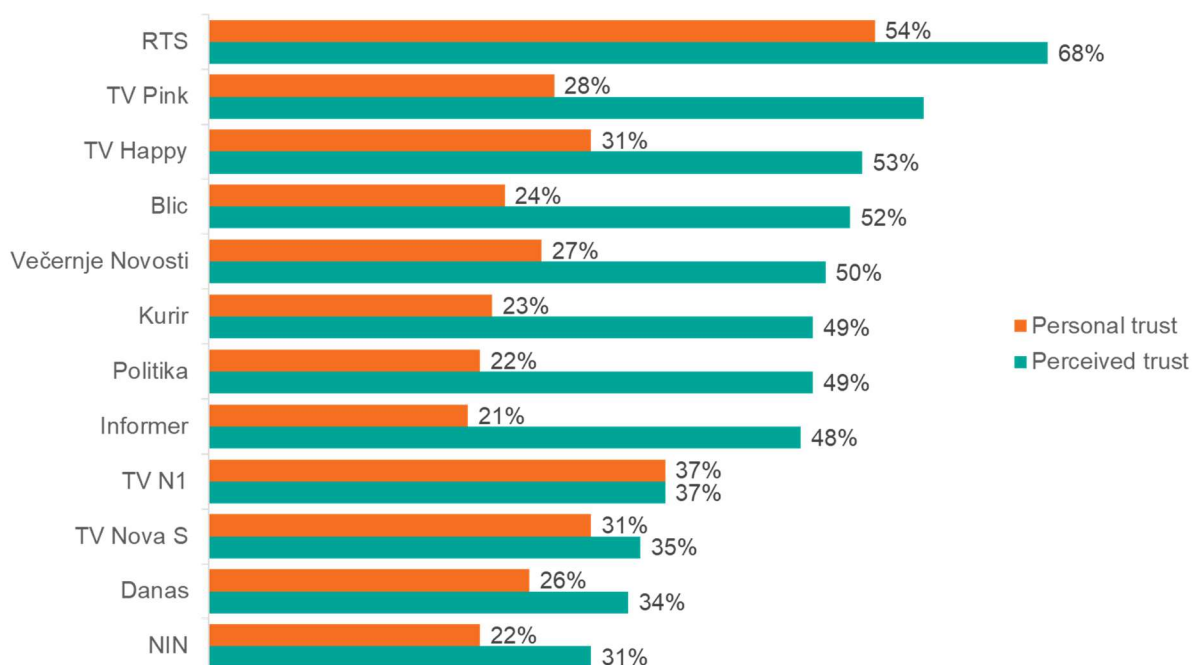


5.3.1 Personal trust vs. perceived trust

In this segment of the study, we pay particular attention to personal trust and perceived trust. Personal trust refers to the individually expressed viewpoint, specifically a positive response to the question “Do you trust this media outlet?”. In addition to the personal trust that citizens have in specific media outlets, we aim to ascertain people’s opinions regarding the trust that the observed media generally enjoy among the public. That is achieved through the positive answer to the question “Do you think that people generally trust this media?” In our analysis, we refer to this type of trust as “perceived trust”.

The results regarding trust in media offer intriguing insights, particularly when considering the difference between individual trust and the perceived trust. Two cable television channels have the smallest difference between personal and perceived trust of citizens – N1 and Nova S.

Chart 17: The comparison of personal trust in media and perceived trust



RTS1 is the television channel in which citizens put the highest level of personal trust. It is also perceived by citizens as the television channel that enjoys the highest trust among the public (perceived trust), with the percentage of perceived trust (68%) slightly exceeding the percentage of personal trust (54%). Personal trust in TV N1 (37%) corresponds to the perception of trust (37%) that this television channel holds, making it the only media outlet to stand out within the sample. (Chart 17)

Particularly interesting are the results for media outlets for which citizens do not express trust. The most striking example is the daily newspaper Informer, for which only every fifth citizen reports trust, while simultaneously believing that Informer enjoys the trust of half the population. Among television channels, TV Pink and Happy stand out as the two lowest-rated channels regarding reported trust. Nevertheless, in terms of perceived trust, they position themselves just below RTS.

These findings imply that the phenomenon of trust in the media is complex, and definitive explanations are not possible based on the data in this study. However, several possible explanations for this drastic discrepancy stand out. One of them is that citizens equate

perceived influence with the spread of media. Thus, the media outlets which are the most prevalent are believed to be the most trustworthy.

The analysis now shifts to a detailed examination of three television channels: the public broadcaster, RTS; another pro-government television, TV Pink; and a critical television channel, TV N1.

5.2.3 Trust in RTS

RTS 1 is the media outlet most trusted by citizens; nonetheless, it often faces criticism for being perceived as biased, and for being addressing public interest topics only formally and in a limited manner. Despite its status as the most trusted media outlet among citizens, there is justified concern about RTS 1 fulfilling its duties as a public media broadcaster.

5.3.2.1 *Demographics*

Among citizens who express trust in RTS, a statistically significant group comprises those with elementary school education. (Infographic 1) This group significantly more often finds RTS trustworthy (66%) compared to 55% of those with secondary education ($p > 95\%$) and 47% of those with a university education. Regional analysis also reveals significant differences, with significantly more positive answers among citizens from south and east Serbia (62%) compared to citizens from Belgrade (47%). Only citizens from Belgrade, highly educated individuals, entrepreneurs, and atheists express more distrust than trust in the public service broadcaster.

Infographic 1: The role of demographic and political affiliation in trusting the RTS 1



5.3.2.2 Political attitudes

A noteworthy 76% of citizens who align with the parties in power trust RTS, significantly more than the trust expressed by those aligned with oppositional parties (37%) or those who are indecisive (46%). This political alignment is also reflected in the trust levels between those who voted for the parties in power and those who voted for the pro-EU opposition: an impressive 72% of those who voted for the current government express trust in the public service broadcaster, while the same number (72%) of those who voted for the pro-EU opposition express distrust. Voters on the right-wing opposition spectrum also do not trust RTS 1, with 61% expressing distrust.

In addition to political support, trust in RTS 1 significantly correlates with certain political views. Among citizens who believe that Serbia should maintain good relations with Russia even at the expense of giving up on the EU, 60% have trust in RTS. Among citizens who believe that Serbia should align its foreign policy with the EU and impose sanctions on Russia, 59% of them do not trust RTS. Similarly, citizens who view the East as the main partner have significantly more trust in the public service broadcaster (63%) than those who view the West as Serbia's primary partner (46%).

Surprisingly, when it comes to Serbia's EU accession, our analysis does not show statistically significant associations. Among both the proponents and opponents of EU accession, RTS enjoys 53% of trust.

5.3.3 Trust in TV Pink

TV Pink is a privately-owned pro-government television channel with national coverage and is the television channel that citizens trust the least (28%). During 2022, representatives of parties in power occupied 91% of all air-time dedicated to political actors in central news, while the opposition parties got 9%. Further, Serbian President had 258 live addresses on TV Pink in 2022.²⁴

5.3.3.1 Demographics

Almost all of the examined demographic categories display statistically significant variations regarding trust in TV Pink. Although most citizens express distrust (66%) in TV Pink, females (33%) place significantly more trust in the channel than males (24%). Age also plays a significant role, with only individuals older than 65 years showing higher trust (47%) than distrust (43%) in the television channel. Nearly 8 out of 10 (78%) citizens under the age of 35 do not trust TV Pink, a sentiment shared by 7 out of 10 (72%) citizens between the ages of 35 and 64.

The most drastic association is observed in terms of education level (Infographic 2): trust in TV Pink decreases with each level of education. The channel enjoys 64% trust among citizens with primary education, a feeling mirrored among 26% of citizens with secondary education, and a mere 15% among those with higher education. Distrust in TV Pink among citizens with high education reaches a high of 81%.

²⁴Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation (2023). During the first year, TV Pink did not fulfill more than half of the claims from the Elaborate. Available here: <https://link.crtv.rs/km> Last access: 26.12.2023

Infographic 2: The role of demographic and political affiliation in trusting the TV Pink



An even larger proportion of citizens who lack trust in TV Pink is found within two categories related to employment status. 85% of students have stated that they do not trust TV Pink, while the highest percentage of those who express distrust towards TV Pink falls within the category of entrepreneurs (87%). When considering citizens who trust TV Pink, statistically significant groups include residents of rural areas (39%), housewives (57% trust) and pensioners (48%).

Lastly, regional analysis reveals low levels of trust in TV Pink in Belgrade (19%) and Vojvodina (25%). In contrast, TV Pink enjoys statistically significant higher levels of trust in Šumadija and western Serbia (34%) as well as in southern and eastern Serbia (36%).

5.3.3.2 Politics

Regarding political parameters, trust in TV Pink records significant levels of association across several questions. The question of perception of the East or the West (or both) as Serbia's most important partners once again proves to be significant. Among those who identify the West as the most important partner, 77% express distrust in TV Pink. Among those who believe the East is the most significant partner, almost every fourth citizens (39%) places their trust in the channel. A remarkable 90% of those who believe Serbia should align its foreign policy with the EU and impose sanctions on Russia express distrust in TV Pink.

Regarding Serbia's EU accession, there are no statistically significant associations with trust. TV Pink records almost identical trust trends among supporters and opponents of EU accession (26% and 27% trust, respectively).

The pro-government nature of TV Pink is evident in the trust it garners among citizens inclined to parties in power (63%), and in the distrust expressed by opposition supporters (89%) and by indecisive citizens (80%). The percentage of citizens who express distrust in TV Pink jumps to 99% when considering citizens who reported voting for the opposition in the previous elections.

5.3.4 Trust in TV N1

In this detailed analysis, we focus on a critical media outlet, N1 Television, which is the highest-rated critical television channel in terms of trust.

5.3.4.1 Demographics

Unlike RTS, trust and distrust in N1 TV exhibit more moderate levels across demographic categories. Two demographic categories yield statistically significant results: place of residence and education. Citizens from Belgrade place significantly more trust in N1 compared to citizens from other parts of Serbia (47%). This difference becomes even more significant when respondents are divided by education level. Only one in four citizens (24%) with primary education trusts N1 TV, and the same applies to one in three citizens with secondary education (34%) and one in two citizens with higher education (50%, Infographic 3). A high number of citizens answered "don't know" regarding trust in N1 TV – a notable 17%. Such a high number of citizens unable to provide an answer is likely due to N1 TV being a cable news channel offered by only one provider, making it available to less than a half (40%) of households.²⁵ Inaccessibility plays a significant role in the high number of citizens who cannot express their opinion.

²⁵ Ratel (2023). "An Overview of the Electronic Communications Market in the Republic of Serbia. The third quarter of 2023". Available here: <https://link.crtar.rs/kr> Last accessed: 26/12/2023

Infographic 3: The role of demographic and political affiliation in trusting the N1 TV



5.3.4.2 Political attitudes

Identifying either the West or both the East and the West, as Serbia's most important partners clearly correlates with trust in N1. Among those who recognise the West as the most important partner, 54% express trust in N1. Every fourth person who recognises both East and West as important partners trusts N1.

The trust in TV N1 is significantly impacted by political alignment. Among citizens who align with the opposition, especially the pro-EU option, an eight out of ten trust N1 (82%, Infographic 2). This number is almost four times lower for citizens who align with the parties in power (21%).

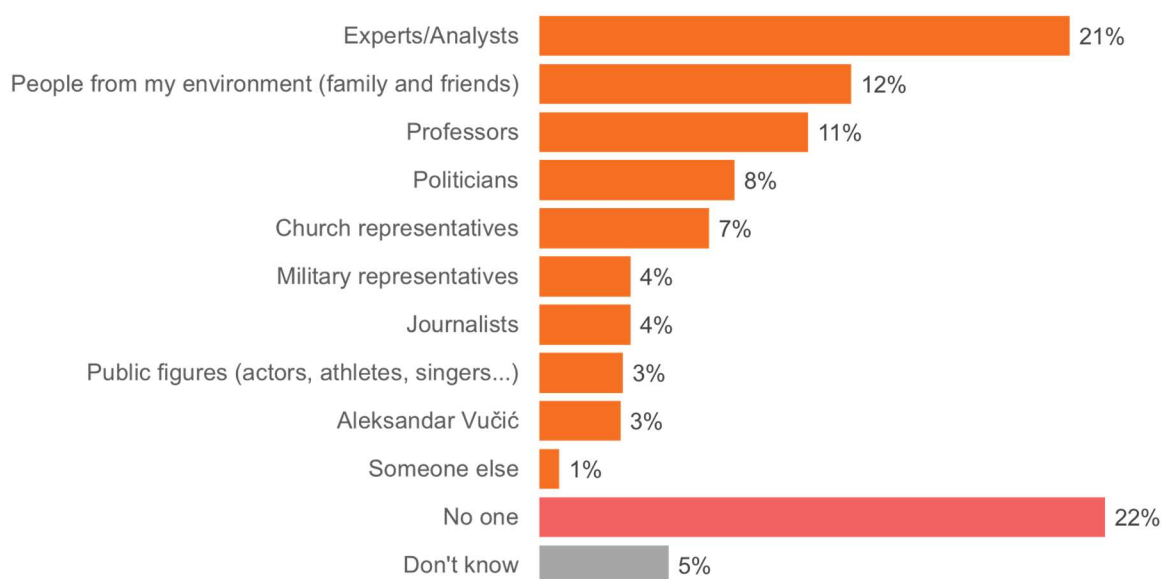
Similarly, 7 out of 10 citizens who support imposing sanctions on Russia have trust in N1 (71%), while every second citizen (54%) who would rather maintain good relations with Russia at the expense of joining the EU does not trust this TV channel. In the case of trust in N1, there is also a significant level of association with citizens' aspirations for Serbia's EU accession. Among those who oppose EU accession, over a half of citizens do not trust N1 (56%), while pro-EU citizens mostly express a high level of trust (50%).

5.4 Trust / actors

Transitioning from media to political actors, our goal was to determine whom people trust the most. Our analysis reveals that people place the most trust in experts (21%). Complementary with the overall lack of trust in the media, one in five citizens states that

they do not trust anyone (22%). In addition to experts, family and friends are also deemed trustworthy (12%). For 11% of citizens, professors are the most trusted when it comes to social topics, while 8% place their trust in politicians. Church representatives are the most trusted by 7%, and military representatives and journalists by 4% of citizens. Aleksandar Vučić is mentioned as the most trusted individual for social topics in 3% of cases. However, it should be noted that he was not among the provided response options, so this is regarded as a systemically important spontaneous response that should be counted towards the results for politicians. (Chart 18)

Chart 18: Who do you trust the most when it comes to news on social issues?



5.4.1 Political attitudes

Among citizens closer to the ruling parties, politicians enjoy the most trust (20%), significantly higher than among those closer to the opposition parties (4%) and those who are not close to either the opposition or the ruling parties (3%).

Among supporters of opposition options, trust in journalists stands out (12%), which is significantly higher than the proportion of those who support the ruling party and primarily trust journalists (3%) or those who are not close to either the ruling party or the opposition (2%).

Experts and analysts are significantly more often mentioned by citizens closer to opposition options (34%) and among those for whom no political option is close (22%), compared to citizens closer to the ruling parties (15%). Similar trends are registered when it comes to professors.

Finally, 28% of citizens who are not close to either the ruling parties nor the opposition do not trust anyone. This lack of trust is significantly lower citizens among those closer to opposition parties (12%) and those closer to the ruling parties (15%).

5.5 Information manipulation

Information manipulation – Chapter overview

- **People older than 65, those with only a primary education, those living in rural areas, housewives, farmers, and pensioners exhibit a very high risk of being a victim of information manipulation.**
- **People older than 35, those with secondary education, unemployed, and those living in the South or East Serbia exhibit a moderately high risk of being affected by information manipulation.**
- **While almost half of citizens reports verifying information, 6 out of 10 citizens verify information entirely incorrectly with additional 3 out 10 verifying partially incorrectly.**
- **Nearly 8 out of 10 people says they encounter manipulated information very often.**
- **The identification of the sources of manipulated information is highly correlated with political affiliation.**

The main aim of our analysis was to identify demographic groups that are the most vulnerable to information manipulation. We define a person vulnerable to information manipulation as a person who is most likely to be manipulated. In our analysis, such a person exhibits several characteristics:

- a) does not have a habit of reading or listening to an entire article,
- b) does not have a habit of following multiple media sources,
- c) does not believe that they encounter information manipulation, and,

either a person who

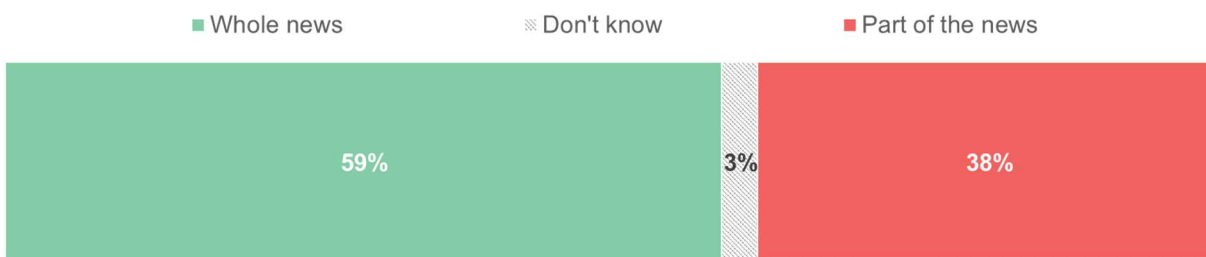
d) does not have a habit of verifying information, or

e) verifies information entirely incorrectly, that is, a person who does not use a single correct method of information verification.

5.5.1 Reading/watching the news entirely

The majority of citizens claim to follow a news articles or TV reports in their entirety. This holds true for six out of ten citizens (59%). Four out of ten (38%) admit to only partially reading/watching the news. (Chart 19)

Chart 19: When reading or watching news content, do you more often follow only part of the news or the entire news?



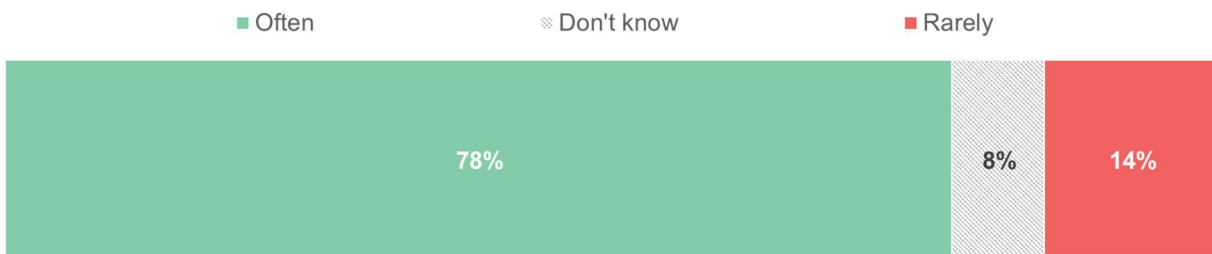
There are significantly more citizens who align with neither the parties in power nor the parties in the opposition that do not read the entire news (44%) compared to citizens who align with either the parties in power (33%) or the opposition (33%). Among citizens who do not read the entire news, there are significantly more of those who lack the habit of verifying the accuracy of information (59%) compared to those who check for accuracy (40%). One reason for this is the feeling of media overload with disinformation.²⁶

²⁶CRTA (2023), Nothing is true, and everything is possible. Available here: <https://link.crtars/ka>. Last access: 26.12.2023

5.5.2 Do people feel they encounter information manipulation

Nearly eight out of ten citizens (78%) feel that they frequently encounter misleading and inaccurate information in the media (Chart 20). There are no significant differences between men (80%) and women (76%), but other demographic factors play a role.

Chart 20: How often do you come across information manipulation in the media?

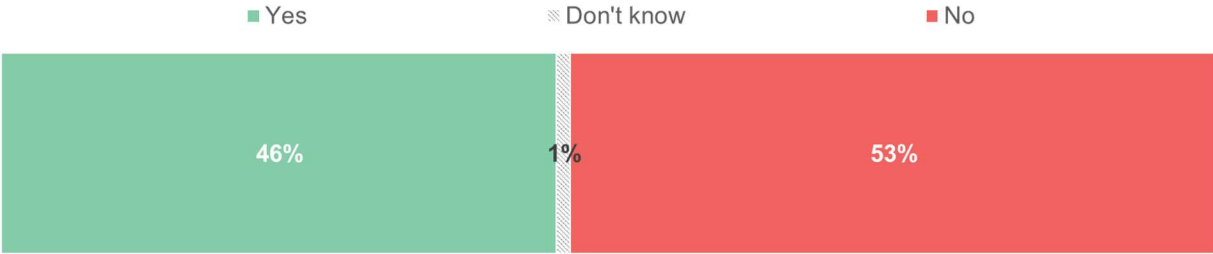


Those over 65 years old less frequently report encountering misleading and inaccurate information (60%) than those under 35 years (87%) and those between 35 and 64 years (83%). Education is a significant factor, with only half of those with elementary education believing that they frequently encounter misleading information. In contrast, the percentage is much higher among those with secondary (82%) and higher education (87%).

5.5.3 Verifying information

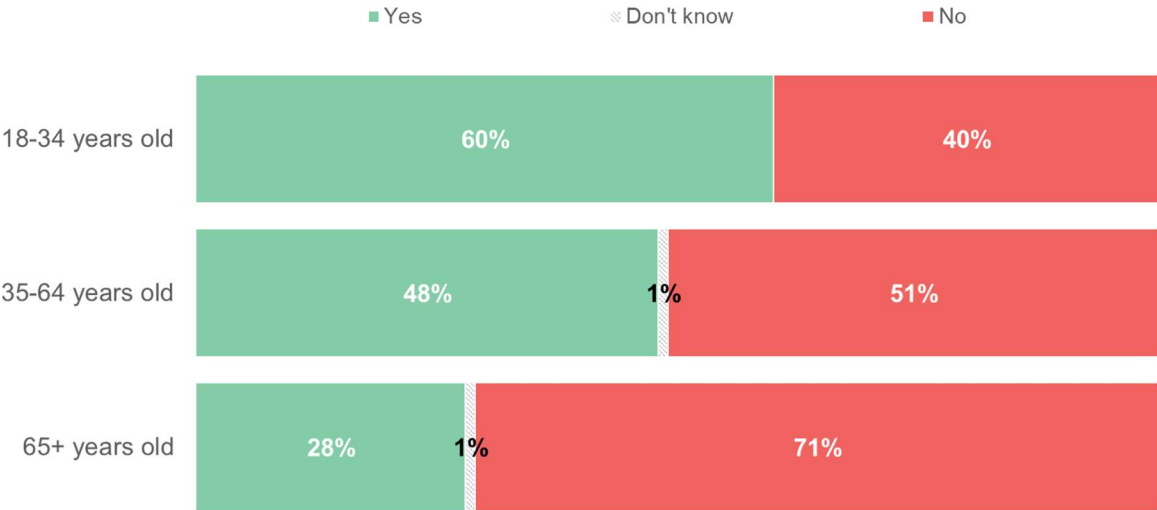
Slightly less than half of the citizens (46%) report they generally verify the information they read or see in the media or on social networks, while slightly more than half do not (53%). There is a significant difference between men and women, with 49% of men verifying information compared to women who do so less frequently (43%).

Chart 21: Do you generally verify the information that you read or watch through media or social media?



Age plays a significant role, with older citizens being less likely to verify information. Only 28% of citizens over 65 years old verify information, compared to almost half of those between 35 and 64 years old (48%). The youngest population is most likely to verify news, with 60% doing so. (Chart 22)

Chart 22: Do people verify information they encounter in the media across three age groups



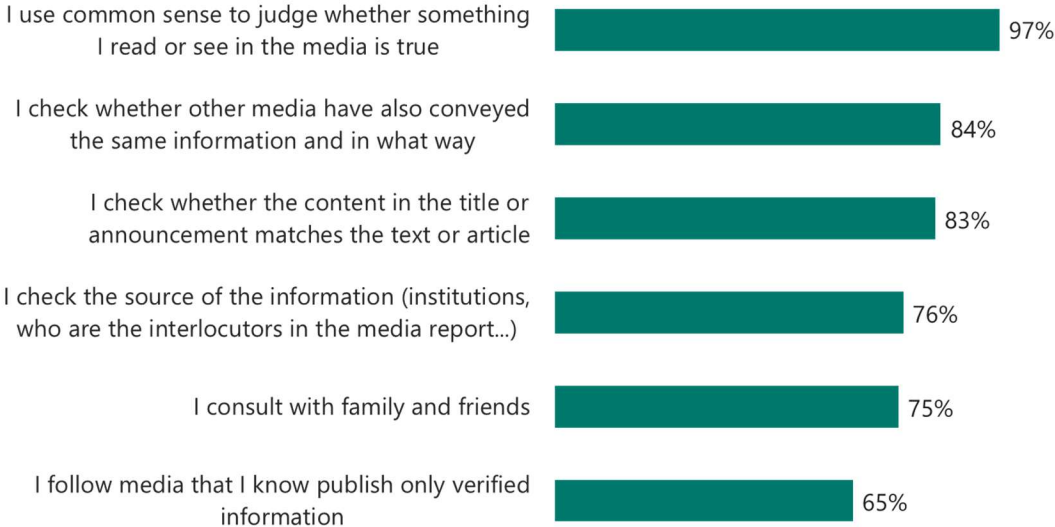
Education also influences this habit, with only 21% of citizens with elementary education verifying information, compared to 46% among those with secondary education and 57% among those with higher education. Urban residents are more likely to verify information,

with 51% doing so, while in rural areas, just over a third of citizens (38%) engage in verification. Employment status also plays a role, with employed individuals (51%) and high-schoolers or students (68%) being more likely to verify the credibility of information.

5.5.4 The way of verifying information

Only 7% of citizens accurately verify information. Additional quarter of citizens (24%) of verify information partially correctly. On the other hand, there are more than twice as many citizens who incorrectly verify information (70%). Men (9%) significantly more often correctly verify the information compared to women (4%). No citizens with primary education verify information correctly, only 4% do so partially correctly, while 96% of citizens with primary education incorrectly verify information. Various methods of information verification are shown below. (Chart 23)

Chart 23: How do people verify potentially manipulated information they encounter?



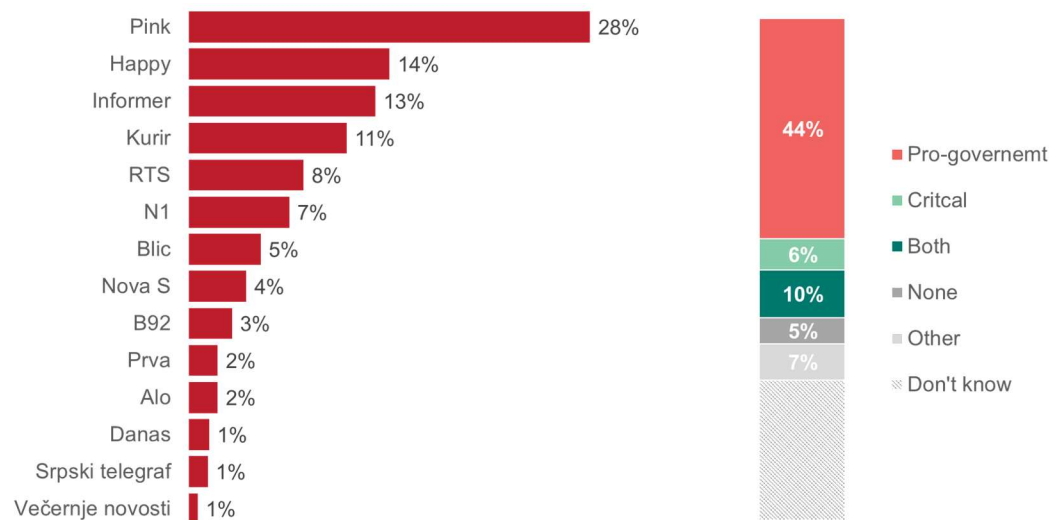
5.5.4.1 Where do people find disinformation?

People perceive disinformation to be primarily associated with pro-government media outlets (50%). Critical media outlets are identified as the primary source of disinformation

by 16% of citizens. Additionally, over a quarter of citizens (28%) indicated that they did not know the answer.

Of all individual media outlets, four stand out as the most frequently recognised sources of disinformation by citizens. These include two television channels: TV Pink (28%) and Happy (14%), as well as two daily print publications: Informer (13%) and Kurir (11%). Citizens were not provided with predefined answering options but were required to provide their responses spontaneously, with the expectation to list up to three media sources (Chart 24).

Chart 24: In which media do you most often encounter such information manipulations?



Political beliefs play an important role in recognising sources of disinformation. The proportion of those who identify pro-government media as the primary source of disinformation is significantly higher among those who support EU accession (75%) compared to those who do not (65%). Among citizens who believe that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia and align its foreign policy with the EU, 88% more frequently encounter disinformation in pro-government media. This is a significantly higher percentage than that of individuals who think Serbia should maintain good relations with Russia even at the expense of EU accession (63%).

5.5.4.2 Who is the most vulnerable to information manipulation?

Our analysis uncovered demographic groups that are to various degrees susceptible to information manipulation. The categories are then divided into three groups: low vulnerability risk, moderate vulnerability risk, and high vulnerability risk, and the assessment is shown below. (Infographic 4)

Infographic 4: Vulnerability to information manipulation across various demographic categories



5.6 Political attitudes and media

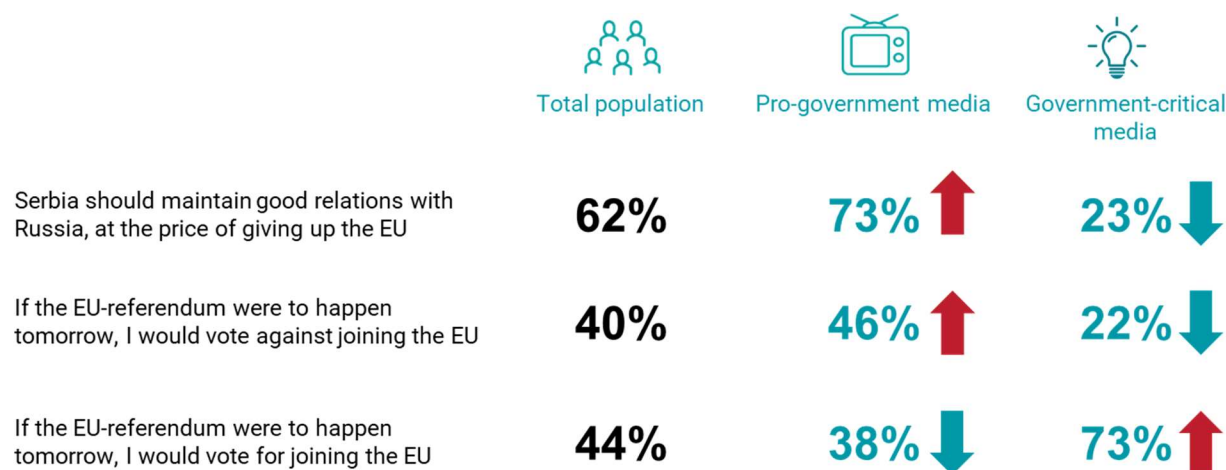
Political attitudes and media - Chapter overview

- **The question of joining the EU splits the population in half. However, the majority of those who oppose joining the EU consume pro-government media.**
- **7 out of 10 viewers of pro-government television channels would give up the accession to the EU much rather than they would impose sanctions on Russia.**
- **Viewers of pro-government television believe that the Eastern countries are the most important partners of Serbia, with only 1 in 5 recognising the West in the same role.**
- **7 out of 10 viewers of government-critical media hope to see Serbia joining the EU.**

The final segment of the consumption habits analysis delves into the differences in political attitudes among individuals who have clear preferences regarding their sources of information (Infographic 5). We have categorised media outlets into pro-government and government-critical categories, and the political issues we included in the analysis pertain to citizens' views on: 1) EU accession, 2) the conflict in Ukraine, 3) the recognition of other countries as Serbia's main partners.

The sensitivity of these questions is reflected in the considerable number of "I don't know" responses to all three of the aforementioned questions.

Infographic 5: Political attitudes of different types of audiences



5.6.1 Attitudes of citizens who primarily obtain information from pro-government media outlets

The majority of citizens who primarily obtain information from pro-government media, 46% of them, are opposed to Serbia's accession to the EU. On the other hand, 38% of these individuals would vote in favour of EU accession in a referendum. Approximately one in six viewers (16%) of pro-government media either would not vote in the referendum (4%) or do not know how they would vote (12%).

Regarding the opinion on the armed conflict in Ukraine, one in ten viewers of pro-government media (9%) believes that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia and align its foreign policy with the EU, while 74% of these viewers believe that Serbia should maintain good relations with Russia even at the expense of EU membership. Every sixth viewer (17%) of pro-government media is uncertain about which of these two statements they align with.

Lastly, one in five viewers of pro-government media (21%) recognises the West as Serbia's most important partner, while twice that much (42%) believe it to be Eastern countries. Only 6% of citizens from this subgroup mentioned both Eastern and Western

countries. One in four viewers of pro-government media could not answer this question (25%).

5.6.2 Attitudes of citizens who predominantly obtain information from critical media outlets

Every fifth citizen who predominantly obtains information from critical media outlets opposes Serbia's EU accession (22%), while 73% of them support it. In comparison with their fellow citizens who primarily rely on pro-government media, this subgroup stands out for its greater willingness to participate in a referendum, as less than 1% of them mention that they would not vote. Significantly fewer citizens (5%) in this group do not know how they would vote.

Regarding the conflict in Ukraine, viewers of critically-oriented media express diametrically opposed views compared to citizens primarily informed by pro-government media. As such, 62% of them believe that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia, while almost every fourth (23%) believes that Serbia should maintain good relations with Russia at the expense of EU membership. The almost identical percentage of those who do not know the answer (15%) underscores the sensitivity of the issue, much like among the population primarily informed by pro-government media.

Finally, with respect to the most important partners, 54% of those primarily obtaining information from critical media recognise the West as Serbia's principal partner, while for the East, this number is nearly four times lower (14%). Only 6% of citizens from this subgroup recognise either "other" countries as the most important partners (3%) or both East and West (3%). A bit higher number of people (8%) believes that no one is the most important partner, while nearly every fifth citizen who primarily obtains information from critical media could not answer this question (19%).

5.6.3 Attitudes of citizens who obtain information from both pro-government and critical media outlets

Citizens who receive information from both types of media exhibit more moderate attitudes; however, they largely reflect the views of citizens informed primarily by critical media. For instance, 29% of these citizens would vote against EU accession, while every sixth one (60%) would vote in favour. Concerning those who would not vote or do not know how they would vote, the percentages are more similar to citizens informed primarily by pro-government media (9% do not know, and 3% would not vote).

This moderation is best reflected in the second political question, regarding Serbia's position on imposing sanctions on Russia. Hence, every third citizen who consumes both types of media believes that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia (32%), while almost every second one (47%) believes that maintaining friendly relations with Russia, even at the cost of EU membership, is the better choice. Finally, every fifth citizens who consumes both pro-government and critical media could not answer this question (21%).

Regarding international partners of Serbia, citizens who primarily obtain information from both pro-government and critical media outlets mostly recognise the West as the main partner (39%). Notably fewer recognise the East (25%), and five times fewer mention both East and West (7%). Only 2% stated that "no one" is the most important partner. "Other" countries are chosen rarely by this subgroup (4%), while every fifth viewer of both the pro-government and government-critical television (22%) could not answer the question.

6 Experiment

Experimental study – Chapter overview

- **Single exposure to counter-attitudinal content has little to no influence on fixed attitudes.**
- **Participants' attitudes towards Serbia's EU accession seemed largely unchanged** after a single exposure to a counter-attitudinal message about the EU, irrespective of whether the message was sourced from a preferred news outlet or presented without any source label.
- **Only pro-EU RTS audience showed a statistically significant shift in attitudes following exposure to a counter-attitudinal message.** Their support for EU accession increased slightly post-exposure, suggesting potential polarisation. The pattern of attitude changes for other participants was inconsistent and not statistically significant.
- Even though participants correctly identified that **the news article presented was in opposition to their EU attitudes, they still rated both the content and the author of the message relatively favourably.** These evaluations did not vary based on the participant's EU attitudes or their preferred news sources.
- **Following the reading of a counter-attitudinal message, pro-EU participants expressed significantly less positive (good mood and optimism) and more negative (anger and anxiety) emotional responses compared to anti-EU participants.**
- **On average, pro-EU participants demonstrated significantly greater political tolerance towards those holding opposing views in the EU debate compared to anti-EU participants.** This was consistent regardless of whether political tolerance was measured through favourability ratings or the willingness to censor the other side.
- **Pro-EU participants were also notably more inclined to vote in an EU referendum compared to the counter-EU participants.**

6.1 Overview of the study

The purpose of this report is to identify and evaluate the potential for change in citizens' attitudes in order to develop resilience to information manipulation and for better identification of disinformation. In order to assess the probability of change in citizens' resilience on one side and media accountability, this study focuses on citizens' attitudes towards divisive issues and counteracts them with the potential for their trust in media outlets to change. This study, therefore, attempts to test the extent to which citizens' attitudes are susceptible to change if they are exposed to news that come from unidentifiable sources and diverges from what citizens commonly consume as news.

The experiment's results indicate that people's opinions on Serbia's EU membership remain mostly unaffected after being exposed to opposing views about the EU, regardless of the news source. However, citizens who are already in favour of the EU and consume news on public broadcaster RTS 1 appear to have slightly reinforced their pro-EU position when presented with contrasting viewpoints. The study also reveals that individuals who hold a favourable view of the EU demonstrate greater levels of political tolerance and an increased probability of participating in an EU referendum.

6.2 Objectives of the Study

The central aim of this study was to investigate the influence of Serbia's leading news outlets in shaping citizens' attitudes toward a deeply significant and divisive issue – Serbia's accession to the European Union (EU). We concentrated on counter-attitudinal messages, echoing the context of Serbia's polarised media landscape, notable for its scarcity of diverse viewpoints and limited internal pluralism.²⁷ This media environment often restricts exposure to politically agreeable information, potentially obstructing a thorough understanding of complex political issues and phenomena. In contrast, cross-

²⁷ CRTA, Media monitoring of political pluralism June 2022 – May 2023, Available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/kb>. Last access: 26/12/2023

cutting exposure is thought to benefit citizens by increasing political knowledge, improving their ability to deliberate, and supporting them in making well-informed political decisions. However, empirical research suggests that in certain situations, exposure to cross-cutting messages can trigger effects that can be defined as undesired, such as further polarisation of existing attitudes or hindrance of political participation. Given the limited research on cross-cutting exposure in Serbia and its media system's characteristics, the main question that steered this inquiry was: how would Serbian audiences react to a counter-attitudinal message from their preferred news outlet? More specifically, we sought answers to the following:

1. Can exposure to a counter-attitudinal message influence audiences' attitudes toward the EU? Does the source of the counter-attitudinal message (whether it is a preferred news outlet or an unknown source) matter?
2. How do diverse news audiences evaluate the content and author of a counter-attitudinal message? Do these evaluations differ if the source is the preferred news outlet?
3. What are the emotional reactions to a counter-attitudinal message? How do they vary based on the message's source and participants' characteristics?
4. How does exposure to a counter-attitudinal message impact participants' intention to participate in politics and their political tolerance? Are these effects related to the source of the counter-attitudinal message?

6.3 Methods

To better understand the influence of media on attitudes, we conducted an experimental study in which we sought to influence attitudes toward the EU by presenting a persuasive message, a text in the form of a typical news post from an online media platform. The study investigated how participants reacted to counter-attitudinal messages providing valid arguments in favour or opposing the EU. The study was conducted from 13 July to 27 July 2023.

6.3.1 Experimental design

Attitudes toward the EU were measured at two points: at the beginning of the experiment, before presenting the article to participants, and after reading this message. The difference between these two measures constitutes the key outcome. We varied the source of the message: for half of the participants, texts were attributed to their preferred news outlet, and the other half read texts without a designated source. Participants always read a counter-attitudinal message.

We recruited participants with diverging attitudes toward EU accession and varying media preferences, specifically focusing on audiences whose preferred news sources are outlets such as N1, RTS, and Pink. The selection of these news outlets is based on their respective positions in the Serbian media landscape, as well as their differing journalistic styles and editorial policies:

- N1 stands out as one of the few TV channels in Serbia that practices professional and critical journalism. It tends to attract audiences that are critical of the government.
- RTS, the national public broadcaster, is consistently rated as the most-watched and most-trusted news source. By steering clear of overtly controversial political topics, its news coverage resonates with citizens who are less politically engaged.
- TV Pink aligns closely with pro-government views and is known for its predominantly sensationalist news coverage.

Participants were randomly allocated into two groups to manipulate the source of the message. Their media preferences and attitudes toward EU accession were recorded within the experiment. To counteract an overemphasised consistency in pre- and post-test attitudes, we presented the pre-test attitude measure within a broader scale containing buffer items on other social issues.

6.3.2 Participants

A total of 563 participants took part in the study. Participants were sampled through a snowballing procedure and according to quotas related to the municipality, settlement type, age, and gender to achieve a good representation of the city of Belgrade. The participants were recruited from all of the seventeen municipalities of Belgrade, proportionally to their size, as well as from urban (86.7%) and rural (13.3%) settlements. The sample was well balanced in terms of gender, as there were 49.2% male and 50.2% female participants. The age ranged from 18 to 90 years, with a mean age of 47.96 (SD – standard deviation 18.67).

In addition to this, participants were asked about their media preferences, that is, whether they preferred as their primary source of information on social and political topics more similar to the N1, RTS, or Pink. Second, they indicated their attitude toward EU accession by answering whether they would vote *Yes* or *No* if the referendum for accession was held the next day. The sample structure based on these two variables is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the sample according to media preference and the attitude toward EU accession

				Total
	N1	RTS	Pink	
Pro-EU	108	102	68	278
Against-EU	63	142	80	285
Total	171	244	148	563

6.3.3 Messages

Participants were presented with messages designed as short texts from online media portals, presenting arguments that cast the European Union positively or negatively. A team of specialists from *Istinomer* prepared the messages. Specifically, the texts focused on assistance to Serbian agriculture from European funds. The positive message highlighted the importance of this financial aid for Serbian agriculture, and this was supported by quoting a (typical) Serbian agriculturist. The negative message highlighted that assistance to agriculturists was being discontinued due to political reasons, leaving the agriculturists in a difficult position. Examples of the vignettes are presented below.

Each participant was randomly assigned to receive a counter-attitudinal message about the EU, either attributed to their preferred outlet (treatment condition, $n = 282$) or without any source label (control condition, $n = 281$). The messages were designed to be as similar as possible. The messages with the designated source were made to look like typical posts on the media online portals, while the control messages just presented text.

Examples of experimental vignettes attributed to RTS and without designated source

PTC Q ☰

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Притисци ЕУ на Србију преко леђа ратара

"Пре пет година сам добио помоћ, тад сам купио машине и успео да оживим газдинство. Рачунао сам да ћу опет конкурисати и овог лета, али сада је све независно и питање је шта ће бити с нама", каже пољопривредник Павле Дражевић из околине Зрењанина. Он је само један од хиљаду људи који ове године неће моћи да рачунају на помоћ из ЕУ фондова.



Дражевић годинама обрађује земљу и препродаје кукуруз, али његово имање је сада у кризи.

"Ово што ради ЕУ је страшно, а страдају обични људи", коментарише незадовољно Дражевић.

Европска унија донела је одлуку да Србији ускрати финансијску подршку и то због наводног неусклађивања са спољном политиком ЕУ. Иако је Србија испунила своје обавезе, Брисел је увео такозване "мере реципроцитета". ЕУ је одлучила да прекине досадашњу праксу и онемогући помоћ из фондова за развој. Између осталог, прекинута је сарадња са локалним ратарима и тренутно није познато да ли ће доћи до реактивације фондова у неком тренутку. Оваквом једностраном одлуком ЕУ, земљорадници су у овом тренутку ускраћени за било какав вид донација. Бесповратна средства су годинама додељивана српским пољопривредницима, на основу меморандума о сарадњи у процесу европских интеграција. Међутим, Србији су уведене одређене "казнене" мере, а очекује се да их ЕУ поштри у наредном периоду.

Vojvodani lakše do mašina, uz fondove iz Evrope



"Ne bih nikad živeo u gradu, na selu ume da bude teže, ali ništa ne može da zameni ovaj osećaj kad radiš na svojoj zemlji", kaže Milan Mirojević iz okoline Vrbasa u Vojvodini. On je jedan od stotinu poljoprivrednika koji su ove godine dobili bespovratna sredstva iz fondova EU za kupovinu poljoprivrednih mašina.

"I ranijih godina sam konkurisao i ako bude prilike ponovo ću jer ne znam kako bih bez tih sredstava finansirao ulaganja u proizvodnju", kaže Mirojević i komentariše da ne zna kako bi drugačije uspeo da nabavi sve što mu je potrebno za obradu zemlje.

Njegovo gazdinstvo zavisi, pre svega, od prinosa kukuruza, ali sem ove biljke, planira da razvija voćnjake koji su tek u začetku na njegovom imanju. Poljoprivredom se bavi čitavog života, kao i njegova porodica.

Podsetimo, odlukom Evropske komisije usvojen je novi IPARD program Republike Srbije za period 2021 – 2027. godine. Finansijski doprinos Evropske unije za IPARD III program povećan je u odnosu na prethodni programski period na skoro 300 miliona evra, što će sa doprinosom Republike Srbije, kao i privatnim doprinosom korisnika obezbediti preko 500 miliona evra namenjenih sektoru poljoprivrede i ruralnog razvoja. Ovakvu finansijsku pomoć do sada je iskoristilo preko 3.000 poljoprivrednika, a za donaciju mogu da konkuriraju – fizička lica, nosioci poljoprivrednih gazdinstava, kao i preduzetnici, privredna društva i zadruge. Program se realizuje preko Ministarstva poljoprivrede, šumarstva i vodoprivrede i Uprave za agrarna plaćanja.

6.3.4 Measures

- Attitudes toward the EU were indicated on the 7-point rating scale, from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*completely agree*).
- Manipulation check: Participants were asked to rate whether the text portrayed the EU positively or negatively and the extent to which the assistance of the EU was important for Serbian agriculture (on a 7-point scale).
- Emotional reactions: Participants evaluated their emotional response to reading the text, evaluating whether it made them feel *angry*, in a *good or bad mood*, *optimistic*, and *anxious* (on a 7-point scale).

- Ratings of the text: Participants were asked to rate the text they read on five dimensions: *factuality, professionalism, objectivity, trustworthiness, and truthfulness*. They also rated the alleged author of the text (although the authors were not identified) for their *impartiality, expertise, thoroughness, and being poor or well-informed*. These ratings were given on a 7-point scale. As the ratings on the different dimensions were highly correlated (internal consistency .84 for the ratings of text and .85 for the ratings of the author), we calculated two indices.
- Political participation was measured as the probability they would cast a vote in a referendum on EU accession (rated on a 7-point scale)
- Political tolerance was assessed using two methods: first, through a “feeling thermometer” allowing participants to rate their feelings towards citizens with opposing EU attitudes on a scale of 0–100; and second, by gauging their willingness to limit freedom of expression for those with contrary EU views, measured on a 7-point scale.
- Socio-demographic variables:
 - Level of education (unfinished primary school, graduated from primary school, graduated from secondary school, graduated from high school, graduated from University, post-graduate level)
 - Socio-economic status (based on the self-reported individual monthly income in seven categories ranging from RSD 30 000 or lower to RSD 150 000 or higher)
 - Level of interest in political and social events (rated on a 7-point scale)
 - Preference for political parties (options: those in power, the opposition, or none)

6.3.5 Limitations

The experiment was confined to a short-term scope, meaning that the results should not be interpreted as proof that the media has no influence on opinions. That influence is likely to be achieved through cumulative exposure.

Furthermore, the focus of the experiment was on the textual content, meaning that the findings of this study may be more relevant to press or digital media. Audio and video content, even upon one-time exposure, may exhibit different extent of the influence.

6.4 Statistical analyses

We analysed whether any attitude change after reading the counter-attitudinal messages could be attributed to the experimentally controlled variables. To examine this, we conducted a mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a repeated factor (pre-post-test attitudes) and three between-subjects factors (message source, media preference, and pre-existing attitudes toward EU accession). If the differences were significant, we followed this up with a simple slope analysis, looking at the effects of single factors or their combinations. For the additional analyses, we also calculated the correlation coefficients of different variables with the index of attitude change.

Results: how did the counter-attitudinal texts affect the attitudes toward the EU?

6.4.1 Was there any change in attitudes?

The exposure to counter-attitudinal messages did not significantly alter the pre-existing attitudes of participants, whether they were in favour of or opposed to Serbia's accession to the EU.

Overall, looking at the whole sample, we did not record significant changes in attitudes after reading the counter-attitudinal message compared to the pre-test attitudes. The attitudes were moderate in the pre-test, somewhat below the theoretical midpoint of the 7-point scale ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 2.31$). The attitudes were not significantly changed after the participants read the counter-attitudinal messages ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 2.34$; $F(1, 551) = 0.11$, $p = .915$). Important, the attitude change did not depend on pre-existing attitudes toward the EU ($F(1, 551) = 1.27$, $p = .259$). This means that neither the participants favouring nor those opposing the accession of Serbia to the EU changed their pre-existing attitudes significantly.

6.4.2 Did the message source make any difference?

The source of information had little to no impact on changing the participants' attitudes towards the subject. Despite the variance in media source attribution, there was no significant shift in perception before and after exposure to the messages.

Our analysis did not record any different reactions based on the source attribution ($F(1, 551) = .09, p = .763$). The attitudes remained largely unchanged in both groups – among participants who read the texts attributed to their preferred media outlets ($M_{pre} = 3.84, SD = 2.31, M_{post} = 3.88, SD = 2.29$), similarly to participants who received messages without recognised sources ($M_{pre} = 3.95, SD = 2.32, M_{post} = 3.97, SD = 2.40$).

6.4.3 Did participants with different media preferences react differently?

The analysis suggested that **participants with different media preferences did react to the messages somewhat differently, as the observed differences were marginally significant** ($F(2, 551) = 2.99, p = .051$). **There were some tendencies in reactions to the texts between N1 audiences compared to both RTS and Pink audiences. However, these differences were not large.**

N1 audience. Looking more closely at these differences, we observed that N1 audience did not appear to change their attitudes as the averages were virtually the same before the exposure to the messages ($M_{pre} = 4.65, SD = 2.24$) and after reading the counter-attitudinal messages ($M_{post} = 4.62, SD = 2.3$). However, when we take into account their pre-test attitudes toward the EU we observe different tendencies in reactions. After reading the messages, participants with pro-EU pre-existing attitudes moved slightly in the positive direction ($M_{pre} = 5.99, SD = 1.34, M_{post} = 6.09, SD = 1.23$). However, this difference was insignificant ($t(107) = -1.28, p = .212$). The opposite was true of participants not favouring EU accession ($M_{pre} = 2.35, SD = 1.46, M_{post} = 2.10, SD = 1.43$), and this difference was only marginally significant ($t(62) = 1.69, p = .096$).

RTS audience. The attitudes of RTS audience tended to move toward slightly more positive: their pre-test attitudes were slightly lower on average ($M_{pre} = 3.49, SD = 2.21$) compared to their attitudes after reading the messages ($M_{post} = 3.65, SD = 2.30$). In more detail, there were no differences in the direction of change among RTS audience when we consider their pre-existing attitudes. Participants favouring EU accession polarised slightly toward more positive attitudes ($M_{pre} = 5.34, SD = 1.58, M_{post} = 5.62, SD = 1.48; t(101) = -2.30, p = .023$). The same tendency was observed among participants with counter-EU pre-existing attitudes. However, this change was not significant ($M_{pre} = 2.16, SD = 1.55, M_{post} = 2.23, SD = 1.65; t(141) = -.57, p = .568$).

Pink audience. The opposite was true for the attitudes of Pink audience, they tended to get slightly more negative after exposure to the counter-attitudinal message ($M_{pre} = 3.70, SD = 2.37, M_{post} = 3.58, SD = 2.26$). Considering the pre-test attitudes, those among those who favoured EU accession slid toward slightly less positive attitudes after reading the message ($M_{pre} = 5.71, SD = 1.52, M_{post} = 5.50, SD = 1.50$). However, this change was not significant ($t(67) = 1.04, p = .303$). The same was true for those opposing EU accession ($M_{pre} = 1.99, SD = 1.44, M_{post} = 1.95, SD = 1.32, t(79) = .29, p = .770$). Thus, the attitude change was not significant among Pink audience.

Recent empirical research suggests that exposure to cross-cutting messages can reinforce rather than temper pre-existing attitudes, potentially increasing polarisation. In our study, this amplifying effect was statistically significant for only one group: pro-EU audience of RTS. Given the recent report²⁸ highlighting that Serbian news outlets, especially TV stations with national coverage like RTS and Pink, tend to cast the EU in a negative light, this outcome might hint at a defensive response by pro-EU individuals. They might be reacting to a media landscape that predominantly showcases unfavourable views of the EU. This unique reaction among RTS viewers could be linked to the particular nature of RTS's news coverage and the type of audience it draws. It is

²⁸ CRTA, (2023). CRTA Media Monitoring: Anti-West Side Story – Monitoring of Foreign Influence, July 2022 – June 2023. Available here: <https://link.crtars.rs/ku> Last access: 26/12/2023

possible that, compared to Pink and N1 viewers, RTS's audience is less politically engaged and holds more malleable political attitudes.

6.4.4 How did the participants understand the message?

Participants correctly identified the tone of the messages, distinguishing positive versus negative portrayals of the EU. However, their reactions to the crucial message content – EU assistance for Serbian agriculture – aligned more with their pre-existing attitudes rather than the message's intent. Pre-existing attitudes seemed to heavily influence participants' interpretations of the message's central argument.

To check whether our participants correctly understood the message's contents, we asked them to rate the extent to which the EU was cast positively or negatively in the text and evaluate the crucial aspect of the message: the importance of EU assistance for Serbian agriculture. Here we found an interesting inconsistency. On one side, we can conclude that our participants correctly recognised the tone of the message, that is, whether it portrayed the EU in a positive or negative light, as those who received the pro-EU message rated it as more positive ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.77$) than those receiving the counter-EU message ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.62$; $F(1, 561) = 188.38$, $p < .01$). On the other side, the answers to the second question show an opposite pattern. Despite reading the counter-attitudinal messages, those participants favouring the EU rated the EU assistance to agriculture as more important ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.59$) than those opposing the EU ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.90$; $F(1, 561) = 86.79$, $p < .01$).

Due to the experimental design (i.e., the fact that participants always read a counter-attitudinal message), it is not entirely possible to disentangle the effects of pre-existing attitudes from the effects of reading the message. On average, participants correctly recognised the message's intent. However, their reactions to its central argument mostly reflected their pre-existing attitudes.

6.4.5 How did participants rate the text and its author?

On average, participants rated both the content and the alleged author moderately favourably in terms of objectivity, truthfulness, and expertise. Interestingly, the participants' ratings did not significantly differ on whether they knew the source of the message or not. Despite contradicting their views, participants generally rated disagreeable content fairly, suggesting receptiveness to diverse viewpoints.

On average, the participants rated the text moderately favourably ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 2.15$) in terms of its factuality, professionalism, objectivity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. The alleged author of the text (which was not identified) was rated slightly more favourably but still moderately ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.88$) regarding their impartiality, expertise, thoroughness, and being informed about the topic.

We also wanted to test whether different groups of participants rated the text and the author differently and whether these differences could account for the (lack of) change in attitudes. Reflecting the previous analytical logic, we looked at the same groups of participants. First, those who received texts that revealed the source did not differ in their ratings of either the text compared to those who read texts with unknown source ($F(1, 551) = .00$, $p = .974$). These two groups did not differ in their ratings of the author ($F(1, 551) = .22$, $p = .638$).

Further, and interestingly, participants who favoured or did not favour accession of Serbia to the EU did not differ in their ratings of the text ($F(1, 551) = .74$, $p = .389$) or the author ($F(1, 551) = .09$, $p = .767$). The same holds for the group of participants with different media preferences. Their ratings of the text did not depend on their preferred news outlet ($F(2, 551) = .99$, $p = .371$), and neither did the ratings of the authors ($F(2, 551) = 2.16$, $p = .116$).

Overall, the dominant pattern of results suggests that participants with different media preferences and attitudes toward the EU rated the messages relatively equally favourably. Even though these ratings could be considered only moderately favourable

(since they averaged around 4–5 on a 7-point scale), the ratings were quite favourable given that the messages contradicted their attitudes. Thus, the participants would not discredit the messages they disagreed with.

This observation has important implications for media educators and practitioners. Given the pronounced polarisation in Serbia's information landscape, the willingness of participants to rate disagreeable news content positively suggests that citizens may have a greater capacity for receptiveness to viewpoint diversity within news coverage than is often assumed by media outlets. Such a trend offers news literacy educators a chance to emphasise the significance of media pluralism. Advocates for press freedom can also leverage these insights, championing the call for diverse news coverage through public campaigns and initiatives. Nevertheless, when we correlated the ratings of the text and the author with the actual attitude change from pre- to post-test attitudes, we found quite small correlations (with the ratings of the text: $r = .10$, $p = .020$, with the ratings of the author, $r = .08$, $p = .046$). Consequently, we can rule out the possibility that discrediting the counter-attitudinal text accounted for a lack of change in attitudes.

6.4.6 How did the counter-attitudinal messages affect the emotional reactions of participants?

The study analysed emotional responses (general mood, optimism, anger, and anxiety) triggered by the articles participants were exposed to. Participants with counter-EU attitudes, exposed to pro-EU messages, displayed more positive emotional reactions compared to those favouring the EU. After exposure to counter-attitudinal messages, pro-EU individuals reported heightened anger and anxiety compared to those opposing EU accession. Conversely, encountering positive information about EU assistance evoked positive emotions regardless of participants' attitudes. While emotional reactions showed slight associations with attitude changes, they did not significantly drive these changes.

We examined the emotional reactions to the texts presented to participants, focusing on four basic reactions: general mood (good vs. bad), optimism, anger, and anxiety. We did find some differences in the profiles of emotional reactions between groups of participants. These reactions differed significantly between the pro- and the counter-EU pre-test attitudes ($F(4, 548) = 6.94, p < .01$).

Specifically, participants with counter-EU attitudes that read pro-EU messages showed more positive emotional reactions compared to participants favourable to the EU. After reading the counter-attitudinal text, the pro-EU participants reported feeling more anger ($M = 3.74, SD = 1.93$) than participants not favouring EU accession ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.93, F(1, 561) = 17.50, p < .01$). They also felt more anxiety ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.77$) compared with the other group ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.92, F(1, 561) = 20.23, p < .01$). Conversely, participants with favourable attitudes toward EU accession expressed less good mood ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.77$) compared to the counter-EU participants ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.94, F(1, 561) = 15.73, p < .01$). Similarly, they expressed less optimism ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.64$) compared to those not supporting the EU ($M = 3.72, SD = 1.86, F(1, 561) = 11.90, p < .01$).

This pattern further underscores the potential effects of a predominantly negative media narrative about the EU on pro-EU audiences. In an environment saturated with unfavourable EU depictions, encountering an additional negative portrayal could heighten pro-EU viewers' "hostile media perceptions"—intensifying their belief that the media is disproportionately biased against their perspective. Conversely, the infrequency of positive EU portrayals might render such positive news less unsettling for EU sceptics.

Notwithstanding their attitudes, learning some positive information about the EU (or, rather, about the help that Serbian agriculture receives) ignited some positive emotions. Also, learning negative information about the EU's support to Serbia among those who support accession to the EU would give rise to more negative emotions. Important, these emotional reactions were only slightly related to the actual change in attitudes (anger: $r = -.08, p = .045$; good mood: $r = .10, p = .013$; optimism: $r = .102, p = .015$; anxiety: $r = -.02, p = .599$) suggesting that the emotions did not drive concordant changes. The issue

remains open whether positive emotions about the help from the EU could be strengthened via alternative framing of the issue in the media discourse.

6.4.7 Who showed more change in attitudes?

Analysis regarding various socio-demographic and political attitudinal factors (education, socio-economic status, interest in politics, likelihood of voting in an EU accession referendum, and political affiliation) revealed no significant relationship with attitude change. Despite exposure to valid arguments, attitudes toward the EU displayed remarkable stability across diverse participant characteristics. This resilience emphasises the need for deeper exploration, especially considering the fluctuating support for EU accession among Serbian citizens over time and the potential impact of dominant media narratives on these attitudes.

We calculated an index of attitude change by subtracting the pre-test attitudes from post-test attitudes within each participant. We related this measure to some basic socio-demographic and attitudinal variables to inspect whether any group of participants exhibited more openness to attitude change. However, we did not find any significant relations to the level of education ($r = .03$, $p = .489$) nor to the socio-economic status of participants ($r = .01$, $p = .900$). Further, we did not detect any changes depending on the level of interest in politics ($r = .02$, $p = .576$), the self-rated probability of voting in a EU accession referendum ($r = .05$, $p = .193$), nor between sympathizers of different political parties: governmental, opposition or neither of them ($F(2, 560) = .35$, $p = .703$).

These additional analyses attest to the stability of the main results that appear to replicate across the political spectrum. As a highly polarised topic, attitudes toward the EU appear to be quite resistant to change even when valid arguments are provided. This resilience is particularly intriguing given that public opinion polls over the past two decades reveal fluctuating levels of support among Serbian citizens for EU accession. The exact weight of dominant media narratives within the myriad factors influencing this support remains a puzzle. Our research only scrutinized the impact of a singular exposure

to a counter-attitudinal message. Upcoming research should delve into the effects of sustained exposure to both cross-cutting and attitude-aligned EU messages. Encouragingly, we found minimal evidence of attitude polarisation, also known from the literature on reactions to counter-attitudinal messages relevant to stable and important attitudes.

6.4.8 How did the counter-attitudinal messages influence participants' political tolerance?

We utilised two metrics of political tolerance. Initially, we questioned participants on their sentiments – favourable or unfavourable – toward citizens holding opposing views on the accession of Serbia to the EU. They could choose a value from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating more favourable feelings.

Similar to the prior analysis, we carried out an analysis of variance with three between-subject factors: message source (assigned or control), pre-test attitudes (pro-EU or anti-EU), and media preference (N1, RTS, and Pink). Generally, participants evaluated citizens holding views opposite to their own on Serbia's EU accession somewhat below the theoretical midpoint of 50 ($M = 43.05$, $SD = 22.35$). Evaluations significantly varied based on the participant's attitudes toward EU accession ($F(1, 551) = 23.10$, $p < .001$); those in favour of Serbia joining the EU rated those against it more favourably ($M = 47.49$, $SD = 21.41$) than the reverse ($M = 38.73$, $SD = 22.43$).

Treatment conditions did not result in a significant difference in ratings. Participants receiving a counter-attitudinal message from their preferred source assigned similar favourability ratings to citizens with opposing views ($M = 43.89$, $SD = 22.18$) as those who received the message from an unidentified source ($M = 42.21$, $SD = 22.51$). Although differences based on preferred news outlets were not statistically significant, some relevant trends emerged. N1 audience assigned almost identical ratings, irrespective of whether the counter-attitudinal message came from N1 ($M = 42.09$, $SD = 21.34$) or an unidentified source ($M = 41.62$, $SD = 20.18$).

A slightly larger difference, but in reverse, was observed for Pink audience who received the counter-attitudinal message from Pink ($M = 44.04$, $SD = 22.34$) and from an unattributed source ($M = 45.78$, $SD = 23.77$). Yet, the largest difference appeared among RTS audience: ratings were higher if the counter-attitudinal message was attributed to RTS ($M = 45.18$, $SD = 22.81$) than if it came from an unidentified source ($M = 40.42$, $SD = 23.07$).

Despite these results not being statistically significant ($F = 1.61$, $p = .201$), they suggest that for certain audiences, exposure to counter-attitudinal messages might increase understanding of the opposing side, potentially decreasing affective polarisation and enhancing deliberative potential.

As a second measure of political tolerance, we queried participants on their level of support or opposition to restricting media access and public expression rights for those holding differing views on the accession of Serbia to the EU. On average, our participants' support for such freedom of speech restrictions was relatively low, tending toward the lower end of a 7-point scale ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 2.07$).

Mirroring the prior result, the only significant difference was based on existing EU attitudes: EU accession supporters were less in favour of restricting the freedom of speech of those opposing it ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.89$) than the reverse ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 2.16$). No statistical difference was found based on treatment condition; support for speech restrictions remained similar, whether the counter-attitudinal message originated from a preferred source ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 2.10$) or lacked a source label ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 2.05$). The source of the counter-attitudinal message – whether from a preferred news outlet or presented without attribution – had no discernible effect on support for speech restrictions. This pattern held across all preferred news outlets. Specifically, for N1 audience, the mean was 2.54 ($SD = 2.02$) when exposed to a sourced message and 2.52 ($SD = 1.97$) without a source; for RTS audience, the figures were 2.92 ($SD = 2.07$) and 2.81 ($SD = 2.12$) respectively; and for Pink audience, the values stood at 2.99 ($SD = 2.22$) and 2.74 ($SD = 2.03$) respectively.

6.4.9 Can counter-attitudinal messages affect political participation?

Finally, we sought to determine if exposure to a counter-attitudinal message influenced participants' intent to vote in an EU referendum. For this, we conducted an analysis of variance considering three factors: message source (assigned or control), initial attitudes towards the EU (pro-EU or anti-EU), and media preference (N1, RTS, and Pink).

Participants, on average, seemed moderately sure of their intention to participate in a referendum ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 2.34$). Echoing our earlier findings, there was a statistically significant difference based on participants' EU stance ($F(1, 551) = 138.10$, $p < .001$): those supportive of Serbia's EU accession were more certain of voting ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.50$) than their counterparts who opposed it ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 2.52$).

One interesting observation, albeit not reaching statistical significance, was the treatment condition's impact ($F(1, 551) = 2.17$, $p = .141$). Participants exposed to a counter-attitudinal message from their favoured news source displayed a slightly reduced willingness to participate ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 2.29$) compared to those who saw the message without source attribution ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 2.38$). Even if not statistically significant, this trend hints at a potential backfire effect wherein receiving a counter-attitudinal message from a trusted source might deter political participation. This effect was most pronounced among N1 audience, who were less inclined to vote if the message was tied to N1 ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 2.26$) compared to an unidentified source ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 2.14$). For Pink audience ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 2.45$ for Pink attributed; $M = 5.01$, $SD = 2.36$ without a source) and RTS audience ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 2.22$ for RTS attributed; $M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.49$ without a source), the differences were not significant.

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