

Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media

Research Report



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SUMMARY

The mapping of disinformation was conducted in the period September–December 2021 on four weekly samples (a total of 28 days). It included 15 media in Serbia: central news of 5 TV channels with national coverage (RTS 1, TV Pink, TV B92, TV Prva and Happy TV), central news of 3 local TV channels (TV Pančevo, Novosadska TV, RTV Novi Pazar), 5 online news media (Alo, Blic, Kurir, Nova, N1), and 2 printed dailies (Informer and Večernje novosti). The sample is formed in such a way to include most frequent news sources among Serbian citizens, most popular media across different media markets, diverse political views and media that received substantial amounts of state funding.

In its overall design the methodology combines qualitative and quantitative content analysis with the fact-checking and debunking procedures. The categorisation of disinformation was developed relying on previous studies and having in mind the nuances in misinformation ecology. It included: false connection, manipulation of facts and misleading content, misleading or false context, extreme bias, imposter content, photo and video manipulation, and fabricated news or information. In addition to the analysis of traditional media, the mapping included a study on the frequency and type of engagement with the disinformation on Facebook.

The analysis and its results are placed within a broader context of the Serbian media landscape. The overview of existing sources showed that there is a rising number of media outlets, lack of pluralism and diversity, as well as the state and party capture of media regulator, public broadcasting service and substantial part of private media. Clientelistic relations between the state and selected private media are achieved through the financing mechanisms, including co-financing of media content, state advertising and other non-transparent contractual relations, and through (in)activity of the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM). In return, the selected media provide a disproportionately high amount of time and space to the authorities and representatives of the ruling parties. The media that remain outside of the clientelistic networks are frequent targets of attacks, administrative harassment, smear campaigns and in general struggle to survive in the market.

This study identified 559 cases of different types of disinformation in 494 news items disseminated in 14 (out of 15 analysed) Serbian news media. Online editions of tabloids Alo and Kurir account for more than half of all the news containing disinformation. They are followed by two printed dailies Večernje novosti and Informer. Among the TV channels with national coverage, TV Pink more frequently disseminated disinformation than other news media. Central news of the public broadcaster Radio-television of Serbia 1 (RTS 1) had the fewest disinformation. Among the local TV channels, disinformation is found in central news of RTV Pančevo and Novosadska TV, while no disinformation is found in the news of RTV Novi Pazar. By spreading *manipulated facts and misleading content*, together with *extremely biased* news, which we found to be the most frequent types of disinformation, the media fail to perform their key societal functions.

We can distinguish two groups of creators of disinformation – sources (officials, politicians, experts, etc.) who make claims that contain disinformation, and journalists who either fail to



check these claims or who create disinformation on their own, as creators, not just distributors. In online news media Alo, local TV channel Novosadska TV and printed daily Informer, disinformation was prevalently created by in-house journalists. High participation of journalists in the creation of disinformation was found in TV channels with national coverage TV Pink and Happy TV, local TV channel RTV Pančevo, printed daily Večernje novosti and online news media Kurir. On Radio-television of Serbia and, to some extent online news media N1, disinformation was the result of the coverage of the statements made by high officials, which were disseminated without fact-checking. In other media, we found a mixture of different groups of creators of disinformation.

Disinformation is primarily oriented towards national lines of polarisation, whereas international affairs serve primarily as their background (since the sample was collected prior to the war in Ukraine). False, misleading and manipulative information occurs around a set of topics, most notably relations between government and opposition, but also around Kosovo, and events such as the environmental protests or protests against the mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić. Events, such as protests, led to heightened media reporting and served as a framework within which dichotomies, such as government–opposition or Belgrade–Priština, are accentuated and reaffirmed, through the use of disinformation.

Disinformation is frequently spread when it relates to those who challenge the government. In over half of the news items containing disinformation, opposition parties and individuals were targeted in online news media Alo, national TV channels TV B92 and TV Pink, and local TV channels Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo. Further studies are needed to confirm our preliminary observation that, similar to other populist regimes, Serbian populism articulated these dichotomies in the media in such a way to bring all “political others” under one umbrella – opposition parties, critical intellectuals, journalists and investigative media.

The data on the frequency of disinformation viewed against the data on different sources of state financing of the media show that the media that are prominent generators of disinformation receive substantial amounts of public funds. This trend can be observed across the markets. In online news media, the two media (Alo and Kurir) that spread more disinformation than others (Blic, N1 and Nova) receive more support from project co-financing and from state advertising. Two printed dailies (Informer and Večernje novosti), in which disinformation is found almost on a daily basis, also receive public money. The TV station with the most frequent occurrence of disinformation (TV Pink) received the most from state advertising (and other benefits). Finally, in the local TV market, RTV Pančevo and Novosadska TV confirm this trend.

In the period September–December 2021, the news items that contained disinformation reached a total of 43,370 engagements – likes, comments and shares. News items from N1 and Nova had higher engagement than news items from Alo and Blic. Our findings about the spread of disinformation on Facebook show that the media that receive state funding (Alo, Kurir, Blic) usually do not post hard news on politics, social, economic or international affairs on their Facebook pages.

INTRODUCTION

Being widely researched and intensively debunked, disinformation comes in different shapes, from various actors, and is being disseminated through different channels. It is regarded as ‘information pollution’ that affects democratic processes and practices.¹ This report attempts to provide preliminary insights into the distribution of disinformation across the Serbian media landscape, which is already troubled with democratic deficiency.² For that reason, we observe the disinformation phenomenon against the data on the Serbian media market that show lack of pluralism, declining media freedoms and media capture by the state.

Dealing with an elusive concept, this study uses the definition by which disinformation is understood as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm”.³ In the analysis, we narrow the focus on political and social affairs which are selected as the most relevant for the quality of public information, democratic processes and for the assessment of journalistic practice. One of the key questions motivating this research is what is the scope and which type of disinformation is prevalent in the media. The answer is based on the identification of seven types of disinformation: *false connection, misleading content and manipulation of facts, extreme bias, false context, imposter content, photo and video manipulation, and fabricated content*. Fifteen media outlets were monitored for these types of disinformation and the sample formed in this way was analysed further to establish the links between disinformation types, news sources, sources of disinformation and targets of disinformation. Overall, this enables us to discern who benefits from the media content that contains disinformation.

Furthermore, the report aims to identify the flow of disinformation on Facebook, the most popular social networking site among Serbian citizens.⁴ We use news containing disinformation found in the five online media as the initial input, and by using the functionalities of the CrowdTangle tool, we observe the level of user engagement. In specific, we report on the frequency of news liking, sharing and commenting.

As we will detail in the methodological sections, this report does not provide insights into the totality of “information pollution” in Serbia due to different constraints. It should rather be seen

¹ Bovet, A., & Makse, H. A. (2019). Influence of fake news in Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. *Nature Communications*, 10(1), 7. <https://link.crtars/77>

McKay, S., & Tenove, C. (2021). Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy. *Political Research Quarterly*, 74(3), 703–717. <https://link.crtars/78>

Schia, N. N., & Gjesvik, L. (2020). Hacking democracy: Managing influence campaigns and disinformation in the digital age. *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 5(3), 413–428. <https://link.crtars/79>

² Spasojević, D. (ed.) (2021). *Undermining democracy*. Belgrade: Crta.

³ European Commission. (2018a). *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*. COM/2018/236. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/7a>

See also: European Commission. (2018b). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent high-level group on fake news and online disinformation*. Luxembourg. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/7b>

⁴ CeSID (2020). *Građani i mediji: konzumacija, navike i medijska pismenost [Citizens and media: consumption, habits and media literacy]*. Retrieved on December 20th, 2020 from <https://link.crtars/7c>



as a first step towards a more comprehensive and detailed analysis which can be designed and implemented using the concepts and findings of this study.

Report structure

First chapter presents **background information on the media landscape in Serbia** which informs the methodology developed for this study and serves as a backdrop against which the results are interpreted. It highlights some of the main challenges of the Serbian media system, including aspects of media market functioning, state support provided to selected media, establishment of clientelist networks and the lack of pluralism and diversity as its consequence.

Second chapter gives information on the **methodology** developed for this study. It explains the criteria which led to the inclusion of 15 news media in the sample, and the rationale behind the selection of the time frame for analysis. It contains discussion about the conceptualisation of disinformation and the main categories used in the analysis. This section further presents the research procedure which included monitoring media for disinformation (done partially in cooperation with Istinomer – CRTA's portal for fact-checking and debunking disinformation), content analysis of news items, and analysis performed on Facebook using the CrowdTangle tool.

Third chapter provides the **key findings** across the entire sample about the types of disinformation, media space provided for news which contains disinformation, frequency of distribution in different media, and sources of disinformation. It also points to topics of media coverage within which disinformation is created and disseminated.

Subsequent chapters take a closer look at different types of media and their practices. First, we look at five **online media** (Chapter 4) which are found to be the disseminators of most of the disinformation circulating in the Serbian media landscape. Then we present the findings about the five **TV channels with national coverage** (Chapter 5). In the next section we discuss disinformation found in two **print tabloids** (Chapter 6). And lastly, we provide the results for the three **local TV channels** (Chapter 7).

Since historical⁵ and more recent analysis⁶ has located disinformation within the realm of international relations and geopolitical struggles, Chapter 8 looks at the **links between disinformation and international news**. It observes actors and targets of disinformation, and in a more qualitative view discusses how pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments serve as the background of disinformation about domestic events and issues.

⁵ Martin, L. J. (1982). Disinformation: An instrumentality in the propaganda arsenal. *Political Communication*, 2(1), 47-64, DOI: 10.1080/10584609.1982.9962747

⁶ Mejias, U. A., & Vokuev, N. E. (2017). Disinformation and the media: the case of Russia and Ukraine. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(7), 1027–1042. <https://link.crtars/7d>

Cosentino, G. (2020). *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot.

Woolley, S., & Howard, P. (2018). *Computational propaganda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Chapter 9 presents more detailed findings and discussion on **the sources of disinformation and the social actors**⁷ – **groups, organisations and individuals** – who are their targets. More than any other category it reveals the purposes of the creation and dissemination of disinformation, which for the most part have a role in domestic political competition.

Two final chapters are dedicated to **the flows of disinformation**, with Chapter 10 looking at the sourcing patterns in news media and the ways in which the media rely on one another and report on one another, and Chapter 11 presenting the findings on the flow of disinformation on Facebook, the most popular social networking site in Serbia.

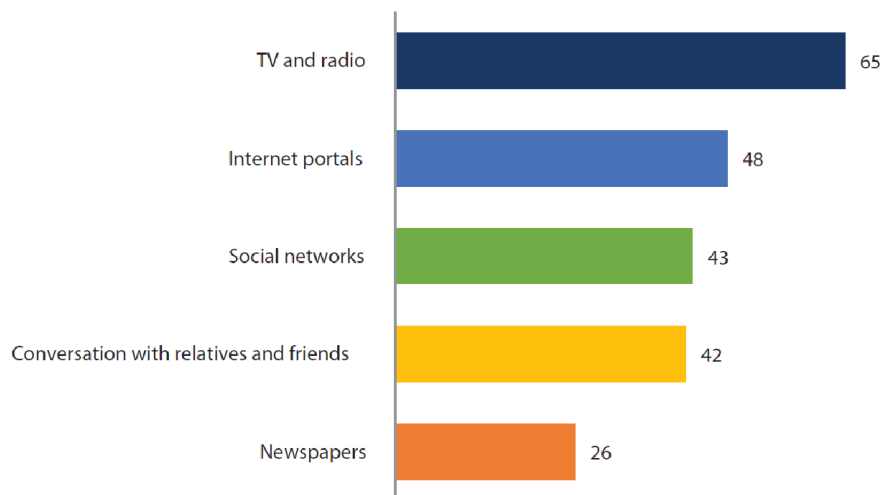
In Chapter 12, we bring together all the previously discussed results, put them in a perspective reflecting the background data about the Serbian media landscape, and interpret the main characteristics of disinformation.

⁷ Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

I BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN SERBIA

The number of the media in Serbia is constantly expanding. With 152 new media registered in 2020,⁸ Serbia has 2,600 media⁹ to serve the needs of its 6,871,5472 citizens. Television is the media most frequently used for obtaining information on political, social and economic developments in the country (Figure 1).¹⁰ The Internet is being increasingly used,¹¹ and although it still lags behind the television, it is an important source of news for Internet users.¹²

Figure 1: Main sources of information on socio-political issues (CRTA, 2021)



Four private TV channels are granted national broadcasting licences and together with the first channel of public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia 1 (RTS 1) they attract the majority of TV viewers. Audience reach of RTS 1 for 2020 exceeded 3 million viewers, followed by TV Prva and TV Pink with around 2.5 million viewers (Table 1).¹³

⁸ Business Registers Agency (2021). *Annual Report 2020*. Retrieved on October 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/i>

⁹ Business Registers Agency, 2021, data received on July 14th, 2021.

¹⁰ Crta (2021). *Attitudes of Serbia Citizens About Participation in Democratic Processes 2020*. Retrieved on July 30th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/21>

¹¹ Kovačević, M., Šutić, V., & Rajčević, U. (2021). *Upotreba informaciono-komunikacionih tehnologija u Republici Srbiji, 2021* [Use of information-communication technologies in the Republic of Serbia]. Beograd: Republički zavod za statistiku. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/7e>

¹² Milivojević, S., Ninković Slavnić, D., & Bajčeta, S. (2020). *Informisanje u digitalnom okruženju u Srbiji* [Getting informed in digital environment in Serbia]. Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka. Retrieved on January 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7f>

¹³ Nielsen Television Audience Measurement



Table 1: Audience share, reach and reach in percentage on TV channels with terrestrial coverage and cable TV N1 and Nova S, January – May 2021 (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement)

	Share in %	Audience Reach	Reach in %
RTS 1	18%	3,046,890	45%
TV PINK	16%	2,310,355	34%
TV PRVA	12%	2,531,640	38%
TV Happy	8%	1,850,928	28%
TV B92	3%	1,587,670	24%
TV N1	1%	432,448	6%
TV Nova S	1%	506,290	8%

With 84,5% of households with cable television,¹⁴ the question of distribution of TV content plays a role in the distribution of TV audiences. The market of operators of electronic communications networks is marked by a fierce competition between the state-owned Telekom and privately owned SBB (Serbia broadband – Srpske kablovske mreže). SBB has a share of 45% of the market, whereas after the purchase of *Kopernikus* in June 2021, Telekom reached the market share of 44% per cent. Both companies are at the same time indirect owners of news channels. SBB is part of the United Group, which operates throughout Southeast Europe, and includes United Media as its part. United Media consists of entertainment and sports channels, and two news channels NovaS and N1. Telekom owns Arena Channels Group, which has 13 cable broadcasting licences, mostly for sports channels, and since May 2021 one channel for news Euronews, a licensed version of European cable news channel in Serbian language for the Serbian market. Without access to Telekom electronic communications network, TV NovaS and TV N1 share is very small (1%), but among internet users the web sites of these outlets are deemed as popular and trusted sources of news.¹⁵

There are ten national daily newspapers, two of them (Nova and Objektiv) launched in 2020–2021. The most popular are newspapers with tabloid editorial policy, Informer, Blic and Večernje novosti (Table 2).¹⁶ Although with small and declining circulation numbers, printed dailies have free web editions which are attracting a substantial number of Internet users.

¹⁴ Regulatorna agencija za elektronske komunikacije i poštanske usluge – RATEL (2021). Pregled tržišta telekomunikacija i poštanskih usluga u Republici Srbiji u 2020. godini [Overview of the market of telecommunications and postal services in the Republic of Serbia in 2020]. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/7g>

¹⁵ Milivojević, S., Ninković Slavnić, D., & Bajčeta, S. (2020). Informisanje u digitalnom okruženju u Srbiji [Getting informed in digital environment in Serbia]. Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka. Retrieved on January 20, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/7f>, p. 9

¹⁶ Ipsos Srbija (2020). MEDIAPuls. Proprietary data purchased by CRTA



Table 2: Average rating in total individuals and in percentage in national dailies in 2020 (Ipsos Srbija, 2020)

Printed dailies	Average rating in total individuals	Average rating in %
Informer	215,309	3.4
Blic	178,428	2.8
Večernje novosti	165,610	2.6
Kurir	158,961	2.5
Alo	117,821	1.8
Politika	95,632	1.5
Srpski telegraf	88,355	1.4
Danas	62,854	1.0

There is a steady increase in the use of the Internet as the number of users rose to 81% of population in 2021.¹⁷ On a weekly basis more than 80% of internet users visit the sites of news media.¹⁸ Data from the website ranking company Alexa confirms the importance of news in average internet usage patterns, since three media portals (Blic.rs, Kurir.rs and B92.net) belong to a group of ten most visited websites in Serbia. Among the ten most popular portals (Table 3), three of them¹⁹ are online-only, which means that the substantial influence of printed newspapers and cable TV is achieved through their web editions.

Table 3: Number of real users, average daily users and page views for ten most popular news websites, December 2021²⁰

	Real users	Average daily users	Page views
Blic.rs	2,864,648	980,593	135,918,632
Kurir.rs	2,651,577	770,038	190,396,682
Mondo.rs	2,747,633	576,266	65,605,886
Alo.rs	2,395,424	562,303	54,580,701
Novosti.rs	2,448,316	535,290	46,404,273

¹⁷ Kovačević, M., Šutić, V., & Rajčević, U. (2021). *Upotreba informaciono-komunikacionih tehnologija u Republici Srbiji, 2021* [Use of information-communication technologies in the Republic of Serbia]. Beograd: Republički zavod za statistiku. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/7e>

¹⁸ Milivojević, S., Ninković Slavnić, D., & Bajčeta, S. (2020). *Informisanje u digitalnom okruženju u Srbiji* [Getting informed in digital environment in Serbia]. Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka. Retrieved on January 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/7f>, p. 7

¹⁹ Mondo, Srbijadanas and Espresso.

²⁰ Data source: Gemius Audience (2021). Country: Serbia. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/7h>

Telegraf.rs	2,500,363	523,234	88,118,179
Nova.rs	2,223,723	472,525	68,173,779
Espresso.rs	2,204,676	455,456	50,403,845
Srbijadanas.com	2,033,453	444,272	57,240,106
N1info.com	1,819,137	327,650	27,748,358

This abundance of news sources, nevertheless, does not mean that there is a plurality of views in public communication. Numerous studies and reports highlight the absence of pluralism as one of the key issues in the media sphere and note that the situation has worsened in the last ten years.²¹ The analysis performed in 2018 using the indicators developed for the European Media Pluralism Monitor notes that there is high risk to pluralism in the political field.²² This finding is corroborated by the subsequent monitoring, especially during election periods. In the nine-month media monitoring period around 2020 parliamentary elections the CRTA Election Observation Mission has recorded every second of the extended prime-time programme (from 17:30 until 00:00) on the five TV channels with national terrestrial coverage and measured a dramatic disproportion in media representation between the ruling parties and the opposition (Figure 2).²³

²¹ Đurić, R., & Dobrilović, J. (2019). *Zaštita javnog interesa i medijskog pluralizma u Srbiji: Radni izveštaj* [Protection of public interest and media pluralism in Serbia: Working report]. Beograd: CRTA, Slavko Ćuruvija Fondacija.

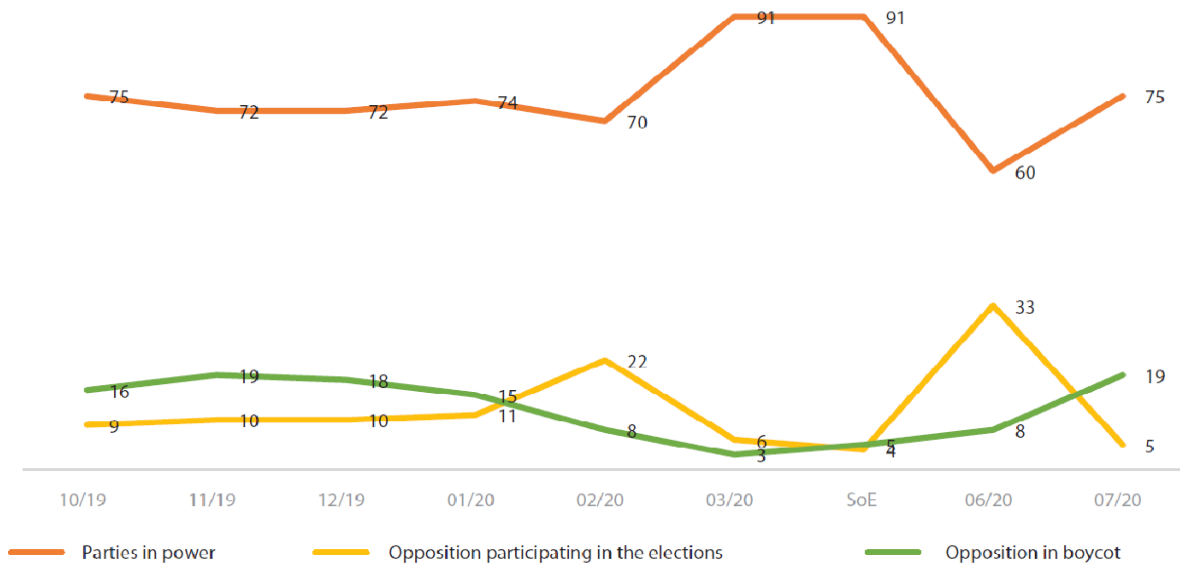
IREX (2019). Media Sustainability Index 2019: Serbia. Retrieved on August 20th, 2020 from <https://link.crtars/7i>
Kleut, J. (2021). Media and Democracy. In D. Spasojević (ed.), *Undermining democracy*. Belgrade: Crta. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/q>

Matić, J. (2018a). Medijska politika vlasti SNS-a u Srbiji 2014-2018. godine [Media policy of SNS in Serbia for 2014-2018 period]. In D. Pralica (ed.), *Zbornik u čast prof. dr Dubravki Valić Nedeljković – Mediji Balkana* (pp. 53–70). Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu.

²² Surčulija Milojević, J. (2018). Serbia. In *Monitoring Media Pluralism in Europe: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor 2017 in the European Union, FYROM, Serbia & Turkey 2018*. Policy Report. European University Institute.

²³ CRTA (2020). *Parlamentarni izbori 2020: Završni izveštaj sa preporukama* [Parliamentary elections 2020: Final report with recommendations]. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/7j>

Figure 2: Gap in media presence between political parties in power and opposition between October 2019 and July 2020 on TV channels with national coverage (CRTA, 2020)

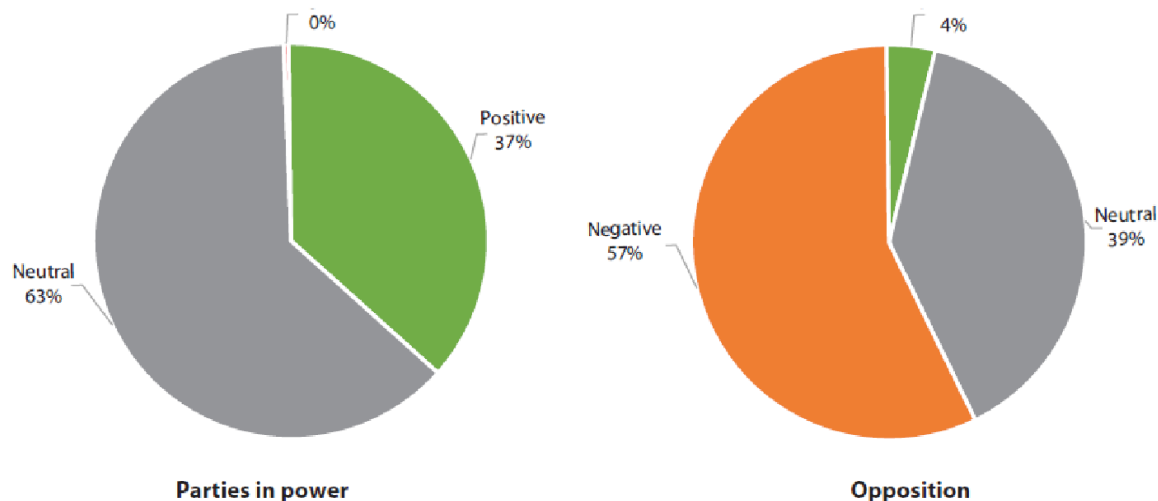


After the elections, between July 2020 and July 2021, central news on TV channels with national coverage lacked political pluralism, as shows the CRTA’s continued media monitoring.²⁴ Data demonstrates “the extremely uneven representation of ruling parties and the opposition”, as ruling parties on average occupied 93% of total central news time, while the remaining time was dedicated to opposition, which is dominantly presented in negative light (Figure 3).²⁵

²⁴ Monitored televisions are the First Channel of the Radio Television Serbia (RTS1, public service broadcaster), and all commercial televisions with national terrestrial coverage – TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy and TV B92.

²⁵ “Central news stripped of political pluralism” (2021, July 8th). Crta. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/t>.

Figure 3: Tone of presentation of political parties in power and opposition in central news on all TV channels with national coverage, July 2020 – June 2021 (%)



* July 16th 2020 - June 30th 2021

Lack of diversity is also found on the level of overall content that is produced primarily for profit, promoting trivial and tabloid entertainment. To amend this lack, a new instrument was introduced in 2014 – project co-financing of the public interest content. The instrument is designed in such a way that the public funds from all levels (national, provincial, local) are awarded to media projects by the appointed commission of media experts. The first years of the implementation have shown substantial procedural weaknesses of project co-financing, and for the most part local self-governments have used the mechanism to subsidize overall work of the local media that were previously state owned.²⁶ Very few of the weaknesses have been corrected in the recent years²⁷ and the reports show that substantial amounts are awarded to the media that promote parties in government.²⁸ The data gathered and analysed by CRTA also show that selected media owners attract the funds from all levels on which projects are awarded (Table 4).

²⁶ Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine (2016). *Bela knjiga konkursnog finansiranja javnog interesa u sferi javnog informisanja* [White book of project financing of the public interest in the public information sphere]. Novi Sad: Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine.

Gruhonjić, D., Šinković, N., & Kleut, J. (2018). Ka evaluaciji projektnog finansiranja medijskih sadržaja u Srbiji [Towards evaluation of the project financing of media content in Serbia]. In A. Milojević & R. Veljanovski (eds.), *Verodostojnost medija: odnos finansiranja i sadržaja* (pp. 11-29). Beograd: Čigoja - Fakultet političkih nauka.

²⁷ Sejdinović, N., & Medić, D. (2021). *Otvorenim podacima do kvalitetnijeg projektnog sufinansiranja medijskih sadržaja* [Open data for better quality of project co-financing of media content]. Novi Sad: Centar za održive zajednice.

²⁸ Krik (n.d.). Ke\$formisanje. Retrieved from <https://link.crtar.rs/7k>



Table 4: Value of state co-financing projects allocated to the media in 2020

Owner	Granted Media	Total in RSD	Total in Euro
Radoica Milosavljević	TV Pirot, RTV Brus, TV Požega, RTV Pančevo, RTV Kruševac, RTV Caribrod, TV Leskovac, SOA kanal plus, RTV Bačka Palanka	78,914,056	671,253
RTV Novi Pazar doo	Radio Novi Pazar, Televizija novi Pazar	52,560,000	447,082
Aleksandra Martinović	Novosadska TV, VTV television	47,089,200	400,546
Zvezdan Milovanović	K:CN Raška, TV K:CN1, K:CN Jug, K:CN Istok, TV K:CN Zapad, Radio Sezam 91,3, TV Sezam, Radio Sid 104,6, KCN TV Jagodina, Radio Jagodina, K: CN Sever	35,280,000	300,096
Saša Blagojević	Alo, Radio Studio B, TV Sudio B	27,680,000	235,449
Aleksandar Vinčić	Sremska TV and Delta TV	26,500,000	225,412
Vidosav Radomirović	TV Belle Amie and Radio Belle Amie	23,900,000	203,296
Nikola Gašić	Zona plus d.o.o. Niš	19,900,000	169,272
50% Vidosav Radomirović, 50% Slađana Ostojić	Niška televizija d.o.o.	16,450,000	139,926
Igor Žeželj	Kurir, Espresso, Elle, National Geographic	13,299,620	113,128
Dragan Vučićević	Informer	6,800,000	57,842
Boban Rajić	Večernje novosti, Radio Novosti	6,580,000	55,970
Dan graf doo	Danas	6,400,000	54,439
Vladana Čitović	Televizija Happy	3,287,000	27,960
Novinsko preduzeće Vreme doo	Vreme	1,400,000	11,909
Ringier Axel Springer	Blic, NIN	1,400,000	11,909
Unknown owner	Pečat	1,250,000	10,633
Ljubomir Dabović	Srpski telegraf	1,100,000	9,357
Nadežda Gaće	Novi magazin	950,000	8,081

This subtle and indirect state interference in the media market is indicative of a broader trend of allocation of other public resources, including financing of media services, state advertising, and granting tax exemptions. According to the CRTA analysis, out of the total amount of state advertising on televisions with national coverage in 2020, the largest portion or 37% (21,3 million Euros) went to TV Pink. TV Happy received 24% (13.6 million Euros). B92 and TV Prva, having the same owner, received 15% (8.4 million Euros) and 14% (7.9 million Euros) respectively. RTS 1 received the smallest amount of total state advertising: 10% (5.7 million Euros). On the other hand, with 24% (6.3 million Euros) of advertising investment coming from state institutions and public companies, printed dailies are the most dependent on this source of financing. The largest amount of state advertising was received by tabloid Alo, which is only the fifth (out of eight) most-read newspapers.

Financing of media services and tax exemption usually lack transparency and legal foundation as they circumvent the media laws and Law on public procurement. This makes a comprehensive analysis almost impossible, as concluded by the Anti-Corruption council which in 2015 attempted to obtain records from public sources and was met with the wall of

silence.²⁹ In relation to tax exemptions, it is established that the state granted TV Pink an option to repay approximately 1.52 billion dinars of tax debt in instalments,³⁰ while at the same time granting it more than €10 million in the form of various loans as well as guarantees from the state-owned Serbian Export Credit and Insurance Agency (AOFI).³¹

Efficient instruments that would secure pluralism in terms of funding sources and owners, as well in terms of diversity of views and opinions are not in place, for several reasons. First, despite being demanded by the laws, ownership over media and the allocation of public money are not transparent³². The Register of the Media created as a part of the Business Registers Agency does not provide sufficient data to establish the final owners. This is especially the case with the media which are, against the legal provision, in state ownership. For example, the publisher of the daily newspaper Politika is the company Politika novine i magazini, in which “OOO East Media Group” registered in Russia has a 50% stake, while the remaining 50% is owned by the joint-stock company Politika a.d. in which over 90% of shares are owned by the Republic of Serbia, the city of Belgrade and other public authorities and organisations. The official data on ownership of “OOO East Media Group” is not available in any register in Serbia.³³

There are other notable examples of the state reluctance to withdraw from media ownership. One is related to Tanjug, once a state-owned news agency, now a cable TV station. Following the adoption of media laws in 2014, the state attempted to privatise the news agency and since it failed in 2015 the Government adopted the decision to close Tanjug. However, for the next five years (until March 2021), Tanjug continued to operate in a legal vacuum. As shown by the Centre for investigative journalism Serbia – CINS, the state provided funds for closing of the agency, but continued also to use its services on a commercial basis.³⁴ Since 2015, when the decision on closing is made, until 2019, the state paid more than 52 million dinars, mostly for the media coverage and other services provided to the government ministries.³⁵ In this period, Tanjug proved to be an unreliable source of information, publishing false news stories that promoted authorities and downplayed the criticism coming from the international

²⁹ Savet za borbu protiv korupcije (2015). *Izveštaj o mogućem uticaju institucija javnog sektora na medije kroz plaćenje usluga oglašavanja i marketinga* [Report on the possible influence of public sector institution on the media through the payment of advertising and marketing services]. Beograd: Savet za borbu protiv korupcije.

³⁰ CINS (February 22nd, 2018). Data on tax debts must be public. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/1b>.

³¹ CINS (January 24th, 2018). Pink extended loan by AOFI again. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/1c>.

³² Matić, J., Maksić, T., & Lansner, T. (2014). *Soft Censorship: Strangling Serbia's Media*. Paris: WAN-IFRA World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/7l>

³³ Law on Public Information and Media prescribes (article 39) that document containing the information about the natural and legal persons who directly or indirectly have more than 5 % share in the authorised share capital of the publisher, the information about associated persons as defined under the law governing the legal status of companies, and the information about other publishers in whose authorised share capital these persons have more than 5 % share shall be entered into Media Register. Searching through the APR Media Register, the research team noted that in the case of Politika, only a document containing information on funders of a publisher, but not on their affiliated persons etc. <https://link.crtars/22>.

³⁴ CINS (May 26th, 2018). State institutions paid Tanjug more than 114 million dinars. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/7m>

³⁵ CINS (September 18th, 2019). Tanjugu umesto gašenja stiglo još novca iz budžeta [Instead of closing, Tanjug receives more money from the budget]. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/7n>

community.³⁶ Finally, on March 9th, 2021, Tanjug was deleted from the Media Register and the Business Entities Register. Prior to the deletion, on November 14th, 2020, the Property Directorate of Serbia (as the owner of all Tanjug properties) made a public call³⁷ for a ten-year lease of four trademarks of Tanjug news agency, including four logos and the slogan “Tanjug. Tačno.” The company “Tačno”, allegedly the only bidder at the auction, was not registered by the Business Registers Agency before November 17th, 2020. 60% of shares of the newly established company belong to “Radio Television Pančevo”, local television owned by Radoica Milosavljević³⁸ who bought a total of 13 local media in the privatisation process while another 40% of the shares belong to “Minacord” (owner of another 3 TV stations). After the deletion of News Agency Tanjug from Business Registers Agency, company “Tačno” started using the trademark and name “Tanjug”, and registered its own media under that name.

The second reason for the lack of efficient instruments for securing media pluralism can be found in the fact that the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM) does not fulfil its tasks related to prevention of media concentration.³⁹ Horizontal and vertical concentration are defined by legislation through the shares of the audience in specific markets. The latest report commissioned by the REM dates all the way back to 2015 and only for national channels.⁴⁰ This has not prevented the REM from making decisions regarding the ownership transformation, even for the scarce national TV licences. This was the case of ownership transformation of TV B92 (share in viewership 3.48%) and TV Prva (11.79%), as well as of a radio station with national coverage, Play radio (share in listenership 7.64%). Both televisions were, through Serbia-based dependent companies, indirectly owned by the Greek media company Antenna Media Group until 2018. Earlier that year, Srđan Milovanović, the brother of a high-ranking official of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party from Niš, Zvezdan Milovanović,⁴¹ sold his cable operator company Kopernikus to the state-owned Telekom. In December 2018, his Cypriot-based Kopernikus Corporation bought the entire Antenna group in Serbia, including publishers of B92, TV Prva and Play Radio, and the Commission for Protection of Competition approved the transaction. Incidentally, Zvezdan Milovanović is the majority owner of 13 local media outlets (television or radio).

The third reason behind the lack of pluralism is also to be found in the inefficient work of the REM, but now in the area of monitoring media reporting during elections. In 2015, the REM adopted the “Rulebook on Obligations of Media Service Providers during Election Campaigns”. Nevertheless, the REM did not conduct monitoring for the parliamentary elections in 2016,

³⁶ Milinkov, S., & Gruhonjić, D. (2020). Politički klijentelizam u medijima u Srbiji – slučaj agencije Tanjug [Political clientelism in the Serbian media – The case of news agency Tanjug]. *Sociologija*, 63(1), 72-95. <https://link.crtars.rs/7o>

³⁷ Javni oglas br. 26, O sprovođenju postupka za ustapanje iskorišćavanja drugih imovinskih prava u svojini Republike Srbije prikupljanjem pismenih ponuda [Public announcement no. 26, On conducting the procedure for transferring the use of other property rights owned by the Republic of Serbia by collecting written offers], Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/7p>

³⁸ “Radoica Milosavljević” (n.d.). *Istinomer*. Retrieved on December 20, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/1m>

³⁹ Irion, K., Ledger, M., Svensson, S., & Ršumović, N. (2017). *The independence and functioning of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media in Serbia: An assessment using the INDIREG methodology*. Amsterdam: Council of Europe.

⁴⁰ REM. (2015). Analiza medijskog tržišta u Srbiji [Analysis of media market in Serbia]. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/7q>

⁴¹ “Zvezdan Milovanović” (n.d.). *Istinomer*. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/20>



presidential elections in 2017 and Belgrade elections in 2018. It withdrew the Rulebook in 2019. Numerous reports on the regularity of elections, such as the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, emphasise the inertia of the REM.⁴² Before the 2020 elections, the REM adopted binding rules for public service broadcasting, but gave other broadcasters only recommendations for behaviour. The monitoring conducted by the REM was assessed as too narrow in sample and its methodology does identify the way in which election actors are presented.⁴³

While there is a network of media, institutions and political parties that formed clientelistic relations, there are also exquisite newsrooms frequently awarded different European and national prizes for journalistic excellence.⁴⁴ The data on media audiences across markets shows they are at the end of the long tail. Moreover, they are the targets of verbal and even physical attacks, hacking, smear campaigns led by tabloids, administrative harassment organised by the state and SLAPP suits by individuals and companies.⁴⁵ The data of the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia show a steady increase of the number of attacks against journalists, from 23 in 2012 to 189 in 2020 (see Figure 4).

⁴² OSCE/ODIHR. (2016). Republic of Serbia: Early parliamentary elections April 24th, 2016. OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report. Retrieved on August 20th, 2020 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7r>

OSCE/ODIHR. (2017). Republic of Serbia: Presidential election April 2nd, 2017, OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report. Retrieved on August 20th, 2020 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7z>.

⁴³ CRTA (May 27th, 2020). Izborni monitoring REM-a u 2020. godini: Pristrastan i netransparentan [Election monitoring of REM in 2020: Biased and non-transparent]. Retrieved on August 20th, 2020 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7s>

⁴⁴ KRIK (September 10th, 2020). KRIK won EU Investigative Journalism Award. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7t>

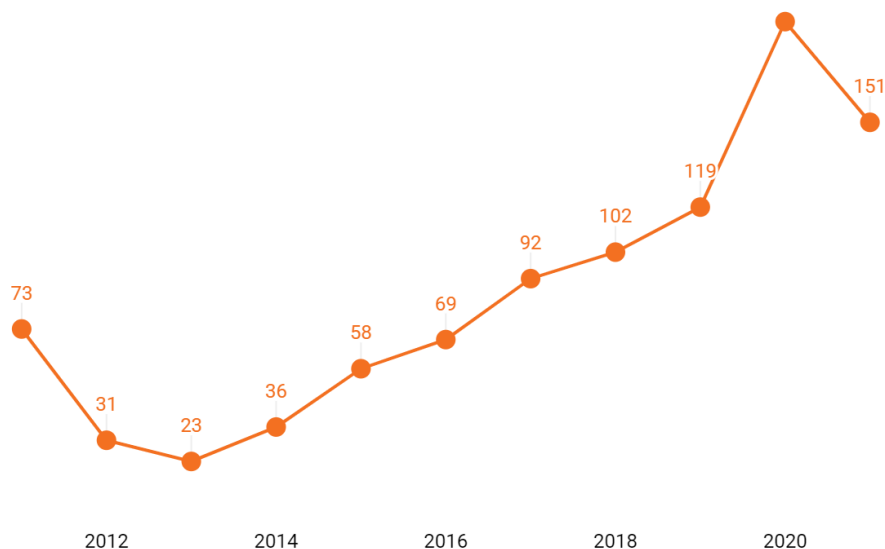
KRIK (2019, May 22). Stevan Dojcinovic Honored with Knight International Journalism Award. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7u>.

⁴⁵ Matić, J. (2018b). Kontrola i sloboda medija: svedočenja novinara [Control and freedom of the media: testimonials of the journalists]. Beograd: Slavko Ćuruvija Fondacija. Retrieved on August 20th, 2020 from <https://link.crtars.rs/7v>

Perkov, B., Ćendić, K., Kovačević, A., & Milošević, F. (2019). GREŠKA 404: Digitalna prava u Srbiji 2014-2019 [Error 404: Digital rights in Serbia 2014-2019]. Beograd: SHARE Fondacija. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/7w>

Vukasović, M. (2018). Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety: Serbia. Belgrade: Independent journalists association of Serbia. Retrieved on August 20th, 2020. from <https://link.crtars.rs/7x>
"Serbia: Wave of lawsuits against investigative portal KRIK chills media freedom" (December 22nd, 2021). Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/7y>

Figure 4: Number of attacks on journalists, 2011–2021⁴⁶



With the media system overwhelmed by other issues pertaining to media freedoms and state-party capture, disinformation is left without any policy response. The Media Strategy for the period 2020-2025⁴⁷ and the Action Plan that accompanies the Strategy⁴⁸ do not mention disinformation in any of their aims and objectives. Nevertheless, there is sufficient data that indicate that disinformation is a growing issue. Annual report published by the KRIK – Crime and Reporting Investigative Network shows that in the five newspapers under observation in 2020 (Kurir, Alo, Informer, Srpski telegraf and Večernje novosti) there were 1.172 false, manipulative and unfounded news, on the front pages alone.⁴⁹ A comparative study dedicated to disinformation on COVID-19, based on the data from the fact-checking initiatives from the Western Balkan region, established that “among the 20 media outlets with the highest number of published manipulations, as many as 15 are from Serbia.”⁵⁰ Other studies also point to daily tabloids Informer, Kurir and Alo as the central hubs of dissemination of disinformation.⁵¹ A study of disinformation during the election campaign before 2020 parliamentary elections,

⁴⁶ NUNS (n.d.) Baza napada na novinare [Data base of attacks on journalists]. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crtar.rs/80>

⁴⁷ Strategija razvoja sistema javnog informisanja u Republici Srbiji za period 2020–2025 [Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2020–2025]. (2020). *Službeni glasnik RS*, 30/18.

⁴⁸ Akcioni plan za sprovođenje Strategije razvoja sistema javnog informisanja u Republici Srbiji za period 2020–2025. godina [Action plan for the Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2020–2025]. Retrieved from <https://link.crtar.rs/81>

⁴⁹ Vučić, M., Ljubičić, M., & Radojević, V. (2021, April 7). Na naslovnica pet novina blizu 1.200 lažnih i neutemeljenih vesti u 2020. godini [Close to 1.200 false and unfounded news on the front pages of five newspapers in 2020]. Retrieved from <https://link.crtar.rs/82>

⁵⁰ *Disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic* (2021). Sarajevo: Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina p. 15

⁵¹ Janjić, S. (2020). *Fabrike manipulacija* [Factories of manipulation]. Novi Sad: Novosadska novinarska škola.



which includes 191 front pages of seven daily newspapers, showed that there were more than 120 false news items about elections and political actors.⁵²

In summary, we can conclude that the Serbian media landscape is marked by a rising number of media outlets, lack of pluralism and diversity, as well as by the state and party capture of media regulator, public broadcasting service and substantial part of private media. Clientelistic⁵³ relations between the state and selected private media are achieved through the financing mechanisms, including co-financing of media content, state advertising and other non-transparent contractual relations, and through (in)activity of the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM). In return, the selected media provide a disproportionately high amount of time and space to the authorities and representatives of the ruling parties. The media that remain outside of the clientelistic networks are frequent targets of attacks, administrative harassment, smear campaigns and in general struggle to survive on the market.

⁵² Maksimović, S. (November 4th, 2020). Predatorska kampanja 2020. na naslovnim stranama [Predatorial campaign on front pages]. *Fake News Tragač*. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/83>

⁵³ Clientelism includes widespread set of relationships between a stronger and weaker actor, complemented with a reward system. In media scholarship it is seen as the remnant of the state-centric media system of post-communist countries. See:

Hallin, D.C., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political Clientelism and the Media: Southern Europe and Latin America in Comparative Perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 175–95.

Mihajlov Prokopović, A., & Vulić, T. (2015). Clientelistic relations and the media in transitional Serbia. *Teme*, XXXIX, 1563–1582.

Örnebring, H. (2012). Clientelism, Elites, and the Media in Central and Eastern Europe. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 17(4): 497–515.

II METHODOLOGY

In this section we present main methodological aspects of the analysis:

- formation of the sample,
- conceptualisation of misinformation,
- analytical categories, and
- research procedure.

In its overall design, the methodology combines qualitative and quantitative aspects of content analysis with the fact-checking and debunking procedures. Its main characteristic is that it does not start from predefined disinformation topics or narratives, or debunked claims, but observes news reporting in a given period to identify the false, misleading or manipulative information. This allows establishing the scope of disinformation in the selected media, which serves as a mid-step needed for further analysis that aims to provide insights into the patterns of topics, sources, and targets of disinformation.

Formation of sample

Monitoring for the occurrences of disinformation was performed on 15 media outlets: central news of 5 TV stations with national coverage, 5 online media, 3 central news of local TV stations and 2 printed dailies. This distribution, with the exception of local media, reflects key news sources for Serbian citizens (see Chapter 2). Radio is primarily used for entertainment⁵⁴ and thus excluded from the analysis.

Table 5: List of the media under analysis

TV stations with national coverage - central news	1. Radio-television of Serbia 1 (RTS 1) - Dnevnik 2
	2. TV Prva - Vesti u 18.00
	3. TV Pink - Nacionalni dnevnik u 18.30
	4. TV B92 - Vesti B92 u 16
	5. HAPPY TV - Telemaster u 17.30
	6. RTV Novi Pazar - Dnevnik u

⁵⁴ Kliping (2021). Rezultati istraživanja: šta Srbija gleda, sluša, pretražuje i čita [Research results: What Serbia watches, listens to, searches and reads]. Retrieved on December 10, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/>

CRTA:

Local TV stations - central news	19.00
	7. Novosadska TV - Objektiv u 19.00
	8. RTV Pančevo - Velike vesti u 19.00
Online media	9. Blic
	10. Kurir
	11. Alo
	12. N1
	13. Nova
Print media	14. Informer
	15. Večernje novosti

Additional criteria that were used for the selection of the specific media outlets were: a) popularity of media outlets based on readership, b) average monthly users and share and total amount of public funds awarded to media companies and c) orientation towards parties in government and opposition (see Chapter 2). By far the most important sources for news are TV channels with licences for national coverage, and for that reason five most viewed national TV channels are included – public broadcaster RTS 1 and four commercially owned channels TV Prva, TV Pink, TV B92 and Happy TV. Online media are gaining prominence in the news diet, especially among the younger population and among those who do not support the government. This is the reason why we have analysed five online news media: three online media market leaders – Blic, Kurir and Alo, to which we have added N1 and Nova online news media that are the most popular media critical towards the government. Local media attract much smaller audiences and the data for their market standing is not available. For that reason, the selection of local media is based solely on the amount of public funding awarded.

For each TV channel, the sample was formed from central afternoon or evening news broadcasts. News on culture, entertainment and sports were not included, even though we are aware that some of them might include disinformation containing certain political aspects. However, these still represent a minor part of the overall and direct news coverage on politics,



including business and society, topics that are deemed most relevant for the disinformation campaigns.

For online media, the sample was formed from a 24-hours news production cycle, and from the sections on politics, social affairs, coronavirus, economy and business, and international affairs. These sections were also monitored in the printed dailies. Local news sections, sports, crime, culture and entertainment were excluded, like in television media, and the supplements were not monitored for disinformation. Opinions and editorials were also excluded from observation since the focus of the study was on news facticity. We are aware that this content might also include factual misinformation or disinformation, but its main focus is on interpretation and personal opinions which cannot be subjected to fact-checking and debunking.

There are several reasons for these inclusion and exclusion criteria. First and foremost, the focus of this analysis is on hard news which are more important for public communication than soft news, and they directly or indirectly influence political and social life, citizens' attitudes, evaluation of government, or voter preferences. The second reason is related to the aim to make the sample from each media outlet relatively comparable in terms of the scope of the topics covered, thus allowing for further comparison of the treatment of certain events in different outlets. Thirdly, this has made the process of coding and monitoring disinformation (see section Research procedure, below) effective and precise in a relatively tight research time frame.

The sample was collected in the period September–December 2021, by observing one week in each of the four months:

- Last week of September (September 27th – October 3rd 2021)
- Third week of October (October 18th – October 24th, 2021)
- Second week of November (November 8th – November 14th, 2021)
- First week of December (November 29th – December 5th, 2021).

This model of sample formation allowed the research team to observe the unfolding events and more importantly to identify the flow of news from one media to another.

It should be highlighted that the sample was collected before the war in Ukraine, an event which significantly changed the disinformation landscape. Due to its importance, the report provides observations about Serbian media reporting in the Annex.

In total, the sample consisted of hard news published in 52 editions of two newspapers (one newspaper does not have a Sunday edition), 140 TV central news and 140 daily publication cycles of online media.

Conceptualisation of disinformation

Mis- and dis-information are concepts that have long histories but have gained new momentum in the contemporary digital media landscape. Disinformation, often in popular discourse labelled as “fake news”, is becoming one of the most prolific terms in academic studies with a rising number of research articles covering this topic. Nonetheless, the primary

definitional and typological approaches to disinformation are rarely academic and theoretical in nature.⁵⁵ More prominently, the conceptualisations of disinformation are provided to create actionable frames for journalistic fact-checking and debunking initiatives that monitor media and social networks. With the growing spread, disinformation is also an actionable term of public policy and intervention, directed at minimising the effect of actions of malicious accounts from foreign countries, and sanctioning the domestic creators, while at the same time strengthening fact-checking organisations and citizens.⁵⁶ The purposes of defining misinformation in these three fields – academic, journalistic and public policy – have many overlaps, but also bring different aspects of mis-/dis-information in focus. Discussing and defining them in detail here is necessary since the conceptualisation and definition of disinformation affects subsequent results of our study.

In their review of the scholarly definitions, Tandoc, Lim and Ling⁵⁷ trace the usage of the term “fake news” with the conclusion that it can be applied to different phenomena. They group them along two axes: 1) level of facticity and 2) intention to deceive the audience. News satire and news parody lack malicious intent, while news fabrication, photo manipulation, advertising and public relations, and propaganda in general have this property. On a scale of facticity, news fabrication scores lowest, followed by photo manipulation and propaganda. The authors also include advertising and PR in their overview definitions, stating that this type of content scores highest on facticity in comparison to other “fake news” phenomena.

With a similar aim of differentiating types of information disorders, Wardle and Derakhshan⁵⁸ use falseness and harmfulness as the key criteria. On this basis, they discern **misinformation, disinformation and mal-information**:

- Dis-information: Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country.
- Mis-information: Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- Mal-information: Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.

Their work served as the foundation of Irreton and Posetti’s UNESCO Handbook for Journalism Education and Training “Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation”.⁵⁹ Under the term misinformation the authors list false connection – “when headlines, visuals or captions

⁵⁵ Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining “Fake News”: A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137–153. <https://link.crtars/84>

Abu Arqoub, O., Elega, A. A., Efe Özad, B., Dwikat, H., & Oloyede, F. A. (2020). Mapping the Scholarship of Fake News Research: A Systematic Review. *Journalism Practice*, 16(1), 56–86. <https://link.crtars/85>

⁵⁶ Disrupting Disinformation: A Global Snapshot of Government Initiatives (2021). Global Disinformation Index. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/86>

Napoli, M. F. (2019). *Social Media and the Public Interest: Media Regulation in the Disinformation Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵⁷ Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining “Fake News”: A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137–153. <https://link.crtars/84>

⁵⁸ Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. (2017) *Information disorder: Toward and interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe Report DGI(2017)09. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/87>

⁵⁹ Irreton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/88>



do not support the content”, and misleading content – “when there is a misleading use of information to frame issues or individuals in certain ways by cropping photos, or choosing quotes or statistics”. Mal-information is related to (some) leaks, (some) harassment, and (some) hate speech. Disinformation includes:

- false context: when authentic (usually visual) material is used in the wrong context;
- imposter content: when genuine sources are impersonated, news sites designed to look like brands people already know;
- manipulated content: when genuine content is manipulated, tampered with or doctored in some way, to deceive;
- fabricated content: when content (textual information, visuals, web sites) are entirely false.

Fact-checking and debunking websites also differentiate between different levels of facticity/falseness. The CRTA’s fact-checking initiative Istinomer⁶⁰ uses three labels to describe mis/disinformation: 1) Truthfulness: true, almost true, untrue, half true; 2) Manipulation of facts; and 3) Cannot be fact-checked. More elaborate list is used by another fact-checking platform Raskrikavanje, and it includes: Political promotion, Satire and humour, Click bait, Hidden advertising, Error, Bias, Conspiracy theory, Pseudoscience, Manipulation of facts, Disinformation, Fake news, Censorship, Unfounded claims.⁶¹

In a recent study of COVID-19-related misinformation, the authors rely on fact-checking typology that includes: “False news – intentional fabrication of factually incorrect information; Redistributing false news – redistributing of false news published by another media outlet; Disinformation – false or selective presentation of existing information; Manipulation of facts – misleading interpretation of factually correct information; Pseudoscience – presenting non-scientific or pseudoscientific claims as scientific information; Conspiracy theory – explicit or implicit claim of the existence of a hidden malevolent plan, without presenting evidence for it; Clickbait – misleading and/or exaggerated media headlines or social media shares; Error – incorrect information published as a result of an unintentional mistake”.⁶²

This short review shows that neither intent nor facticity, as categories used to discern harmful and false information, are clear cut. Intent to deceive and harm someone is useful for keeping parody and satire as separate from malicious content. But beyond a clear programming label which parody and satire have, some misinformation can be an error made without an intent to deceive, or (on the opposite pole), regarded as false news or disinformation. For that reason, fact-checking and debunking initiatives reach out to media and other actors and expect them to publish a correction if they made an error. Since this step was outside of scope of the present study, we have not further examined the intent behind disinformation.

The facticity and falseness cover a range of information types. There is some information that can be checked and debunked, but there are also claims and news items that cannot be fact-

⁶⁰ Istinomer is part of the International Fact-Checking Network. See: <https://link.crtars/89>

⁶¹ KRIK (December 17th, 2020). Metodologija platforme za borbu protiv medijskog dezinformisanja – Raskrikavanje.rs. [Methodology of the platform for the fight against media disinformation]. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/8a>

⁶² *Disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic* (2021). Sarajevo: Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina.

checked due to lack of transparent data, available sources, and similar obstacles. Further, some information combines factually correct data with false one, or presents accurate facts in a misleading way or context, both giving rise to manipulative blends. And finally, the absence of information or some parts of it, or absence of context in which the information was originally created, can also lead to misinformation.

Considering the purpose and scope of this analysis, we have taken the following decisions:

- 1) To dismiss forms of misinformation which are not intended to deceive (e.g. parody, satire);
- 2) To dismiss claims containing disinformation if the media signalled that the information is inaccurate.
- 3) To focus on facticity and verifiability, excluding the claims that cannot be checked (e.g. conspiracy theories) and mal-information (hate speech, harassment);
- 4) To focus on political, social and international news, dismissing advertising and PR which is factually correct;
- 5) To include the cases of extreme bias⁶³ to account for political and media polarisation.

BOX 1 During the course of the research, the team has noticed the appearance of the news that seem inconsistent and potentially were disinformation. They would fall under the disinformation types such as conspiracy theories or unfounded claims. However, they were not included in our analysis since they could not be fact-checked for different reasons. For example, the Prime Minister has made a claim that an assassination of the President was planned for January 27th, 2021, and that the “parallel structures in the Ministry of Interior have been formed”. Since the prosecution, as the Prime Minister herself said, has not opened an investigation into the matter, there are no verifiable sources to confirm or debunk this claim.⁶⁴

Relying on previous studies and having mind the nuances in misinformation ecology, we developed the categorisation that includes:

1. **FALSE CONNECTION:** Headlines, photographs, videos and captions that significantly alter information conveyed in the main body of news. It does not include exaggerated or clickbait content, if it is based on the main news.

For example, in our sample we find an instance of *false connection* in the heading that reads “Omicron originates from HIV patients”.⁶⁵ This heading is a false interpretation of the news source, who connected immunodeficiency and omicron variant of coronavirus, and mentioned HIV only as one of the possible immunodeficiency illnesses.

⁶³ Our study is relying on terminology used by Bovet and Makse (2019) who distinguished between “fake news” and “extremely biased news”.

⁶⁴ PREMIJERKA BRNABIĆ: Ubistvo predsednika Vučića planirano u januaru na otkrivanju spomenika Stefanu Nemanji [Prime Minister Brabić: Assassination of President Vučić was planned for January, during the opening of the Stefan Nemanja monument] (2021, October 24). *Kurir*. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8b>

⁶⁵ Omikron nastao kod HIV pacijenata [Omicron originated from HIV patients] (November 29th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on November 30th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8c>

2. **MANIPULATION OF FACTS AND MISLEADING CONTENT:** Combining factual information with false, omission of information in a misleading way, misleading or contextually false interpretation of factual information.

In our sample, manipulation of facts and misleading content can be found in the statement that “Nowhere in the world, does metro run below the hospitals unless the hospitals are built afterwards, which is only few in the world”.⁶⁶ This inaccurate claim⁶⁷ is placed among other information on the metro in Belgrade, which was accurate.

3. **MISLEADING OR FALSE CONTEXT:** Addition of false context to factual information; creation of false background; presentation of old images or statements as recent ones in a misleading manner.

For example, printed daily Večernje novosti published news that Poland is buying Ambrams tanks from the U.S., to take them, as the newspaper writes, “to the war with Russia”.⁶⁸ This is not false news, however it is old news from July 2021 presented as something new, and as such, it gives misleading context.

4. **EXTREME BIAS:** Absence of the basic information on an event or statement that is being extensively commented; tendentious absence of the other side in reporting on the news that necessitates two sides. If there are two separate news items presenting views and opinions of different sides, the news is not considered as biased. The exception to this is online news because the consumption pattern for online content does not guarantee that the users will read both news.

For example, the lead of one news item reads: Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar has strongly condemned the last in a *line of attacks on the son of the head of the state*, coming from tycoon’s political parties and their low-budget tabloids.⁶⁹ What these attacks are remains intransparent for the readers as the news and the source do not offer any details.

5. **IMPOSTER CONTENT:** Using non-existent people as sources; attributing statements to the people who did not make them, but someone else did; misleading use of titles and affiliations.

⁶⁶ DA LI JE METRO PO MERI PRIVATNIKA ILI NARODA: Vesić za Kurir o prvoj liniji, ceni, izlasku Građevinskog fakulteta iz projekta... [Is metro made for companies or the people: Vesić for Kurir about the first line, price, Engineering Faculty that left the project] (November 10th, 2021). Kurir. Retrieved on November 11th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8d>

⁶⁷ Nijedan metro na svetu ne prolazi ispod bolnice [No metro in the world goes under a hospital]. (2021, September 9). Istinomer. Retrieved on November 11th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8e>

⁶⁸ „Ambrams” kupuju da sa Rusima ratuju [They are buying “Ambrams” to take it to war with Russia] (September 29th, 2021). Večernje novosti, 9.

⁶⁹ MINISTAR LONČAR O NAPADU NA SINA PREDSEDNIKA: Srbija nikada neće biti zemlja u kojoj će se napadima na decu osvajati vlast [Minister Lončar about the attack on President’s son: Serbia will never be a country in which attack on children are a way to win power]. (October 22nd, 2021). Kurir. Retrieved on October 23rd, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8f>

For example, we find misleading use of titles and affiliations in the news items in which a person is presented as the expert of the Centre for Social Stability⁷⁰, without any mention that he was, at the same time, a member of legislative branch of power elected in 2020 on the list of the Serbian Progressive Party.⁷¹

6. **PHOTO AND VIDEO MANIPULATION:** Using misleadingly cropped and filtered images and videos, blending two separate images to create the impression that it is one image;

For example, photo manipulation occurs when the media or the sources they rely upon crops the images from protest to present only a partial number of protestors.⁷²

7. **FABRICATED NEWS OR INFORMATION:** Factually incorrect news in its entirety, that is debunked; attributing statements to the people who did not make them.

For example, one online news media from our sample reported a tweet about the protests that was actually never made, and made an entire news item from the tweet content.⁷³

The methodological design adequately captures the occurrences of disinformation in relation to the domestic political, social and economic affairs. Unlike many previous studies, conducted both in Serbia⁷⁴ and elsewhere⁷⁵, it does not start from the predefined set of debunked claims or disinformation narratives, or sources; instead it advances the approach that starts from the media reporting and then discerns disinformation. This makes the research time-demanding and requires a research team with both journalistic and research related competences. This required us to narrow the focus to one aspect of disinformation, with no intention of claiming that other types do not exist or produce harmful consequences.

Research procedure

The research procedure was designed to secure reliable information on the scope and type of disinformation in Serbia. It included three steps.

⁷⁰ Analitičari upozoravaju: Opoziciona politika uništavanja biće još agresivnija, sa lomljenja prostorija će preći na ljude (2021, November 11). Alo. Retrieved on November 12th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/8g>

⁷¹ Predrag Rajić (n.d.). Istinomer. Retrieved on September 30th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/8j>

⁷² ŽIVOT U BEOGRADU ZAUSTAVLJEN! Vesić otkrio šta se dešava sa javim prevozom, autobus kamenovan, mnogi zarobljeni! [Life in Belgrade came to standstill! Vesić has revealed what is happening with the public transport, bus hit by rocks, many are trapped] (December 4th, 2021). Alo. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/8i>

⁷³ ČUMETOVE USTAŠE NAM TREBAJU DA BIJEMO ČETNIKE Skandal, Vesna Pešić ogrezla u mržnji prema sopstvenom narodu! [We need Ustasha's to beat Chetniks. Scandal, Vesna Pešić drowns in hatred towards her own people]. (2021, December 1). Alo. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/8j>

⁷⁴ European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A. (2021). *Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them*, European Parliament. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/8k>

Jovović, J., & Mijatović, P. (2021). *Uokvirivanje infodemije* [Framing infodemic]. Novi Sad: Novosadska novinarska škola. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/8l>

⁷⁵ Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M. (2017). *Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge.

Fletcher, F., Cornia, A., Graves, L., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018). Measuring the reach of "fake news" and online disinformation in Europe. *Australasian Policing*, 10(2). Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.rs/8m>

Step 1: Monitoring and fact-checking

The selected 15 media outlets were monitored in the given period with the goal to identify disinformation following the conceptualisation elaborated in the previous section. Monitoring was done by a team of 9 coders, graduates or senior year students of journalism from the University of Novi Sad.⁷⁶ A one-day training on disinformation and coding procedure was organised for the coders. During the entire research period weekly meetings were organised, with additional meetings during the weeks when the sample was collected. The meetings were dedicated to identification and classification of disinformation, and coding.

A two-way cooperation was developed between the coding team and the team of Istinomer's journalists. Coding team sent queries to Istinomer journalists for consultation on the identification of disinformation, especially those that require further investigation and analysis. Coding team also observed Istinomer's database of the debunked information and used it as a resource to identify news for further analysis.

Most of the fact-checking was done by the coding team, that relied upon their journalistic knowledge and tutorials created by the lead and assistant researcher. For fact-checking and debunking of the information, the team relied on the existing data bases and sources of information, content published in other media, and academic sources.

By rule, the team did not perform the additional steps of contacting the author of disinformation or initiating the procedure according to the Law on the Free Access to Public Information since the experiences of domestic media and fact-checking organisations show that these steps, despite their high value for verification procedure, take substantial time and resources.

BOX 2: Especially challenging for fact-checking were the international news. There are significant language barriers in searching foreign media and foreign data bases. For example, news about the military and security operations at the border between Russia and Ukraine from the permanent Moscow correspondent of the daily Večernje novosti, or news taken from Sputnik which are frequently published on the Alo web site could not be corroborated or debunked. The study was performed before the war in Ukraine that led to greater attention to disinformation and more global fact-checking efforts (for observations on Serbian media reporting on war in Ukraine, see Annex to the report).

The claims which are labelled as disinformation by the media, thus providing a critical stance, have not been analysed. This means that if journalists signalled that the source whose statement is quoted makes a false claim, we would not analyse it since the audience would not be misled by such disinformation. Also, if – during the time of monitoring – the media published the correction of the news with disinformation, it was removed from the sample and it was not analysed further.

All the news items that were identified as disinformation were archived for further analysis.

⁷⁶ Coders participating in the research: Anja Lalović, Bojana Popović, David Milosavić, Dijana Dacin, Milana Maričić, Vanja Velisavljev, Ivana Čordaš, Isidora Bašić, and Aleksandar Milošević.

Step 2: Content analysis

The main method applied in this research was content analysis⁷⁷ which allows quantification of manifest attributes of the news. The unit of analysis was a news item. The instrument employed in content analysis was the code sheet with categories and variables of analysis (see next section, below). On the basis of the code sheet each news item that was identified and coded as containing disinformation was analysed in terms of type of disinformation, salience, topics, sourcing, and targets. Coding was done in MS Excel.

The first week of coding (27 September – 3 October 2021) was taken as a pilot for testing the code sheet and reliable intercoder understanding of the coding categories. Testing has led to the refinement of coding categories and additional explanations being added in the code sheet.

After each monitored week, coders submitted their coding and it was checked by lead researcher and research assistant, and dilemmas and challenges for coding were discussed during the meetings.

Step 3: Analysis of the spread of disinformation on Facebook

Using CrowdTangle,⁷⁸ a tool created by Facebook, we analysed the spread of disinformation. We conducted a preliminary study which showed that hard news is not widely engaged with on Facebook pages of the 15 analysed media. Additional preliminary analysis showed the media do not post on their Facebook pages all the news they published on their web sites. Thus, we started from the web-based news items that we collected during the monitoring of five online media (Alo, Blic, Kurir, Nova and N1). Using the CrowdTangle add-on on the internet browser, for each news item we collected the data on the frequency and type of engagement. This data gives us a partial view on the spread of disinformation on Facebook, since the CrowdTangle does not provide us with the data on the number of views (i.e. reach of a post).

Analytical categories

The code sheet consisted of the following groups of categories:

- **Formal attributes of the news** included name of the outlet, type of media, date and time of publication, week of publication.
- **Identification of disinformation type** was used both as a criterion for the inclusion of the news item in analysis and as a code. To account for the possibility of occurrence of multiple types of disinformation in a single news item, we have used binary (yes-no) categories for each of the seven categories.
- **Salience of news** included size of the news, types of content (text, video, photo, etc), placement of news on front pages of newspapers and in headlines of TV news.

⁷⁷ Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis. An introduction to its methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Riffe, D., Lacy, L., & Fico, F. (2014). *Analysing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research*, Third edition. New York: Taylor and Francis.

⁷⁸ CrowdTangle Team (2020). *CrowdTangle*. Facebook, Menlo Park, California, United States.

CRTA:

- **Type of coverage** was used to discern coverage of genuine events, from pseudo-events (press conferences, press releases and other staged events)⁷⁹, and coverage led by media initiative without the impetus of an event⁸⁰. Additional codes were created to identify when news or some parts of it are taken from other legacy media or from social media.
- **Topics** of reporting were identified through thematic areas and sections in which the news items are placed. Initial list of 12 topics was created on the basis of preliminary testing of the code sheet, while additional four topics have been added to provide a more accurate account of the topics covered in the news.
- **Sourcing patterns of news and disinformation.** The study identified both the sources who appear in the news and the sources of disinformation. This allowed us to distinguish between the social actors – individuals, groups, collectives, institutions – who are given voice in the news containing disinformation, and the actors who are originators of the claims that contained disinformation. For both categories we have analysed the identification (name and surname, company/organisation name) of the source in the coding scheme.
- **Targets and uses of disinformation.** When disinformation is about an individual or a group to whom it produces harmful effects, we regarded these social actors as targets. For the targets we used the same predefined coding variables as for the sources. Since disinformation can be used for other purposes than inflicting harm, we have discerned between disinformation which has a purpose to create a positive image of different social actors (country and its leadership, opposition or party in government, foreign countries).

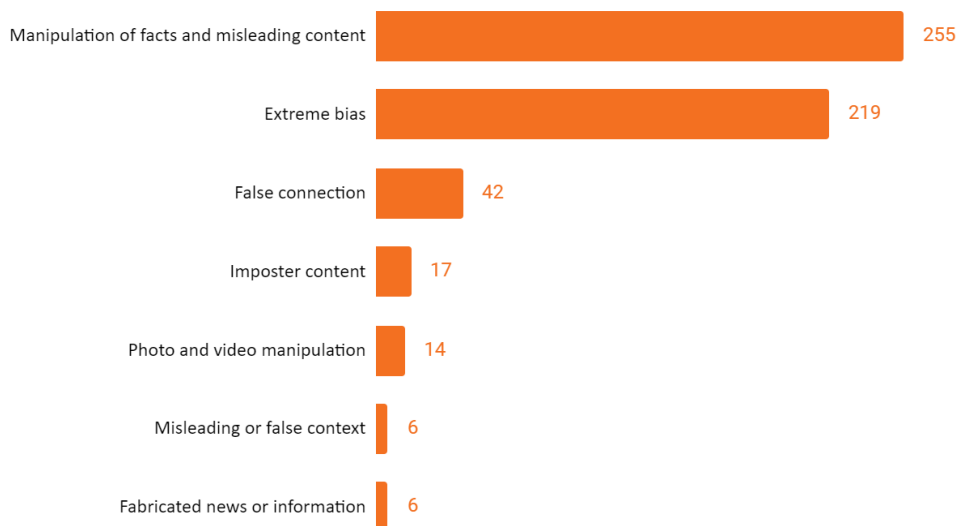
⁷⁹ Kepplinger, H.M. (2016). Pseudo-Event. In G. Mazzoleni (ed.), *The International Encyclopaedia of Political Communication*. <https://link.crtars/8n>

⁸⁰ The fact that 15 news media were monitored during four cycles consisting of one week, allowed us to establish if a coverage was based on the initiative of the media, thus absent from other media, or it was based on genuine or pseudo-events covered by other media.

III MAIN FINDINGS

The analysis identified 494 news items that contained 559 disinformation (Figure 5), which means that some news items contained more than one category of disinformation. The majority of disinformation falls under the category *manipulation of facts and misleading content*, those that combine factual information with false one, omit information in a misleading way, or present the case of misleading interpretation of factual information. They are closely followed by the *extreme bias* which we have defined as the absence of the basic information on an event or statement that is being extensively commented, or the tendentious absence of the other side in reporting on the news that necessitates two sides. Other types of disinformation are less frequent, but nevertheless present in 14 out of 15 media outlets that were analysed.

Figure 5: Types of disinformation across all media in total number



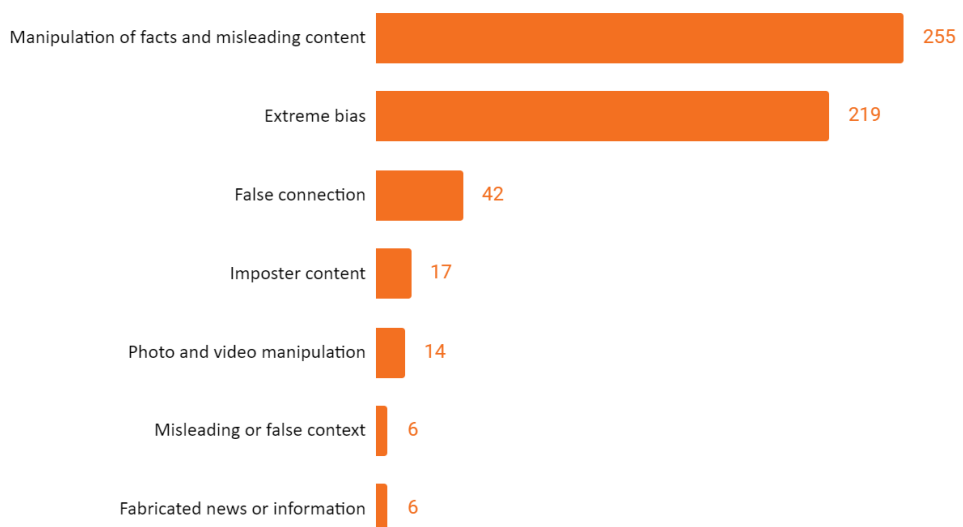
By far the most frequent disseminators of disinformation are the five online news media (Table 6), which account for more than two thirds of disinformation. Five national TV stations broadcast 63 disinformation, and three local TV stations had 39. Two printed newspapers disseminated 53 news items that contained disinformation.

Table 6: Disinformation per media type

Type of media	No.	%
Online media	339	68.62
National TV	63	12.75
Newspapers	53	10.73
Local TV	39	7.89
Total	494	100.00

Online editions of tabloids Alo and Kurir account for more than half of all the news containing disinformation (Figure 6). They are followed by two printed dailies Informer and Večernje novosti. With no disinformation broadcast during the four monitored weeks local television RTV Novi Pazar has the best standing. Public broadcaster Radio-television of Serbia 1 (RTS 1) had four pieces of disinformation during the monitored period.

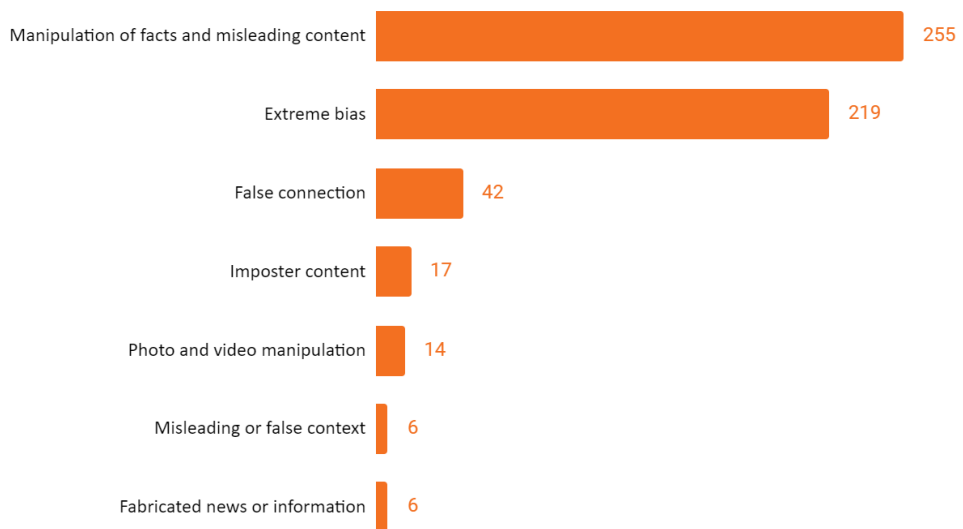
Figure 6: Distribution of disinformation within media outlets (%)



Salience of news carrying disinformation was identified through the length of the news piece and its placement on newspaper front pages and headlines of TV central news (placement of online news on the homepage was not analysed). On average the news was not placed in the

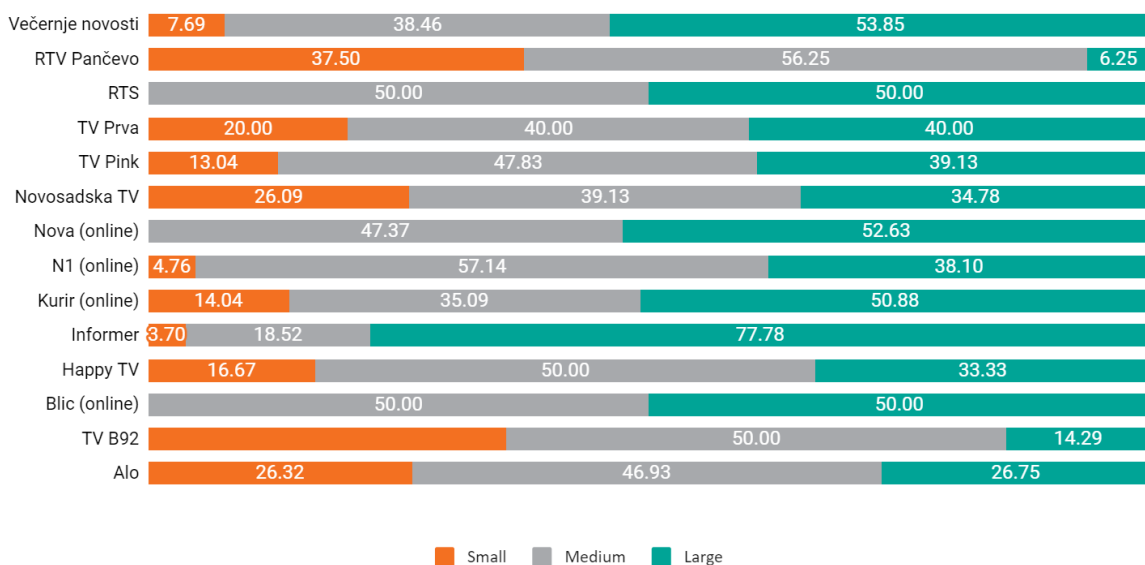
TV headlines and front pages of newspapers, but some media, like Happy TV and Informer, placed disinformation high on their daily agenda (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Disinformation on front pages and in headlines per media outlet (%)



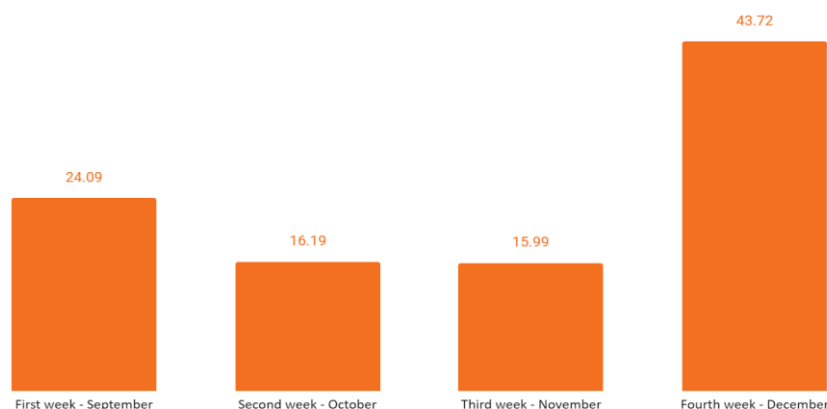
On average, disinformation is found in longer and larger news pieces, irrespective of the media type (Figure 8). Most of the disinformation in lengthy news coverage was found in the daily Informer, while most of the disinformation in shorter news was found in RTV Pančevo and TV B92 news broadcasts.

Figure 8: Size of the news containing disinformation per media outlet (%)



For the large part, dissemination of disinformation is led by events. This can be observed in the time distribution and topics of media reporting within which disinformation is found. Figure 9 shows that there is significantly more disinformation disseminated in the fourth week of analysis (29 November – 5 December 2021), when two environmental protests, one held on November 27th and the other on December 4th, were frequent topics in the media.

Figure 9: Distribution of disinformation per week (%)



News about the *environmental protests*, organised in several Serbian cities, account for more than two thirds of all topics (Table 7). This news is related to the events during the protests, especially conflicts, as well as to the wider theme of lithium extraction by Rio Tinto company. Different types of disinformation have been identified in relation to this topic: 1) *manipulation of facts and misleading content* pertaining to the description of events (number of protesters, their behaviour, statements made by leaders of opposition parties) and decisions and actions taken by the government; 2) *extreme bias* in the news that contained comments on the events with no mention of the reasons why the protest is taking place and no space provided for protesters and their views; 3) *photo and video manipulation*, namely cropped visuals of the protests and conflict events, and 4) *fabricated news*, for example about the tweet allegedly made by an intellectual Vesna Pešić, which she did not make.

BOX 3: Around the topic of *environmental protest*, we could find a couple of types of disinformation in a single news item. For example, in the news titled “They blocked the roads and made life hard for ordinary citizens”⁸¹, we identified *extreme bias* because it has 7 statements, including those of the Prime Minister, Health Minister, Finance Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, Defence Minister, Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Governance and Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija – and no statements from protest organisers. At the same time, the article contains *manipulation of facts and misleading content* since it reports the number of protesters only in one place, and omits to report the number of protesters in Belgrade. Further, it has a clickbait subheading with a false *connection* that reads: “Support comes from Kurti (Prime Minister of Kosovo)”, even though Albin Kurti made no official statement about the protests.

⁸¹ Blokirali puteve, zagorčali život običnom narodu (They blocked the roads and made life hard for ordinary citizens). (December 5th, 2020). *Večernje novosti*, 3-4.

Table 7: Topics of the news containing disinformation

Topics	No. of occurrences	%
Environmental protests*	176	35.63
Relations between government and opposition	110	22.27
Kosovo	34	6.88
Elections and electoral conditions	19	3.85
Relations with/in the region	19	3.85
State support and investments	15	3.04
COVID-19	14	2.83
Media operations*	13	2.63
Economic trends	11	2.23
Mural of Ratko Mladić*	11	2.23
Corruption	10	2.02
Environment	9	1.82
EU integrations	8	1.62
Letter of US congressmen*	8	1.62
International news	4	0.81
Other	33	6.68
Total	494	100.00



*Topics added inductively from the analysed material. Other topics were pre-given, deductive.

The second salient topic of the news are the *relations between the government and opposition parties*. In such news, an event is a background or a pretext for evaluative statements of opposition or government representatives about the opposite side. For the most part this news topic brings the type of disinformation which we have labelled *extreme bias*, since the statements and actions of one party are starkly absent in the text, whereas comments and views from the other are extensively quoted with no factual background on the event that is commented on.

Some other topics also point to the event-led nature of disinformation. The attempt of civil society organisations to remove the *mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić in Belgrade*, and the subsequent protests in November 2021, gave rise to misleading and manipulative reporting in some media. Further, *the letter of a group of US congressmen* received substantial attention in November 2021. In some media, the content of the letter was misleadingly interpreted as a call to US president Joe Biden to introduce sanctions to Serbia as the entire country and its citizens, while it was the call for sanctions which are brought against individuals.

Disinformation in the news about *Kosovo* was related to the misleading representation of statements made by Priština authorities and to Kosovo local elections. For example, on Monday, a day after local elections in Kosovo took place, some Serbian media disseminated the information that Srpska lista (Serbian list) won the majority in all Kosovo municipalities with Serbian population. This statement was made by the leader of Srpska lista on Sunday evening, but already on Monday morning it was clear that this was not the case, and the election will be repeated in one municipality. This piece of information was omitted in the Monday evening central news on TV Pink, Happy TV, Novosadska TV and TV Pančevo.

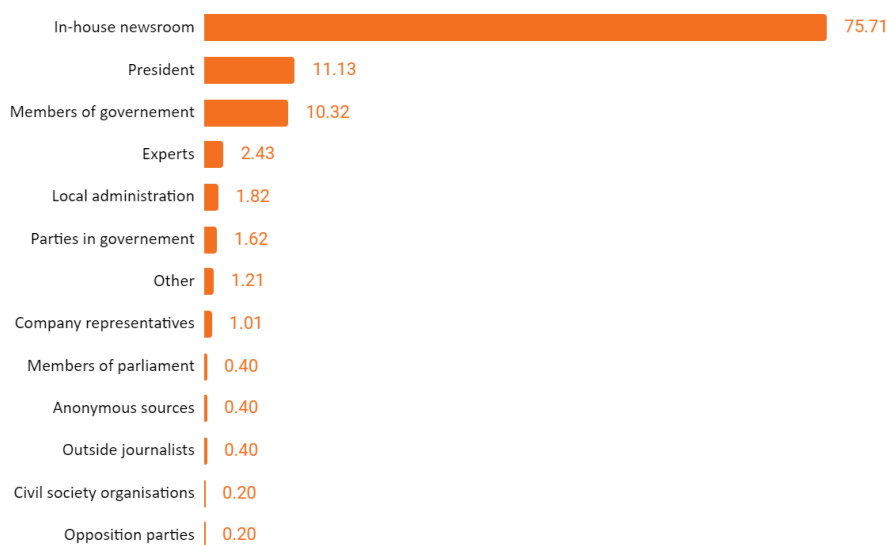
Across the topics, we can recognise two disinformation campaigns that were launched as a response to the reporting of the media. One campaign was orchestrated after Captain Dragan Vasiljković, a commander of one paramilitary unit who was sentenced for committing war crimes, said that upon return to Serbia he received financial support from Danilo Vučić, the eldest son of the Serbian president. This was published on the front page of the daily Danas and in other media, leading to a disinformation campaign of articles belonging to the category *extreme bias*, in which audience did not learn anything about the original event, but was only informed that there was "a disgraceful campaign of Đilas's media on Vučić's son". Similar campaign was launched after the investigative news website KRIK published the article from *La Repubblica* in which the Italian newspaper claimed that Danilo Vučić acted as football manager.

News with the topics of *state support and investment*, together with the news on *economic trends* and *EU integration* are also found to contain disinformation. For example, receiving the progress report for Serbian EU integrations, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stated that "progress is noted in almost all areas. Progress is noted in all political criteria and in the area of rule of law". Fact-checking portal Istinomer has labelled this statement as *manipulation of facts*

because the Report also brings serious criticism of the democratic capacity of Serbian institutions.⁸²

In general, we can distinguish two types of creators of disinformation: people who make claims that contain disinformation or spread content (videos, photographs) that is false and misleading, and journalists and newsrooms who fail to check these claims and content, or act on their own to manipulate headlines, contexts, photographs, mislead or provide false information to their audience. In our classification of different types of disinformation, there are some types that can be attributed to journalists, those are *extreme bias* since it is an editorial decision to omit background, and provide only one side without taking statement from the other, *false connection* because headlines and captions are the sole responsibility of the newsroom, and *imposter content* since it is the media that select sources and choose how to present their affiliations. For other types of disinformation, the creators can be both individuals acting as sources whose claims and content is referenced, or journalists and their newsrooms. Our analysis shows that journalists and newsrooms of the 14 out of 15 analysed media are most frequently creators of disinformation (Figure 10). In terms of individuals, the president of the Republic of Serbia and members of the Government are frequently found to be originators of disinformation.

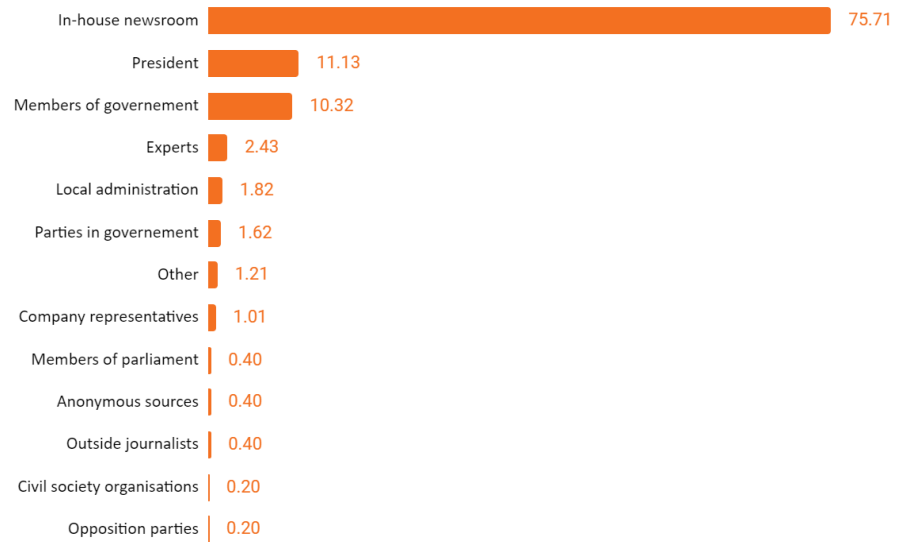
Figure 10: Creators of disinformation (%)



In almost half of the news that contains disinformation, the targets are opposition parties in general or their leaders in specific (Figure 11). Citizens are targets of disinformation as participants in the environmental protests. Media and journalists, especially those labelled as opposition, are also those about whom the disinformation is created. In part of the news there was no discernible target of disinformation.

⁸² Napredak konstatovan u svemu [Progress noted in all areas] (2021, October 26). Istinomer. Retrieved on October 29, 2021 from <https://link.crt.rs/8o>

Figure 11: Targets of disinformation (%)



IV DISINFORMATION IN FIVE ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

In general, online news media account for the majority of disinformation. However, with almost equally prolific publication of news on their website, the five news portals under observation have quite different practices of disseminating disinformation (Table 8). Similar to other analysis,⁸³ our results show that the portal Alo.rs is the most prolific disseminator of disinformation, with the majority of disinformation falling into the category of *extreme bias*, followed by *manipulation of facts and misleading content*. Online edition of the daily Kurir has significantly fewer disinformation, but there is overall similarity in the ratio between *extreme bias* and *manipulation of facts* in Kurir and Alo. Other three online news media have less disinformation, mostly pertaining to *manipulation of facts*. This requires a separate look at the practices of the five online media.

Table 8: Types of disinformation in online news in total number*

	Alo	Kurir	N1	Nova	Blic
Manipulation of facts	98	30	19	17	11
Extreme bias	122	26	0	1	1
False connection	34	0	1	1	1
Imposter content	0	1	0	0	0
Photo and video manipulation	3	5	0	0	1
Misleading context	3	0	0	0	0
Fabricated news	2	0	1	0	0
Total	262	62	21	19	14

*Total number of disinformation types is higher than the total number of news since one news item can contain more than one type of disinformation

Website Alo.rs has a publication routine of slicing otherwise connected pieces of information into separate news items and this routine is the primary reason for the high number of disinformation. Secondary reason is that the Alo publishes statements and comments from many sources, that way inflating the number of already sliced news. For example, during a single week, the Alo has published 100 news items about the environmental protests that contained disinformation. On the day of the protests (December 4th, 2021), it had 58 individual news items with different types of disinformation, 14 published within two hours (Table 9).

⁸³ Zlatni Pinokio za „Alo”, Srebrni za „Informer”, Bronzani za „Espresso” [Golden Pinocchio for Alo, silver for Informer, bronze for Espresso] (December 16th, 2021). *Fake News Tragač*. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crt.rs/8p>

Table 9: Publication dynamics of disinformation on environmental protest in A/o, December 4th, 2021

13:26	False environmentalist Vladimir Vuletić and the dodgy crew of Velja Nevolja (velja the Troublemaker) on the protests ⁸⁴
13:31	Aida Ćorović commands protest participants. A woman who calls the Serbs genocidal lead the road blockades ⁸⁵
13:37	Axes found near Šabac bridge! Scandal – protest organisers have hidden the weapon! DNA Found (Video) ⁸⁶
13:47	Krstić reveals the hypocrisy of the fake environmentalists. Gathering of demonstrators near the gas station. It's tragicomical ⁸⁷
13:59	Miserable number of people blocking the Gazela bridge and highway. Working people cannot move freely. Belgrade citizens tormented ⁸⁸
14:01	Environmental protest with nicotine smoke. All you need to know about fake activist in one photo ⁸⁹
14:16	I don't know who is demolishing, I just know that I will not pick up my wife and children on time. A citizen of Belgrade talks in despair about latest events ⁹⁰
14:16	Go f**k yourselves! Tormented citizens going crazy from fake environmentalists and hostages holding citizens ⁹¹
14:18	Malović comments. The only blockade we have seen is not road blockade but brain blockade ⁹²
14:21	He had a coffee, and then started turning people against one another. Đilas and

⁸⁴ Lažni ekolog Vladimir Vuletić i sumnjiva ekipa Velje Nevolje na protestima (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8q>

⁸⁵ AIDA ĆOROVIĆ POSTROJAVA UČESNIKE PROTESTA Žena koja Srbe naziva genocidnim vođa blokade puteva (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8r>

⁸⁶ PRONAĐENE SEKIRE KOD ŠABAČKOG MOSTA! Skandal - organizatori protesta sakrili oružje! Pronađen DNK (VIDEO) (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8s>

⁸⁷ KRSTIĆ RAZVALIO LICEMERJE FEJK EKOLOGA Skupljanje protestanta kod benzinske pumpe: To je tragikomedija (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8t>

⁸⁸ ŠAKA JADA BLOKIRALA GAZELU I AUTO-PUT Ne daju radnom narodu da se kreće! Maltretiraju Beograđane (FOTO/VIDEO) (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8u>

⁸⁹ EKOLOŠKI PROTEST UZ NIKOTINSKI DIM Sve što treba da znate o lažnim aktivistima u jednoj fotografiji (FOTO) (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8v>

⁹⁰ JA NE ZNAM KO ŠTA LOMI, SAMO ZNAM DA PO ŽENU I DECU NEĆU DOĆI NA VREME Beograđanin očajno govori šta mu se dešava (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8w>

⁹¹ JE*EM VAM MATER: Izmučeni građani poludeli od lažnih ekologa i taoca naroda (VIDEO) (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8x>

⁹² MALOVIĆ OCENILA Od najavljene blokade puteva, videsmo samo blokadu mozga! (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/8y>

	Marinika are laughing at the citizens who are blocked ⁹³
14:36	Life in Belgrade came to standstill! Vesić has revealed what is happening with the public transport, bus hit by rocks, many are trapped ⁹⁴
14:41	Shame on you, cheaters! Poor people are carrying children over Pančevo bridge on foot, due to road blockade ⁹⁵
14:51	“Come on, come through”! Mother put a baby in a stroller in front of a car, mob is supporting her in total madness ⁹⁶
14:55	Are they ready for everything!? Foreign mercenaries and domestic traitors come from all over for the interests of Đilas ⁹⁷

This publication dynamic is possible because the Alo has a practice of publishing news without a single cited source. When there are sources, this media outlet usually relies on the members of the parties in government and government members (Figure 12). It should be stressed that this distribution does not relate to the creators of disinformation, but to the sources in general.

⁹³ POPIO KAFICU, PA KRENUO DA ZAVAĐA NAROD Đilas i Marinika se smeju blokiranim građanima (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/8z>

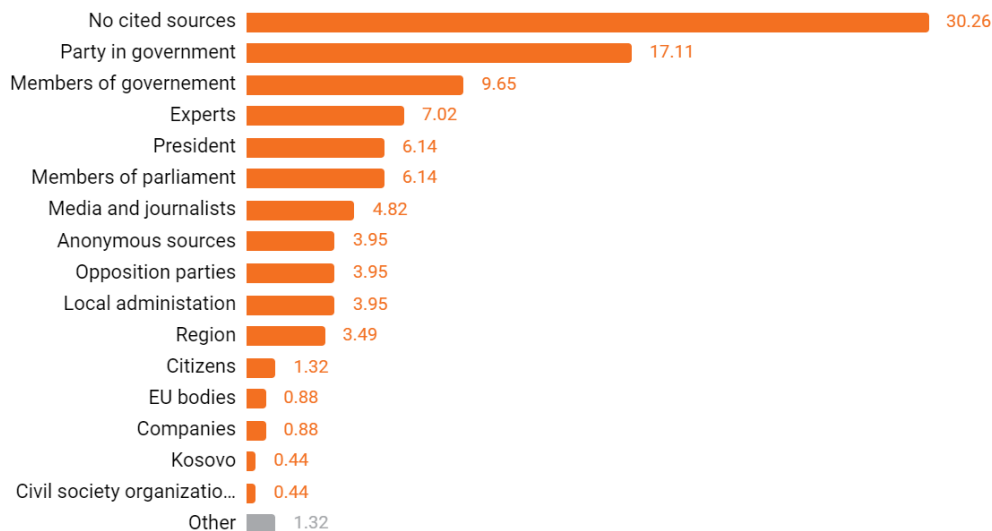
⁹⁴ ŽIVOT U BEOGRADU ZAUSTAVLJEN! Vesić otkrio šta se dešava sa javim prevozom, autobus kamenovan, mnogi zarobljeni! (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/8i>

⁹⁵ STIDITE SE, HOHŠTAPLER!! Jadni ljudi prenose decu peške preko Pančevca zbog blokade (FOTO) (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/90>

⁹⁶ “HAJDE, PROĐI”! Majka isturila bebu u kolicima pred automobil, rulja je podržava u totalnom ludilu (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/91>

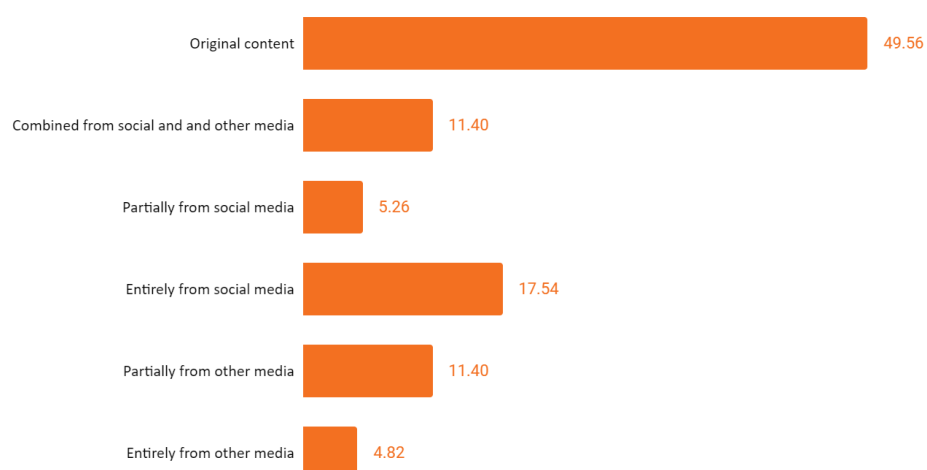
⁹⁷ NA ŠTA SU SVE SPREMNI?! Strani plaćenici i domaći izdajnici došli sa svih strana zarad Đilasovih interesa! (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/92>

Figure 12: Sources in the news that contain disinformation in Alo (%)



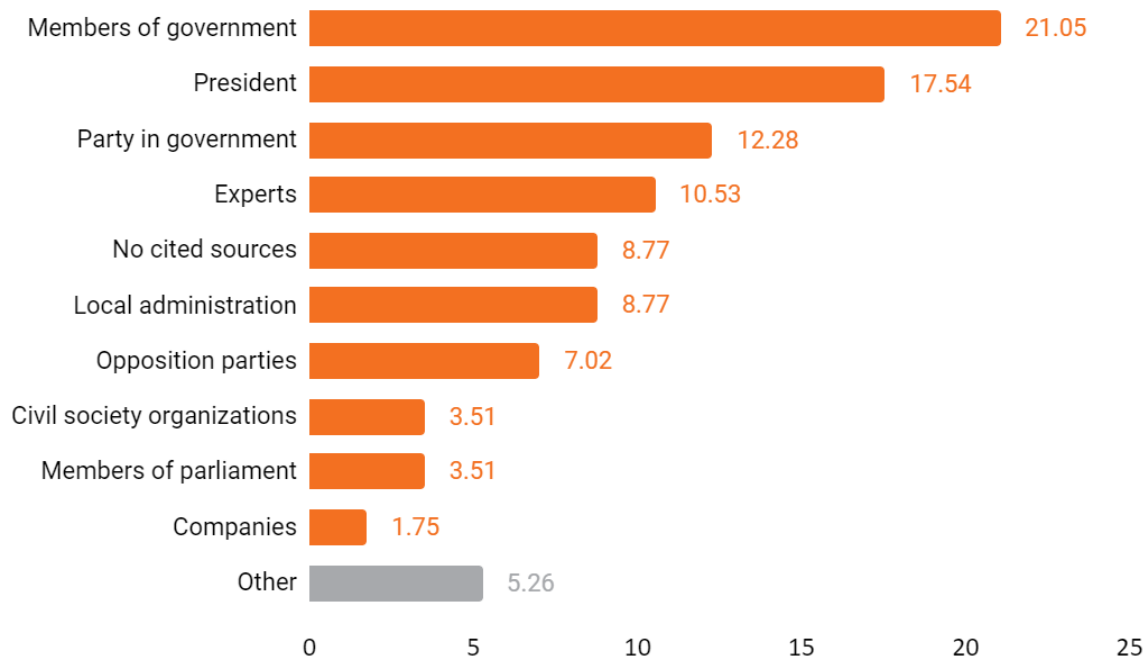
In addition, more than one half (51.75%) of the news items on Alo.rs are based on pseudo-events, and the news portal relies on social media posts and reporting of other traditional media to achieve its high publication dynamics (Figure 13). It relies on the pseudo-fact-checking Twitter account “Lie detector” (Detektor laži), an issue to which we will return in Chapter 10.

Figure 13: Distribution of original content, content taken from other media, and from social media in Alo (%)



Relatively similar sourcing pattern can be observed in the web edition of the daily tabloid Kurir. There is a high frequency of individuals who belong to the party in government, including the president and other party members (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Sources in the news containing disinformation in Kurir (%)



The two media outlets have a similar distribution of topics (Table 10) and a high number of news items belonging to the category *extreme bias* (Table 8). These are not typical journalistic pieces, but rather reprints of the statements of the leadership of the Serbian Progressive Party. In such news the event that is commented on, if mentioned at all, is condensed to a single evaluative sentence, while the entire press release or social media post is cited.

Table 10: Distribution of topics in Alo and Kurir (%)

	Alo	Kurir
Environmental protests	43.9	28.1
Relations between government and opposition	26.3	24.6
Kosovo	6.1	5.3
Relations with/in the region	5.3	1.8
Elections and electoral conditions	3.5	1.8
Mural of Ratko Mladić	2.2	1.8
EU integrations	1.8	1.8
Economic trends	1.8	1.8

Letter of US congressmen	1.8	0.0
Media operations	1.8	8.8
COVID-19	0.9	1.8
Environment	0.9	1.8
State support and investments	0.9	5.3
Corruption	0.4	0.0
Other	2.6	15.8
Total	100.0	100.0

For example, the type of disinformation *extreme bias* can be found after several media published that Captain Dragan, a commander of one paramilitary unit who was sentenced for committing war crimes, stated that upon return to Serbia he received financial support from Danilo Vučić, the eldest son of the Serbian president. The lead on the news published in the Kurir and the Alo does not mention this event but states:

- Shameful campaign of attacks against the family of the President Aleksandar Vučić has continued today, by making his son Danilo a target again, said the mayor of Novi Sad Miloš Vučević. * Sramna kampanja napada na porodicu predsednika Aleksandra Vučića nastavljena je i danas ponovnim stavljanjem mete na njegovog sina Danila, naveo je gradonačelnik Novog Sada Miloš Vučević.⁹⁸
- Marko Đurić commented the latest attack of Đilas's media on the President Vučić son = Marko Đurić se oglasio povodom najnovijih napada Đilasovih medija na sina predsednika Vučića⁹⁹
- In a press release, a member of the Main Board of Serbian Progressive Party and member of Parliament Dejan Kesar commented the newest lies and horrific attacks, from the kitchen of Multicom party and its employees, on the family of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić – Član Glavnog odbora Srpske napredne stranke i narodni poslanik Dejan Kesar osvrnuo se u saopštenju na najnovije laži i gnusne napade na porodicu predsednika Srbije Aleksandra Vučića iz kuhinje Multikom stranke i zaposlenih u njoj.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ SRAMNA KAMPANJA ĐILASOVIIH MEDIJA Vučević: Porodica je svetinja, u nju se ne dira, to rade samo bednici i poslednje kukavice! [Shameful campaign of Đilas's media. Vučević: Family is sacred, you don't go there, only rascals and biggest cowards would do it] (October 22nd, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on October 23rd, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/93>

⁹⁹ MARKO ĐURIĆ Divljački napad privatnog Đilasovog biltena na sina predsednika Vučića je šamar celoj Srbiji [Marko Đurić: Savage attack of Đilas private bulletin on the son of President Vučić is the slap in the face for entire Serbia] (2021, October 22nd). *A/o*. Retrieved on October 23rd, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/94>

¹⁰⁰ KESAR OTKRIO Evo ko napada Vučićevu porodicu – tajkuni iz kruga dvojke sa po 30 nekretnina [Kesar reveals: These are the ones who attack Vučić family – tycoons from the city centre with 30 properties] (2021, October 22nd). *A/o*. Retrieved on October 23rd, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/95>

- Finance Minister Siniša Mali addressed the public on the newest campaign of the media against the family of the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić. Ministar finansija Siniša Mali obratio se javnosti povodom najnovije kampanje medija protiv porodice predsednika Srbije Aleksandra Vučića. Saopštenje Siniše Malog prenosimo u celosti.¹⁰¹
- Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar has strongly condemned the last in a line of attacks on the son of the head of the state, coming from tycoon's political parties and their low-budget tabloids. Ministar zdravlja Zlatibor Lončar najoštrije je osudio poslednji u nizu napada na sina predsednika države, koji dolazi od strane tajkunskih političkih stranaka i njihovih niskotiražnih tabloida.¹⁰²

As the examples show, the news is framed as an attack on the President and statements refer to it as a part of the political competition between opposition parties and parties in the government.

The other three online news media, N1, Nova and Blic, have fewer disinformation in total, and they are identified in the news covering somewhat different topics (Table 11) than those covered by the Alo and the Kurir. Disinformation is frequently found in the news on *Environmental protests* in N1 and the Blic. Topic *Relations between government and opposition*, together with *Election and electoral conditions* are frequent in news containing disinformation in Nova. Both in the Nova and the Blic, *COVID-19* related disinformation is among the most frequent.

Table 11: Distribution of topics in Blic, Nova and N1 (%)

	N1	Nova	Blic
Environmental protests	19.0	0.0	28.6
Relations between government and opposition	4.8	21.1	7.1
Kosovo	4.8	0.0	7.1
Elections and electoral conditions	4.8	10.5	0.0
Mural of Ratko Mladić	4.8	0.0	0.0
EU integrations	4.8	5.3	7.1
Economic trends	0.0	5.3	0.0

¹⁰¹ MINISTAR SE OGLASIO POSLE NAPADA NA PORODICU PREDSEDNKA VUČIĆA: Cela Srbija je još jednom zaprepašćena (FOTO) [Minister comments after the attack on the family of the President Vučić: Serbia is dismayed again] (2021, October 22nd). *Kurir*. Retrieved on October 23rd, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/96>

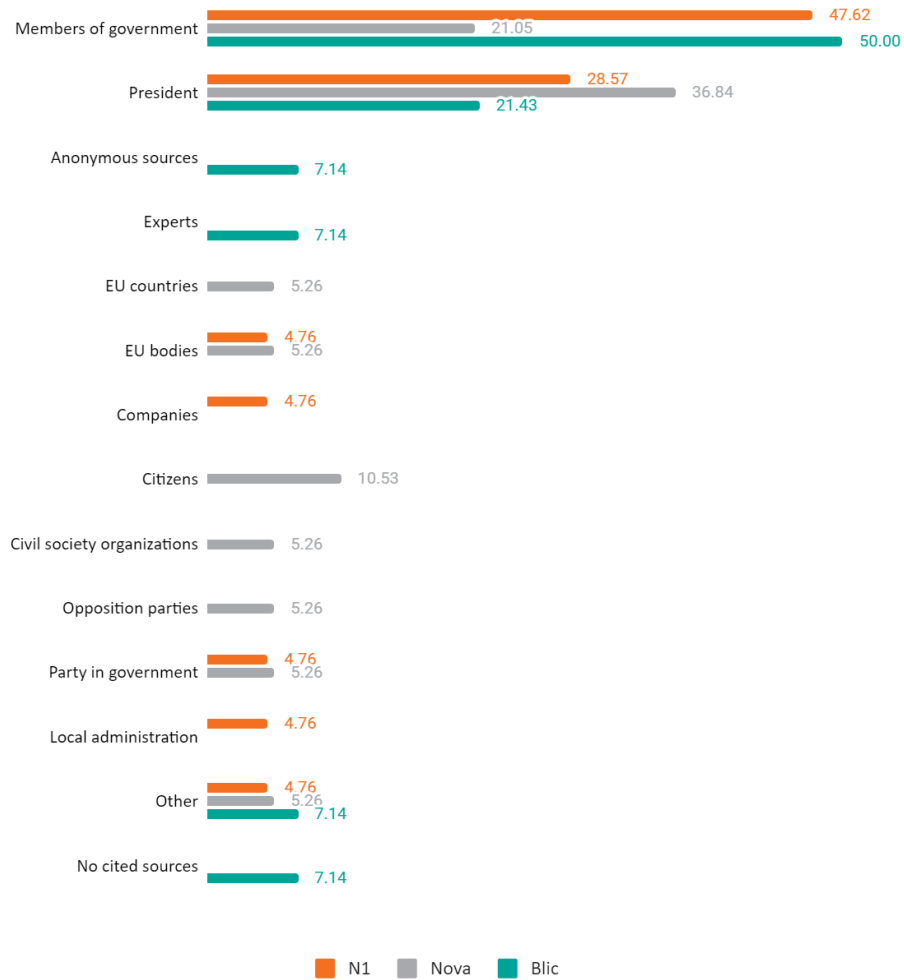
¹⁰² MINISTAR LONČAR O NAPADU NA SINA PREDSEDNKA: Srbija nikada neće biti zemlja u kojoj će se napadima na decu osvajati vlast [Minister Lončar about the attack on President's son: Serbia will never be a country in which attack on children are a way to win power]. (2021, October 22nd). *Kurir*. Retrieved on October 23rd, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/8f>



Letter of US congressmen	4.8	0.0	0.0
Media operations	4.8	5.3	0.0
Environment	4.8	5.3	7.1
State support and investments	4.8	5.3	7.1
Corruption	4.8	10.5	0.0
COVID-19	9.5	21.1	21.4
Other	23.8	10.5	14.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

All three online media rely on official sources in the news that are found to contain disinformation (Figure 15). The Blic has more news items containing disinformation in which it cites no sources or uses anonymous ones, while Nova and N1 have a higher frequency of news items with sources from opposition parties, EU countries and bodies. Members of the government are frequent sources in the analysed news of the Blic and N1.

Figure 15: Sources in the news containing disinformation in Blic, Nova and N1 (%)



V FIVE NATIONAL TV STATIONS AND DISINFORMATION

Five TV stations with national coverage broadcast 63 news that contained disinformation. The highest frequency of disinformation was found in the central news of TV Pink, while the fewest disinformation was identified in the news of the first channel of the public broadcasting service RTS 1 (Table 12).

*Table 12: Types of disinformation in national TV news in total number**

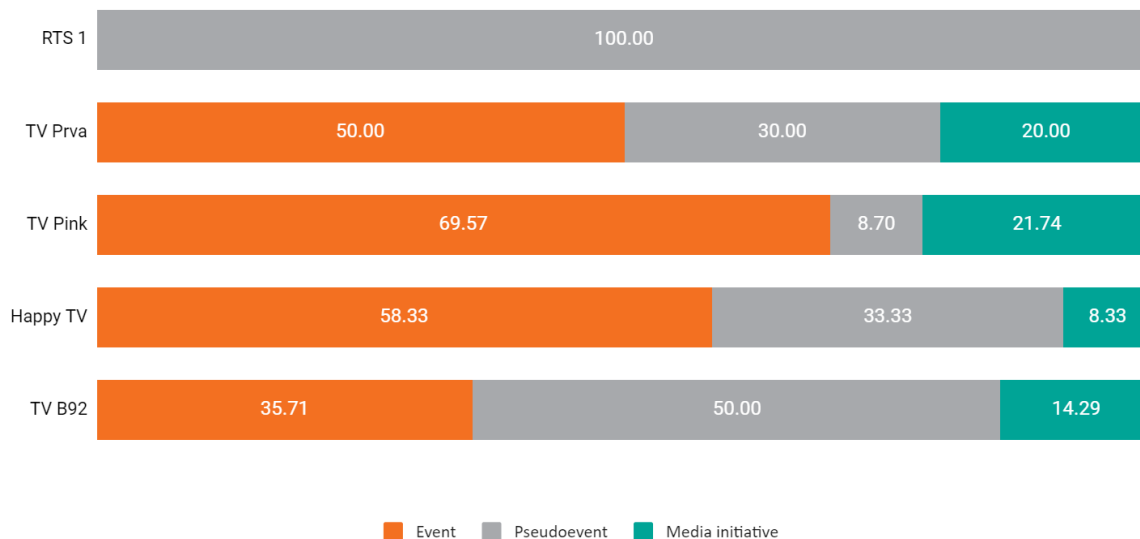
	TV B92	Happy TV	TV Pink	TV Prva	RTS 1
Manipulation of facts	10	6	7	8	4
Extreme bias	8	3	16	3	0
False connection	0	0	0	0	0
Imposter content	0	1	2	0	0
Photo and video manipulation	1	0	3	0	0
Misleading context	0	1	0	0	0
Fabricated news	0	1	1	0	0
Total	14	12	23	10	4

*Total number of disinformation types is higher than the total number of news since one news item can contain more than one type of disinformation

All of the disinformation on RTS 1 originates from coverage of pseudo-events, that is press conferences and press releases. High frequency of pseudo-events is also found in other media, with the exception of TV Pink which has a high frequency of event-based disinformation. It should be noted that some TV stations have a practice of interrupting regular central news with live coverage of press conferences of high-ranking officials. Also, some central news broadcast videos from social media posts as an integral part of the news. For example, TV Prva and TV B92 have broadcast a promotional video of the Serbian President in which data is presented about the rise of pensions in the last ten years. The content is established to be misleading as it neglects the fact that in 2014 the pensions were cut by 22%.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Disinformation about the increase in pensions is frequented by the government members and already debunked by Istinomer, see: Penzije nikad veće (2018, November 30th). Istinomer. Retrieved on October 30th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/98>

Figure 16: Types of coverage per occasion of reporting in national TV news (%)



Majority of topics around which disinformation is created and distributed were on the topic *Environmental protests* (Table 13). *Relations between government and opposition* is a relatively frequent topic in the main evening news of TV Pink, while *Kosovo* is a salient topic for TV Happy and TV Pink.

Table 13: Distribution of topics in national TV news (%)

	TV B92	Happy TV	TV Pink	TV Prva	RTS 1
Environmental protests	64,29	41,67	43,48	30,00	50,00
Relations between government and opposition	0,00	0,00	21,74	10,00	0,00
Kosovo	0,00	16,67	17,39	0,00	0,00
Elections and electoral conditions	0,00	0,00	4,35	0,00	0,00
EU integrations	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	25,00
Economic trends	7.14	8.33	0.00	20.00	0.00
Letter of US congressmen	14.29	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Environment	0.00	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.00
State support and investments	14.29	0.00	0.00	20.00	0.00
Corruption	0.00	0.00	4.35	20.00	0.00

CRTA:

Relations with/in the region	0.00	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.00
COVID-19	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	25.00
International news	0.00	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.00
Other	0.00	8.33	8.70	0.00	0.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

VI DISINFORMATION IN TWO PRINTED DAILIES

Two printed dailies published 53 news items that contained disinformation, Informer 27 and Večernje novosti 26. Similarly to other media, most of the disinformation belongs to the category *manipulation of facts and misleading content* (Table 14). There is also a relatively high number of *imposter content* types of disinformation.

Table 14: Types of disinformation in printed dailies in total number*

	Informer	Večernje novosti
Manipulation of facts	14	29
Extreme bias	1	4
False connection	2	3
Imposter content	8	2
Photo and video manipulation	1	0
Misleading context	1	1
Fabricated news	1	0
Total	28	39

*Total number of disinformation types is higher than the total number of news items since one news item can contain more than one type of disinformation

In general, *imposter content* includes referring to people who do not exist as sources, attributing statements to the people who did not make them (but someone else did) or misleading use of titles and affiliations. The latter was found in printed dailies, in their larger news pieces which also include opinions of experts and analysts. In the Informer and Večernje novosti these experts are introduced as affiliates of certain civil society organisations, but at the same time they hold positions in legislative or executive branches. This information on the second, very important affiliation is not disclosed to the readership and thus it is classified as a type of disinformation. For example, in several news items there is no mention that Predrag Rajić, presented as the expert of the Centre for Social Stability, is at the same time member of parliament elected in 2020 on the list of the Serbian Progressive Party.¹⁰⁴ Another analyst appearing in news is Ognjen Karanović, introduced as a historian, and not as an Assistant

¹⁰⁴ Predrag Rajić (n.d.). *Istinomer*. Retrieved on September 30, 2021 from <https://link.crt.rs/8h>

Provincial Secretary in the Secretariat for regional development, international cooperation and local self-government which is an executive function he held in the time of reporting.¹⁰⁵

As in other media, *Environmental protests* were a frequent topic within which disinformation was created in printed dailies (Table 15). The *Večernje novosti* also frequently spread disinformation when they cover news about *The relations in/with the region – Crna Gora, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia*. For example, they reported about the blockades organised on the day of anointing of the new metropolitan bishop Joanikije in Montenegro and the investigation that followed using the title “Confirmed: Komitis used fire on police”¹⁰⁶. This title was deemed a false *connection* because none of the sources, cited in texts, explicitly mentions Komitis.

Table 15: Distribution of topics in printed dailies (%)

	Informer	Večernje novosti
Environmental protests	22.22	19.23
Relations between government and opposition	11.11	11.54
Kosovo	14.81	11.54
Elections and electoral conditions	14.81	7.69
Corruption	7.41	0.00
COVID-19	7.41	0.00
Letter of US congressmen	7.41	3.85
Environment	3.70	3.85
State support and investments	3.70	3.85
Other	3.70	3.85
International affairs	3.70	7.69
Relations in/with the region	0.00	15.38

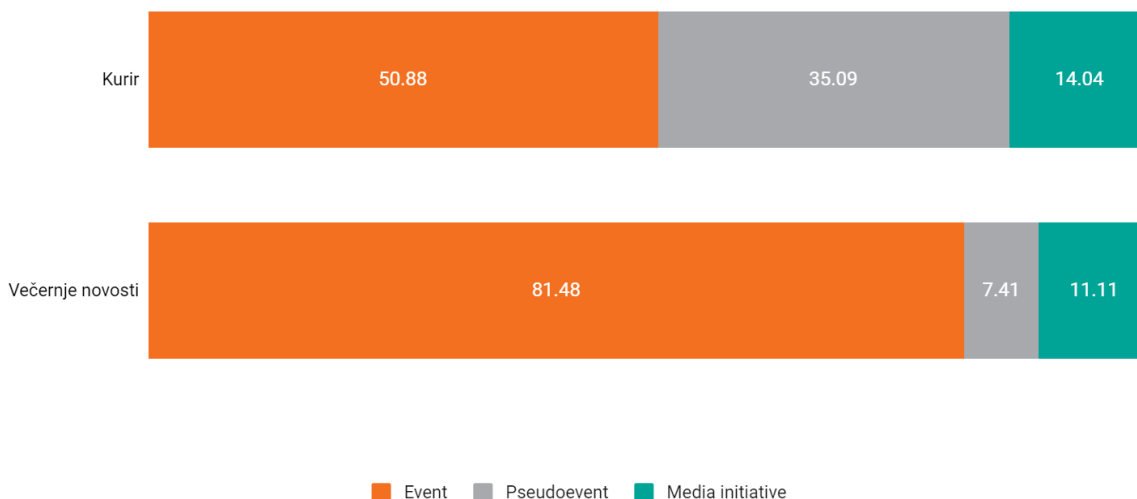
¹⁰⁵ Pokrajinski sekretarijat za regionalni razvoj, međuregionalnu saradnju i lokalnu samoupravu [Provincial Secretariat for Regional Development, Inter-regional Cooperation and Local Self-governance] (n.d.). Kabinet. Retrieved on October 4th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/99>

¹⁰⁶ POTVRĐENO: Komite pucale na policiju [Confirmed: Komitis used fire on police] (2021, September 28th). *Večernje novosti*, 3.

Economic trends	0.00	3.85
Media operations	0.00	3.85
Mural of Ratko Mladić	0.00	3.85
Total	100.00	100.00

There are some differences in the types of coverage per occasion of reporting in the two printed dailies (Figure 17). The Večernje novosti rely more frequently on pseudo-events, with no initiative on their own. The Informer, on the other hand, takes a more proactive approach. One example of such initiative was found in two news items about the inspection of the winery by the civil servants from the office of Commissioner for Public Information and Personal Data Protection. It is claimed the Commissioner knew that the President's son worked in the winery and that he wanted to pin money laundering on him.¹⁰⁷ In these news items, sources for Informer misleadingly claim that winery and inspection is not part of Commissioner's competences, which is a false claim since inspection is one of his tasks prescribed by the Law.¹⁰⁸

Figure 17: Types of coverage per occasion of reporting in printed dailies (%)



¹⁰⁷ Hteli su da Danila lažno optuže za pranje para [They wanted to falsely accuse Danilo of money laundering] (November 13th, 2021). *Informer*, 2-3.

Poverenik progoni Danila [Commissioner is pestering Danilo] (November 12th, 2021). *Informer*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁸ Law on Personal Data Protection ("Official Gazette of RS" No. 87/2018)

VII DISINFORMATION ON THREE LOCAL TV STATIONS

Radio-television Novi Pazar is the only media from our sample that in the given period did not broadcast any disinformation. Two other local TV stations – Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo do have disinformation in the evening central news, predominantly belonging to the types of *extreme bias* and *manipulation of facts* (Table 16).

*Table 16: Types of disinformation on local TV news in total number**

	Novosadska TV	RTV Pančevo
Manipulation of facts	7	4
Extreme bias	21	13
False connection	0	0
Imposter content	2	1
Photo and video manipulation	0	0
Misleading context	0	0
Fabricated news	0	0
Total	30	18

*Total number of disinformation types is higher than the total number of news items since one news item can contain more than one type of disinformation

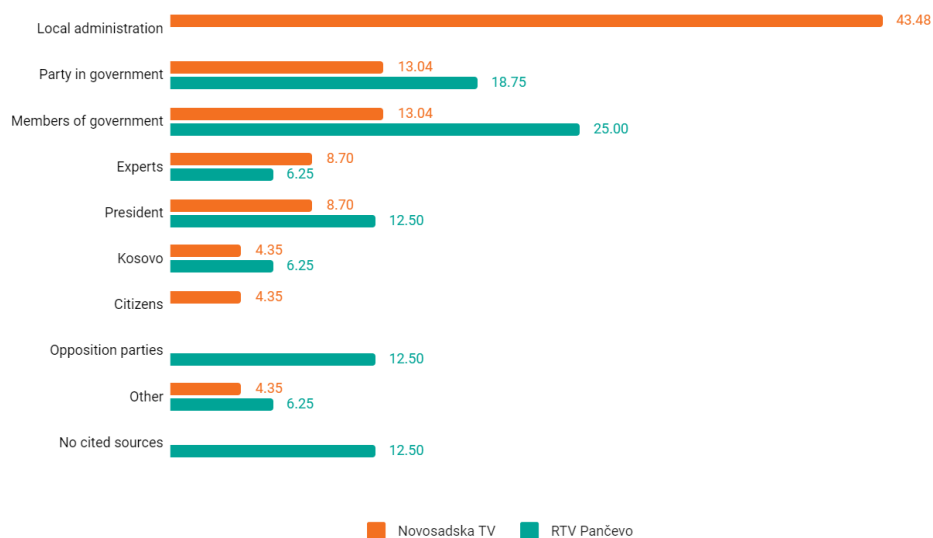
For the most part, this disinformation is connected to the topic *Relations between government and opposition*, as well as to the *Environmental protests* (Table 17). For example, the event extensively covered by both TV Pančevo and Novosadska TV was the demolition of the office of SNS in Novi Sad, by a son of local opposition leader Borislav Novaković, in October 2021. In a news item lasting almost seven minutes, Novosadska TV quotes imposter analysts and its own editor-in-chief who comment on the event and the reactions of the opposition leaders. These reactions of the other side are only retold without inviting opposition to give their own opinions. Exactly the same news, with the same sources, was again broadcast two days later on Novosadska TV, and it is taken over by RTV Pančevo and broadcast yet again.

Table 17: Distribution of topics in local TV news (%)

	Novosadska TV	RTV Pančevo
Relations between government and opposition	43.48	43.75
Environmental protests	34.78	25.00
Corruption	4.35	0.00
Kosovo	4.35	6.25
Relations in/with the region	0.00	6.25
EU integrations	0.00	6.25
State support and investments	0.00	6.25
Other	13.04	6.25
Total	100.00	100.00

The main difference between Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo lies in the selection of sources (Figure 18). In the news that are found to contain disinformation, Novosadska TV relies on the local administration, predominantly the mayor of Novi Sad, Miloš Vučević. RTV Pančevo, on the other hand, has higher frequency of the sources from the national level, members of the government and the President.

Figure 18: Sources in the news containing disinformation in local TV news (%)



VIII INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND DISINFORMATION

Among 494 disinformation, there were four news items that were related to international affairs and contained some types of disinformation. Two of those are about Russia and its relations with NATO. For example, the printed daily *Večernje novosti* published news that Poland is buying Ambrams tanks from the U.S., to take them, as the newspaper writes, to the war with Russia.¹⁰⁹ This is not false news, however, it is old news from July 2021 presented as something new, and as such it gives misleading context. Two among four identified disinformation are related to visual materials. For example, the tabloid *Informer* published a news item titled “Army on the streets because of gas shortages”¹¹⁰ which portrays Boris Johnson, UK Prime Minister, surrounded by soldiers. The image is not labelled as an illustration or archival photo, although it originated from December 2019 when Johnson met soldiers from the Queen’s Royal Hussars in Estonia.¹¹¹

Quite a modest amount of disinformation pertaining to international affairs does not allow for a detailed quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, it should be noted that beyond the clear thematic focus on international affairs there are numerous references to the EU, UK, USA, Russia and other foreign countries in the news on domestic events. These references serve as a background to the news of domestic conflicts and they prevalently antagonise Serbian public towards the Western, NATO countries. We will provide a few examples.

The news about a letter sent by seven US congressmen to president Biden received substantial media attention with eight news items containing disinformation found in the monitored period. In the headlines, the event was framed as an attack of “Albanian lobbyists”¹¹² or “US attack against president Vučić”¹¹³, organised by Dragan Đilas and opposition parties¹¹⁴. Within this narrative, US politics is represented as Serb-hating:

“Although for a while Serbia heaved a sigh of relief when the US congressmen Eliot Engel, notorious Serb-hater who advocated bombing of Serbia and Kosovo independence, left

¹⁰⁹ „Ambrams” kupuju da sa Rusima ratuju [They are buying “Ambrams” to take it to war with Russia] (2021, September 29th). *Večernje novosti*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Vojska izlazi na ulice zbog nestašice goriva? [Army is going to the streets because of oil shortages?] (2021, September 29th). *Informer*, 14

¹¹¹ Owen, G., & Cole, H. (2019, December 21st). President Donald Trump tells Boris Johnson to celebrate his election win with a 'victory tour' of the United States - but the Prime Minister is 'in no rush to accept' due to impeachment drama. *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/9a>

¹¹² Utuk na ofanzivu albanskih lobista [Response to the offensive of Albanian lobbyists] (November 11th, 2021). *Večernje novosti*, 3.

Pismo kongresmena je zbog biznis interesa: Smajlović raskrinkala plan Đilasa i albanskih lobista [The letter of congressman is because of business interests: Smajlović reveals the plan of Đilas and Albanian lobbyists] (2021, November 8). *A/o*. Retrieved on November 12th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/9b>

ALBANSKI LOBISTI TRLJAJU RUKE Đilas, Šolak, Kurti i Milo se udružili da sruše Vučića! [Albanian lobbyists are enjoying: Đilas, Šolak, Kurti and Milo gathered to bring down Vučić] (2021, November, 8th). *A/o*. Retrieved on November 9th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/9c>

¹¹³ SAD napadaju Vučića i zato što je nabavio respiratore [USA attacks Vučić also because he procured ventilators] (2021, November 8th). *Informer*, 2-3.

¹¹⁴ Đilas u SAD obećavao baš sve za vlast [Đilas in USA promised absolutely everything to get on power] (2021, November 11th). *Informer*, 2-3.

congress in January this year, it seems that the pause was very short. Engel got his successor Richie Torres for whom it is clearer every day that he continues the path against Serbia. And to make things worse, Torres found his collaborators in Serbia, in opposition leader Dragan Đilas, whose main aim is to bring down Vučić from power”.¹¹⁵

Following a similar pattern, foreign countries are mentioned in news items about Kosovo. Russia is portrayed as the key ally¹¹⁶ and it is misleadingly claimed that Putin said that tanks should be sent to Kosovo.¹¹⁷ At the same time, it is claimed that “the EU has equipped, armoured and trained paramilitary illegal forces” in Kosovo.¹¹⁸

The US, EU and its member states are referenced in the media coverage of the environmental protests held in December 2021. Media cite the claim of the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić that Rockefeller foundation is providing support to the environmental organisations.¹¹⁹ They also take the Prime Minister’s claim that police reaction to protests in EU countries is much harsher than in Serbia, and make their own comparison, mistaking dates of the protests in Germany and providing very little context in these comparisons.¹²⁰ One of the targets of these news items is Viola von Kramon who, as stated in one clickbait headline, “wants blood on Serbian streets”.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Iako je Srbija na trenutak odahnula kada je američki kongresmen Eliot Engel, čuveni srbomrzac koji se zalagao za bombardovanje Srbije i nezavisnost Kosova, napustio Kongres u januaru ove godine, izgleda da je predah bio izuzetno kratak. Engel je dobio svog naslednika Ričija Toresa za kojeg je sve jasnije da nastavlja utabanim putem usmerenim protiv Srbije. A da stvari budu još gore, Tores je saradnike pronašao baš u Srbiji u opozicionom lideru Draganu Đilas, kojem je glavni cilj srušiti Vučića sa vlasti.

ALBANSKI LOBISTI TRLJAJU RUKE Đilas, Šolak, Kurti i Milo se udružili da sruše Vučića! [Albanian lobbyists are enjoying: Đilas, Šolak, Kurti and Milo gathered to bring down Vučić] (2021, November, 8th). *A/o*. Retrieved on November 9, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/9c>

¹¹⁶ PUTIN GRMI NA AMERIKU I EVROPU ZBOG KOSOVA Situacija ide u lošem pravcu, smirite Albance ili će Rusija morati da interveniše [Putin storms on US and Europe because of Kosovo: Situation is going in a wrong direction, calm down the Albanians or Russia will have to intervene]. (2021, September 28th). *A/o*. Retrieved on September 29th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/9d>

¹¹⁷ PUTINU PREKIPELO Srbi, šaljite tenkove na Kosovo Rusija je uz vas! [Putin had enough: Serbs, send the tanks on Kosovo, Russia is with you!] (2021, September 27th). *A/o*. Retrieved on September 28th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/9e>

¹¹⁸ EU opremala, naoružavala i obučavala paravojne ilegalne snage [The EU has equipped, armoured and trained paramilitary illegal forces] (2021, September 27th). *A/o*. Retrieved on September 28th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/9f>

¹¹⁹ Brnabić: Rokfeler fondacija je najzainteresovanije za ekologiju u Srbiji, da li je vama to logično? [Brnabić: Rockefeller Foundation is most interested in Serbian environment, is that logical to you?] (2021, November 29th). *A/o*. Retrieved on November 30, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/9g>

Rokfelerovi plaćaju za haos po Srbiji [Rockefeller’s are funding chaos in Serbia] (2021, November 29th). *Informer*, 4-5.

Terorišu većinu i to novcem Rokfelera [Terrorizing the majority, and with the money from Rockefeller’s] (2021, November 30th). *Informer*, 2-3.

¹²⁰ Viola, prvo sredi svoje dvorište rasulo u Nemačkoj, puštaju vodene topove i besne pse na ljude, a u Srbiji potpuno obrnuto! Na protestima rade šta hoće, Kramonova ipak ima nešto da doda [Viola, clean your yard first, chaos in Germany, they are using water cannons and mad dogs on people, and in Serbia it is opposite! They do what they want on protests, but Kramon still has something to add] (2021, November 30th). *A/o*. Retrieved on November 30th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/9h>

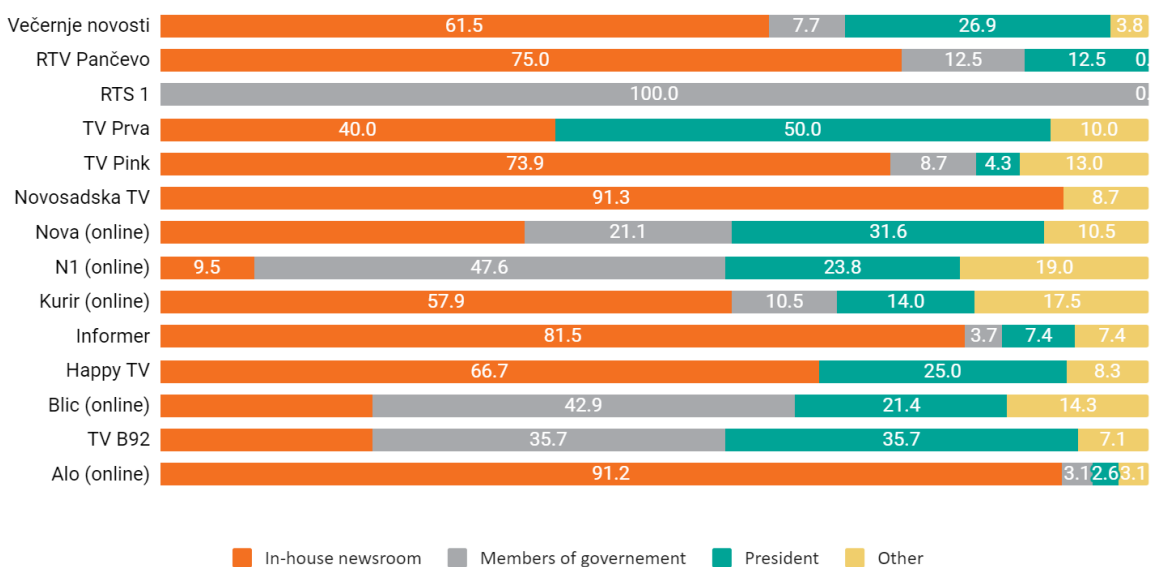
¹²¹ LICEMER NA KVADRAT Viola fon Kramon priželjkuje krv na srpskim ulicama [Two times hypocrite. Viola von Kramon wants blood on Serbia streets] (2021, December 5th). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 6th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.rs/aw>

IX CREATORS AND TARGETS OF DISINFORMATION

In general, we can distinguish two groups of creators of disinformation. The first groups are the sources (officials, politicians, experts, etc.) who make claims that contain disinformation or spread content (videos, photographs) that is false and misleading. The second are journalists who either fail to check these claims or who create disinformation by manipulating headlines, contexts, photographs, or create misleading or false information on their own, as creators, not just distributors. Our study shows that primary creators of disinformation are the media, their newsrooms and journalists. They are the ones who can be attributed the making of false connections in headlines, photographs, videos and captions, providing misleading or false context, using imposter content or manipulating photo and video material, and most importantly creating extremely biased news.

When we observe this issue in more detail, from the analysis of news containing disinformation we can infer that different newsrooms have different practices (Figure 19). In some of them, most notably RTS 1 and to some extent online news media N1, disinformation was the result of the coverage of the statements made by high officials, which was disseminated without fact-checking and notifying the audience that information is not accurate. In others, like online Alo, local station Novosadska TV and the printed daily Informer, disinformation originated from in-house journalists' accounts for 80% of disinformation.

Figure 19: Primary creators of disinformation per media outlet (%)



Targets of disinformation are different social actors – individuals, groups, organisations, collectives, institutions, or countries that are explicitly mentioned in news items and about whom false or misleading claims were made. Our study found that opposition parties were the most frequent targets of disinformation, although this varies across the media (Table 18). In over half of the news containing disinformation, opposition parties and individuals were targeted in online news media Alo, national TV stations B92 and TV Pink, and local stations

Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo. Together with opposition parties, in the online media Kurir frequent targets are also media and journalists.

Table 18: Distribution of targets per media outlet (%)

	Members of government	Party in government	Opposition parties	Media and journalists	CSO	Experts	Citizens	Companies	Kosovo	Region	EU bodies	USA	Other	No direct targets
Alo (online)	0.0	0.9	52.6	5.7	0.9	3.5	15.4	1.3	4.4	3.1	1.8	1.8	0.4	8.3
TV B92	0.0	0.0	64.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.1	7.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	21.4
Blic (online)	0.0	0.0	14.3	7.1	0.0	7.1	14.3	0.0	7.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	35.7
Happy TV	0.0	0.0	33.3	8.3	0.0	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Informer	0.0	3.7	33.3	11.1	0.0	3.7	3.7	0.0	7.4	0.0	0.0	3.7	14.8	18.5
Kurir (online)	0.0	0.0	40.4	22.8	0.0	1.8	1.8	0.0	3.5	1.8	0.0	0.0	1.8	26.3
N1 (online)	0.0	0.0	19.0	0.0	4.8	0.0	14.3	4.8	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	47.6
Nova (online)	5.3	5.3	15.8	0.0	5.3	0.0	5.3	5.3	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	52.6
Novosadska TV	0.0	0.0	69.6	0.0	4.3	0.0	13.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.0
TV Pink	4.3	0.0	56.5	13.0	4.3	0.0	4.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.3	4.3	0.0	8.7
TV Prva	10.0	0.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	40.0
RTS	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
RTV Pančevo	0.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	6.3	18.8	0.0	0.0	6.3	6.3	0.0	0.0	12.5
Večernje novosti	0.0	3.8	30.8	7.7	0.0	3.8	3.8	0.0	7.7	7.7	3.8	0.0	0.0	30.8

When the in-house newsroom is the creator of news items established to contain disinformation, in general, it has identifiable, explicit targets. Those are opposition parties, citizens who took part in environmental protests, or media and journalists (Table 19). The disinformation originating from high officials is not always targeting social actors, but if it does, it aims toward opposition parties and their members.

Table 19: Distribution of targets per three main sources of disinformation (%)

	Members of government	President	In-house newsroom
Members of government	0.00	0.00	0.56
Party in government	0.00	0.00	1.40
Opposition parties	28.57	45.28	47.47
Media and journalists	0.00	0.00	9.83
Civil society organisations	4.08	0.00	1.12
Experts	0.00	1.89	2.81
Citizens	10.20	9.43	12.08
Companies	0.00	0.00	1.40
Kosovo	6.12	0.00	4.21
Region	0.00	3.77	2.81
EU bodies	4.08	0.00	1.40
USA	0.00	0.00	1.97

Other	0.00	1.89	1.97
No direct targets	46.94	37.74	10.96
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

In specific, president of the Party of Freedom and Justice, Dragan Đilas is the most prevalent target in the news that contained disinformation (Figure 20). In 89 news pieces he was the central object of media reporting. Some other opposition parties' leaders are also frequently targeted – Marinika Tepić from the Party of Freedom and Justice in 20 news items, Borislav Novaković from Peoples Party in 14, and Nebojša Zelenović from Together for Serbia in 12. Protesters in environmental blockades were targets in 52 news pieces, while among the media and journalists, central objects of reporting were investigative newsroom KRIK in 11 news items, and daily newspaper Danas in 7. It should be highlighted that these numbers reflect only the news in which the targeted actor is given prominent place in reporting, either through headline, visuals or the space and time provided. They do not include mentions and attributions that link diverse social actors in a single group. For example, the media linked to the United Media were introduced as “daily Nova belonging to Đilas and Šolak”,¹²² “mafia outlets” and “Đilas’s portals”,¹²³ or “Đilas’s low-circulation paper Danas”.¹²⁴ Similarly, protesting citizens are labelled as “Đilas’s people”,¹²⁵ “Đilas’s activists”¹²⁶ or “Evil of Đilas”.¹²⁷

¹²² Profesionalni medij ili bruka za novinarstvo? Đilasov i Šolakov dnevni list “Nova” siledžiju naziva herojem protesta u Šapcu! [Professional media or journalistic shame? Đilas’s and Šolak’s daily paper “Nova” call bully a hero] (2021, November 30th). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 1st, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9i>

¹²³ Spin metode koje koriste mafijaška glasila! Dejan Vukelić odbrusio uredniku đilasovskog portala: Pričaj mi o drogama [Spin methods used by mafia outlets! Dejan Vukelić responded to the editor of Đilas’s web portal] (2021, December 1). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 1st, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9j>

¹²⁴ Veći Šiptari od Šiptara? Danas optužio Vučića za zveckanje oružjem [Bigger Shiptars than Shiptars? Danas accused Vučić for mentioning weapons] (2021, September 28th). *Informer*, 3.

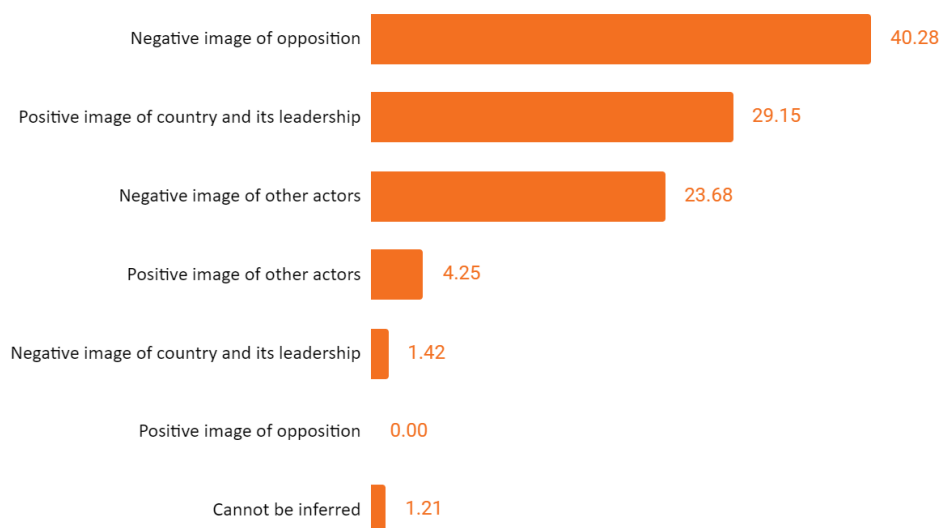
¹²⁵ ĐILASOVCI I LAŽNI EKOLOZI BRUTALNO PREBILI ČOVEKA Tukli ga i vikali: Ubij ga! Vučiću pe*eru! (VIDEO) [Đilas’s people and fake environmentalists brutally beaten a man They punched him and shouted: Kill hip! Vučić fa**ot!]. (December 4th, 2021). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9k>

¹²⁶ EU ZAHTEVA USVAJANJE I PRIMENU ZAKONA O REFERENDUMU! Manojlović i Đilasovi aktivisti SABOTIRAJU Srbiju na putu ka EU (VIDEO) [EU demands adoption and implementation of the Law on Referendum! Manojlović and Đilas’s activists are sabotaging Serbia on its road to the EU] (2021, December, 3rd). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/b0>

¹²⁷ Đilasovsko zlo [Evil of Đilas] (2021, November 30th). *Informer*, 2-3.

“has never heard that anyone said that elections in Serbia were irregular and illegitimate”¹²⁹ or the Minister of Interior, Aleksandar Vulin, said that “Belgrade is one of the safest cities”.¹³⁰

Figure 21: Inferred effects of disinformation (%)



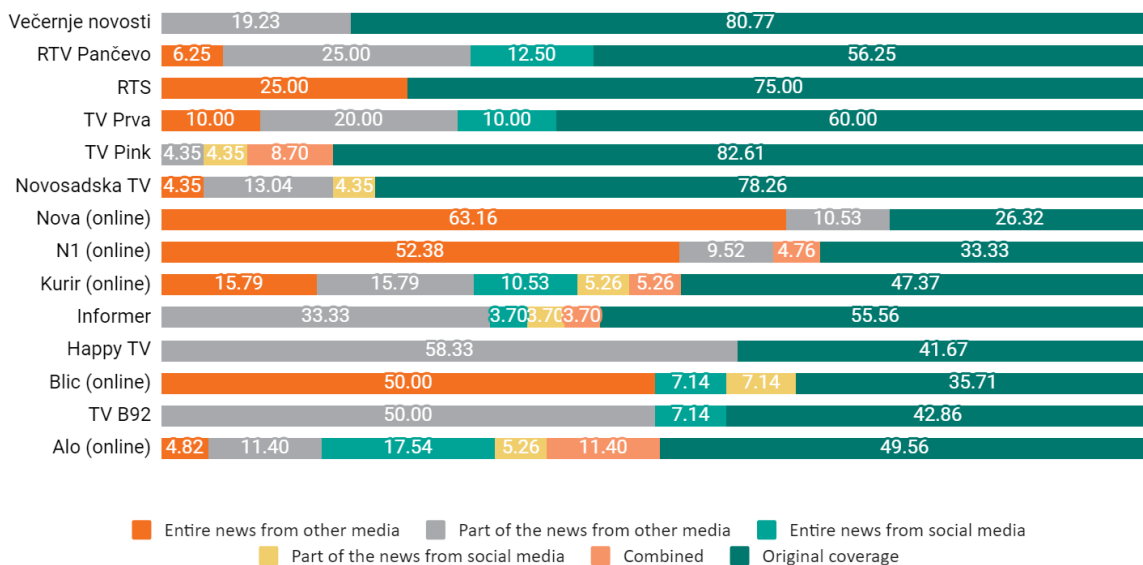
¹²⁹ PREMIJERKA BRNABIĆ: Ne očekujem nikakvu promenu u politici SAD prema Srbiji kao posledicu pisma kongresmena [Prime Minister Brnabić: I don't expect a change in US politics towards Serbia as a result of the congressmen letter] (2021, November 8th). *Kurir*. Retrieved on November 9th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9n>
 Brnabić: Neko je izlobirao, vidi se da tekst nije njihov [Brnabić: Somebody lobbied, you can tell it is not their own text] (2021, November 8). *Nova*. Retrieved on November 9th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9o>

¹³⁰ Vulin: Beograd jedan od najbezbednijih gradova u Evropi [Vulin: Belgrade is one of the safest cities in Europe] (2021, October 21st). *N7*. Retrieved on October 22nd, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9p>

X FLOWS OF DISINFORMATION

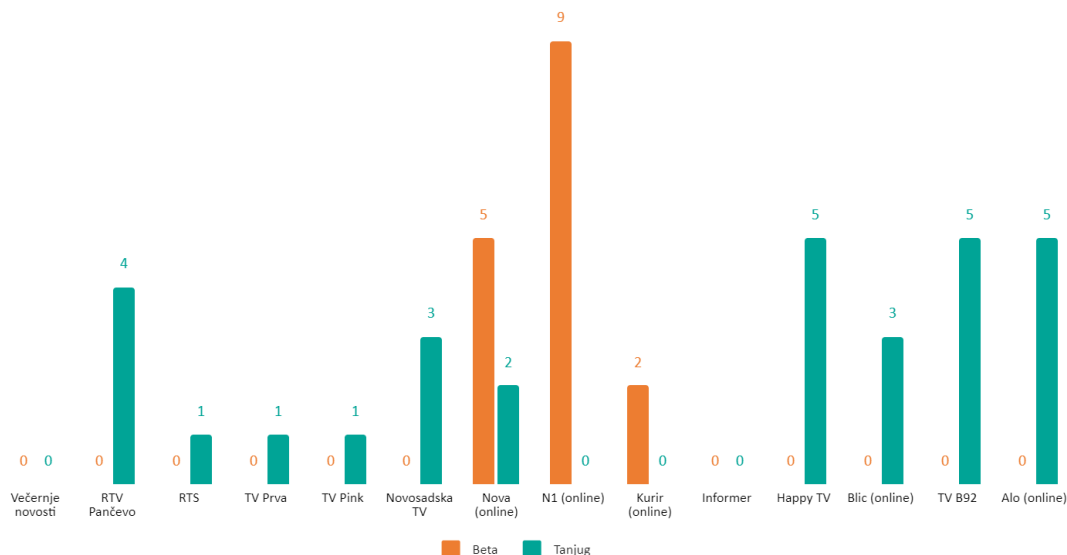
A segment of our study examined the extent in which media rely on their own journalists and have original coverage, or use information from other traditional media, and social media, when disseminating false or misleading information in their own news. Our findings show most of the news items containing disinformation represent original coverage made by in-house journalists (Figure 22). However, the practices of media vary significantly. National stations TV Pink and RTS 1, local station Novosadska TV, and the printed daily Večernje novosti disseminated more than a half of news items containing disinformation produced by their own journalists. Other outlets, most notably online media Nova, N1, and Blic, are more reliant on news agencies and news taken from other media. In the online medium Alo, the printed daily Kurir, local RTV Pančevo and national station TV Prva, there is a higher frequency of news items originating from social media posts. It should be stressed that this data is based solely on explicit labelling provided by the media themselves, and since many news items remain unsigned and lack proper labels for the content taken from other sources, these findings should be used as indicative.

Figure 22: Reliance on original coverage, coverage taken from other media, and social media (%)



Expectedly, news from news agencies are often used by the media, either in their integral version as created by the news agency, or in segments that form part of the news item. Previously state-owned news agency and now privatised and transformed into cable TV – Tanjug is the most frequent source for the media. Nevertheless, we can observe that there is a relative polarisation between the use of Tanjug and its main market competitor Beta (Figure 20). Two local TV stations, and national stations Happy TV and TV B92 rely on Tanjug for footage of events, while Alo integrates Tanjug news on its website.

Figure 23: Use of Beta and Tanjug news services in total number



Taking news from other media does not necessarily mean the mere copying. The online media Alo and Kurir, as well as the printed daily Informer have a practice to make the reporting of other media the primary theme of their stories. For example, the Kurir published a text titled “KRIK’s cheap text: how self-proclaimed investigative media violates journalistic standards to LEAD DIRTY POLITICAL CAMPAIGN”.¹³¹ Such negative framing of other media is omitted when, for example, Alo, Kurir and Nova rely on the news originating from TV Pink and TV Prva (17 news items in total).

Taking news from foreign news agencies and media is quite rare, used in less than 4% percent of news items that contain disinformation (17 news in total). The media from which news is taken are mainly regional: Vijesti, Borba.me, HRT – Croatian Radio-television, Radio-television of Republika Srpska. Contrary to the findings of some other studies on Russian state media as disinformation hubs,¹³² with only one news that contained disinformation from Sputnik and one from TAS, they are marginally represented in our sample.

Some, and especially online media, base their news on information and content taken from social media posts. Among the news that contain disinformation, the online medium Alo has 17,5% of news items that are based entirely on social media posts, while there are additional 2,5% of stories that represent the combination of content from social media and the original

¹³¹ KRIKOV JEFTINI URADAK: Kako samozvani istraživački medij krši novinarske standarde da bi VODIO PRLJAVU POLITIČKU KAMPANJU [KRIK’s cheap text: How self-proclaimed investigative media violates journalistic standards to lead dirty political campaign] (2021, December 1). *Kurir*. Retrieved on December 2nd, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/9q>

¹³² Wagnsson, C. (2022). The paperboys of Russian messaging: RT/Sputnik audiences as vehicles for malign information influence. *Information, Communication & Society*, Online First. <https://link.crta.rs/9r>
Deverell, E., Wagnsson, C., & Olsson, E-K. (2021). Destruct, direct and suppress: Sputnik narratives on the Nordic countries. *The Journal of International Communication*, 27(1), 15-37. <https://link.crta.rs/9s>

journalistic content. The online news medium Kurir has 15,8% of stories that are fully or in part based on posts on social media.

There are four larger groups of accounts and profiles behind the social media posts taken by the media (Figure 21). The first group consists of high officials, the Prime Minister and members of government, and the President of Serbia (21 news items in total). The second group is made of high-ranking members of Serbian Progressive Party (20 news items). The third group contains news items from a single account “Lie Detector” (Detektor Laži) (12 news items in total). The last group is composed of 9 news items with posts made by leaders of opposition parties.

Figure 24: Accounts and profiles as sources of news – word cloud



Posts from the account “Lie Detector” usually form the entire news and are published in the online medium Alo. In several instances of disinformation from our sample, we can see that “Lie Detector” took a claim from TV N1 or TV NovaS, cropped the entire context in which a claim was made, and then framed it as the praise or attack on the country or its top officials. For example, in the news item titled “Scandal in the centre of Belgrade! Here are those who want to bring down Vučić! Rade Radovanić accuses Serbia of several genocides”,¹³³ the Alo took the entire post from the account “Lie Detector” and made news out of it. This post falsely interprets the words of journalist Rade Radovanić during his speech on the protest against the Mural of Ratko Mladić, since he never said that the entire country is responsible for genocide.

¹³³ SKANDAL U CENTRU BEOGRADA! EVO KO ŽELI DA SRUŠI VUČIĆA: Rade Radovanović optužuje Srbiju za nekoliko genocida! (VIDEO) [Scandal in the centre of Belgrade! These are the ones who want to bring down Vučić: Rade Radovanović accuses Serbia of several genocides] (2021, November 13th). *Alo*. Retrieved on November 14th, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9t>

XI SPREAD OF DISINFORMATION ON FACEBOOK

Two initial observations are needed before we present the findings related to the spread of disinformation on Facebook. First, it should be noted that the data about audience shares in traditional media and their web editions do not equal their popularity on Facebook. We used CrowdTangle,¹³⁴ a Facebook-led tool for social media monitoring and analysis, that allows us to extract the main data per Facebook Page in a given time period, including page likes and followers, total number of likes, comment, shares, views of videos, as well as a cumulative data of these elements as a measure of total interactions of users with a specific page.¹³⁵ For the period we observed in this study, September–December 2021, the Blic had the page with most followers and likes (Table 20). It was followed by B92 (both a portal and TV station), TV Prva and the Alo. However, the engagement of the users with the media content posted on Facebook shows that the number of page likes and followers does not necessarily lead to high user engagement. The highest number of engagements, measured as “total interactions” was found on the pages of N1, Nova, Blic and Večernje novosti.

Table 20: Main data on media accounts on Facebook (CrowdTangle, September–December 2021)

	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Owned Total Views	All Reactions	All Interaction Rate	Total Posts	Page Likes	Page Followers
N1	3,919,745	2,007,854	773.98	184.779	32,422,553	2,960,986	0.31%	4.418	290.297	327.857
Nova	3,606,017	1,915,582	650.537	207.192	7,034,025	2,748,288	0.78%	5.17	92.491	218.22
Blic	2,523,907	1,101,953	538.344	67.292	2,195,360	1,918,271	0.06%	4.596	974.07	1,001,292
Večernje novosti	1,770,748	975.109	224.068	46.49	121.899	1,500,190	0.08%	5.579	398.527	386.762
Kurir	828.018	433.313	175.755	13.838	2,315,681	638.425	0.02%	4.14	841.59	847.65
B92	774.871	333.911	239.262	18.446	1.391	517.163	0.04%	3.634	509.833	498.642
Alo	753.362	379.68	174.251	24.041	104.758	555.07	0.02%	7.279	427.69	411.066
TV Prva	638.816	390.604	85.605	34.976	13,866,896	518.235	0.02%	3.79	673.924	731.793
RTS	546.007	275.332	115.728	14.689	3,551,620	415.59	0.02%	7.638	359.337	367.276
Informer	212.436	117.491	49.902	3.918	220.707	158.616	0.04%	4.343	108.013	108.611
TV Pink	147.498	58.984	46.33	3.213	0	97.955	0.04%	3.543	100.739	116.154
RTV Novi Pazar	65.561	46.427	7.358	3.264	1,237,546	54.939	0.06%	3.052	36.36	50.059
Happy TV	13.218	7.158	2.88	357	0	9.981	0%	8.696	31.272	31.648
Novosadska TV	199	151	19	6	495	174	0.04%	185	2.423	2.57
RTV Pančevo	64	63	0	0	0	64	0.18%	22	1.165	1.294

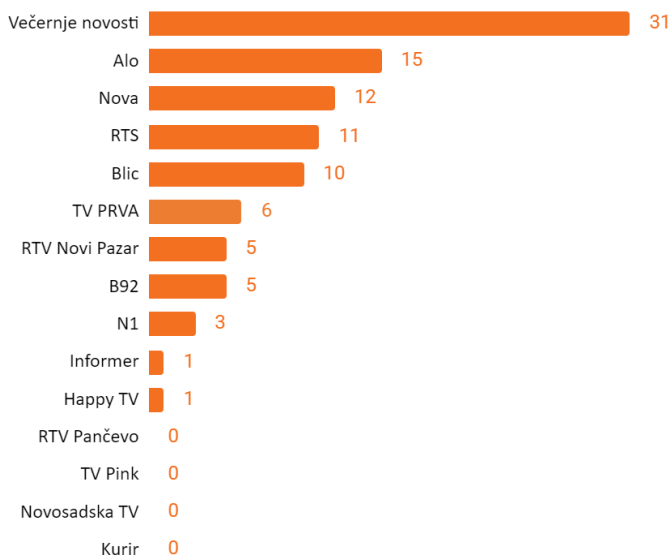
The second preliminary observation is that hard news, which was in our focus, does not generate significant engagement on the Facebook pages of the media. For the purposes of this study we have conducted a limited analysis of the top 100 overperforming posts published on 15 media pages, for the period under observation, that is September–December 2021. Overperforming posts are those that, within the overall engagement on a specific page,

¹³⁴ CrowdTangle Team (2020). CrowdTangle. Facebook, Menlo Park, California, United States. [List ID number 1633892]

¹³⁵ CrowdTangle Glossary (2022). CrowdTangle. Retrieved on January 20th, 2022 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9u>

have higher engagement levels.¹³⁶ Within the top 100 overperforming posts, the majority belong to Večernje novosti, followed by Alo, Nova and RTS 1 (Figure 25).

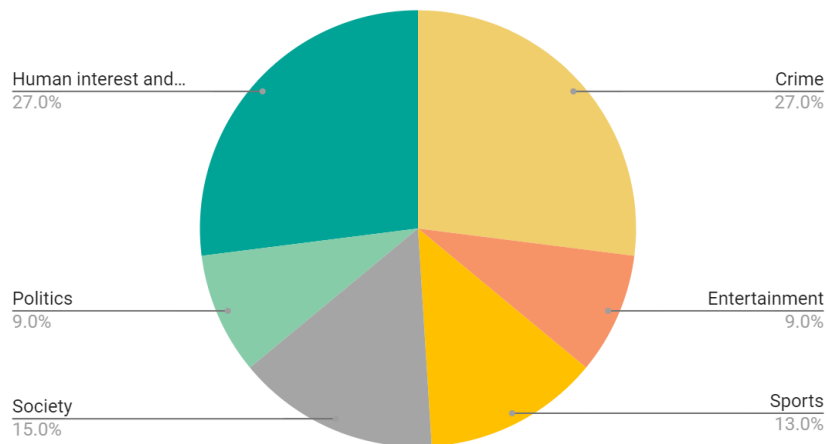
Figure 25: Top 100 overperforming posts per media outlet, September–December 2021



Most of the stories that generated higher than average user engagement belonged to the sections crime, and human interest and religion. These include news items on personal misfortunes, health breakthroughs, calls for humanitarian aid, notifications on religious holidays. News items on the topics that belong to the section society are represented in 15% of overperforming posts, to the politics in 9%, while topics that belonged to the section world did not reach top 100 of overperforming posts. This indicated that, in general, hard news, as a focus of our study, is not widely engaged with.

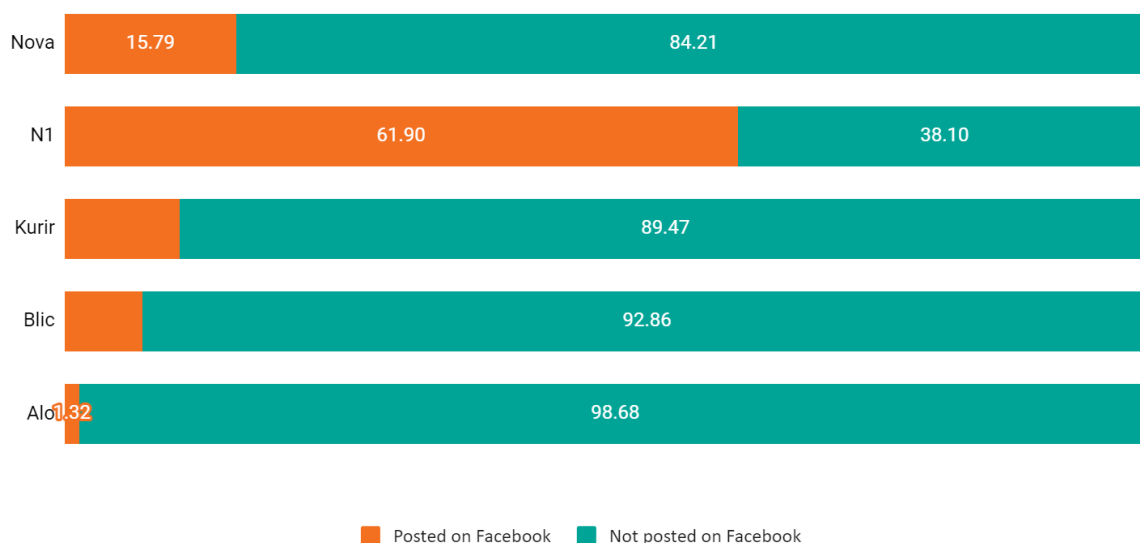
¹³⁶ How do you calculate overperforming scores? (2022). *CrowdTangle*. Retrieved on January 20th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/9v>

Figure 26: Distribution of posts per section, top 100 overperforming posts, September–December 2021 (%)



In light of these findings, we did not start from the post engagement to establish the frequency of the identified disinformation among them. Rather, we started from the web-based news items collected during monitoring of five online media (Alo, Blic, Kurir, Nova, N1) and performed subsequent analysis using CrowdTangle add-on for internet browsers. Additional reason for opting for this was the fact that only some news published on web-pages of five online media were shared on the Facebook pages (Figure 27).

Figure 27: News items containing disinformation (not) posted on media Facebook pages (%)



The fact that news items that contained disinformation were not shared on the Facebook pages of the analysed media does not mean that they were not shared at all, and we collected data for overall performance of a news item by following engagement with a link to news

items on public and private pages. In the period September–December 2021, the news items that contained disinformation reached a total of 43,370 engagements – likes, comments and shares (Table 21). News items from N1 and Nova had higher engagement than news items from the Alo and the Blic. For the most part, news items were shared on users’ private pages, but some were shared on public pages, maximising their overall reach.

Table 21: Engagement with disinformation on Facebook per online media

	Number of news items*	Total interactions	Total likes and comments	Total shares	Private shares	Public shares
Alo	134	4,842	3,762	1,080	1,070	10
Blic	12	915	763	152	137	15
Kurir	37	6,808	6,187	621	601	20
N1	18	19,061	18,454	607	586	21
Nova	10	11,744	10,671	1,073	1,032	41
Total	211	43,370	39,837	3,533	3,426	107

*Number of news items that contain disinformation with at least one engagement.

It should be highlighted that this data, and CrowdTangle tool in general, capture engagement and not the total number of views of Facebook posts that contain disinformation. For that reason, they should not be treated as a measure of reach of disinformation.

XII CONCLUSION: DISINFORMATION WITHIN A WIDER CONTEXT OF SERBIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

This study identified 559 cases of different types of disinformation in 494 news items disseminated in 14 out of 15 analysed Serbian news media, on four weekly samples in the period September–December 2021. Our study found that false, misleading and manipulative information occupy a significant portion of news in some of the analysed media. Disinformation is found in hard news, which was the focus of the study because media work in this area is most important for democracy. In order to fulfil its democratic functions,¹³⁷ the media should provide *accurate* information about social, political and economic issues, events, processes and actions that serve as sufficient informational resources for citizens to orient themselves, to assess the performance of those holding offices or to choose who to vote for. By spreading *manipulated facts and misleading content*, together with *extremely biased* news, which we found to be the most frequent types of disinformation, the media fail to perform their key societal functions.

The majority of news items (46.15%) containing disinformation were found in the online edition of the daily tabloid Alo. Our findings are consistent with the results of previous analyses¹³⁸ which have identified the Alo as the most prolific disseminator of disinformation. Furthermore, according to the Press Council's data on monitoring the violation of the Journalists' Code of print media, Alo violated it the most, 1,278 times from July to December 2021.¹³⁹ Owned by Saša Blagojević,¹⁴⁰ the Alo is the fifth most read newspaper, and its online edition had over 2 million real users and over half a million of average daily users in December 2021.¹⁴¹ It received a total of 235,449 euros on the basis of project co-financing of the media content in 2020. Since 2017, Alo media systems d.o.o. – a company that bought the daily Alo from Ringier Axel Springer – received 306,302 euros for 27 projects.¹⁴² Based on the data collected by Ipsos for printed dailies, weeklies and radio stations, the tabloid Alo gained the most (19%) from public companies advertising investment in 2020 (1.2 million Euros).¹⁴³

With 11.54% of news items that contained disinformation in our sample, the online edition of the daily Kurir is the second most prolific disseminator of false, misleading and manipulative

¹³⁷ McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 5th edn. London: Sage.

¹³⁸ Vučić, M., Ljubičić, M., & Radojević, V. (2021, April 7th). Na naslovnicama pet novina blizu 1.200 lažnih i neutemeljenih vesti u 2020. godini [Close to 1.200 false and unfounded news on the front pages of five newspapers in 2020]. *Raskrikavanje*. Retrieved from <https://link.crtar.rs/82>

Janjić, S. (2020). *Fabrike manipulacija* [Factories of manipulation]. Novi Sad: Novosadska novinarska škola.

¹³⁹ Savet za štampu (2021). Izveštaj o monitoringu poštovanja Kodeksa novinara Srbije u dnevnim novinama u periodu od 1. jula do 31. decembra 2021. godine [Report on monitoring the adherence to the Code of Journalists in Serbia in print media, for the period July 1st – December 31st, 2021]. Retrieved on March 1st, 2022 from <https://link.crtar.rs/9w>

¹⁴⁰ Saša Blagojević (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10, 2021 from <https://link.crtar.rs/ay>

¹⁴¹ Gemius Audience (2021). Country: Serbia. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crtar.rs/7h>

¹⁴² Projektno sufinansiranje medija u Srbiji [Project co-financing of the the media in Serbia] (n.d.). Retrieved on February 20th, 2022 from <https://link.crtar.rs/18>

¹⁴³ Ipsos Srbija (2020). MEDIAPuls. Proprietary data purchased by CRTA

news. Like in the case of the Alo, this finding is consistent with the results of previous studies.¹⁴⁴ Owned by Igor Žeželj¹⁴⁵, the Kurir is the fourth most-read newspaper, and its online edition was the second most-read news source, with over 2.5 million real users and 770.036 average daily users, in December 2021.¹⁴⁶ Adria media group, the owner of Kurir print and online edition, together with Kurir TV, received 395,961 euros on the basis of project co-financing since 2015,¹⁴⁷ while the Adria Media Magazine d.o.o., also owned by Žeželj, received 104,422 euros since 2018.¹⁴⁸ In 2020, Kurir received 1.1 million euros from state advertising.¹⁴⁹

Other online media in our sample, N1, Nova and the Blic had significantly smaller numbers of disinformation. In comparison with the Kurir and the Alo, in these three online news media there are fewer cases of the disinformation types that we classified as *false connection* and *extreme bias*. For N1 and the Blic we established that disinformation rarely originates from the media itself. It comes from official sources, for example press conferences from which the media are reporting. However, the media do not denounce this disinformation and leave them uncorrected.

Online editions of N1 and Nova are owned by United Media formed by SBB (Serbia broadband – Srpske kablovske mreže), Telemach Slovenia, and Telemach Bosnia.¹⁵⁰ In 2014 an American global investment fund, KKR, became the majority owner of United Group.¹⁵¹ In 2019 KKR sold its shares to British international investment firm BC Partners.¹⁵² Dragan Šolak – Director of the Management Board of United Group, is known as the owner of the SBB. United Media did not receive any funding from the project co-financing instrument (and possibly did not apply).

The Blic is owned by Ringier Axel Springer Media AG, a joint venture between Swiss Ringier AG and German Axel Springer SE.¹⁵³ Ringier Axel Springer Media AG manages an extensive portfolio of more than 200 digital and print products in the expanding markets of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia.¹⁵⁴ Through project co-financing,

¹⁴⁴ Vučić, M., Ljubičić, M., & Radojević, V. (2021, April 7th). Na naslovnica pet novina blizu 1.200 lažnih i neutemeljenih vesti u 2020. godini [Close to 1.200 false and unfounded news on the front pages of five newspapers in 2020]. *Raskrikavanje*. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars.org/82>

Janjić, S. (2020). *Fabrike manipulacija* [Factories of manipulation]. Novi Sad: Novosadska novinarska škola.

¹⁴⁵ Igor Žeželj (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.org/9z>

¹⁴⁶ Gemius Audience (2021). Country: Serbia. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars.org/7h>

¹⁴⁷ Projektno sufinansiranje medija u Srbiji [Project co-financing of the media in Serbia] (n.d.). Retrieved on February 20th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars.org/18>

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ipsos Srbija (2020). MEDIAPuls. Proprietary data purchased by CRTA

¹⁵⁰ United Media (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.org/a0>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Blic (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.org/a1>

¹⁵⁴ Who we are (n.d.). Ringier Axel Springer. Retrieved on December 14th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars.org/a2>

Ringier Axel Springer received a total of 20,737 euros since 2017 for different media in its portfolio.¹⁵⁵ In 2020, the Blic received 1.1 million euros from state advertising.¹⁵⁶

Although monitored for print, which has a much smaller total number of news items when compared to online media, the *Informer* and the *Večernje novosti* occupy the position of third and fourth most prolific disseminators of disinformation. Both of these printed dailies have already been identified as part of Serbian disinformation ecology.¹⁵⁷ In addition, in its report for the second half of 2021, the Press Council has registered 949 violations of Press Code in the *Informer* and 586 in the *Večernje novosti*.¹⁵⁸

The *Informer* is a daily with the highest rating in the print media market, owned by Dragan Vučićević, through his company *Insajder tim*.¹⁵⁹ Through project co-financing *Insajder tim* received 135,603 euros since 2017.¹⁶⁰ The *Informer* received 11% (0.7 million euros) from state advertising allocated for print in 2020.¹⁶¹

The *Večernje novosti* is the third most popular printed daily, with an online edition that had over half a million average daily users in December 2021.¹⁶² The publisher of the *Večernje novosti* is registered as a joint stock company, Newspaper Publishing Company (NPC) *Novosti* (joint-stock company – JSC) Belgrade. The sole shareholder is a private company *Media 026 Vučak*, with Boban Rajić registered as the official legal representative in the Serbian Business Registry Agency (SBRA).¹⁶³ Since 2015, *Večernje novosti* received 273,771 euros on the basis of project co-financing.¹⁶⁴ It also received 17% (1 million euros) from state advertising for print in 2020.¹⁶⁵

Among five TV channels with the licences for national coverage, the highest portion of disinformation is found in central news on TV Pink, followed by TV B92, Happy TV and TV Prva. In the news of public broadcaster RTS 1, disinformation is marginally present. In previous studies, Serbian TV news has not been analysed for disinformation and further

¹⁵⁵ *Večernje novosti* (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/az>

¹⁵⁶ Ipsos Srbija (2020). MEDIAPuls. Proprietary data purchased by CRTA

¹⁵⁷ Vučić, M., Ljubičić, M., & Radojević, V. (2021, April 7th). Na naslovnicama pet novina blizu 1.200 lažnih i neutemeljenih vesti u 2020. godini [Close to 1.200 false and unfounded news on the front pages of five newspapers in 2020]. *Raskrikavanje*. Retrieved from <https://link.crtars/82>

Janjić, S. (2020). *Fabrike manipulacija* [Factories of manipulation]. Novi Sad: Novosadska novinarska škola.

¹⁵⁸ Savet za štampu (2021). Izveštaj o monitoringu poštovanja Kodeksa novinara Srbije u dnevnim novinama u periodu od 1. jula do 31. decembra 2021. godine [Report on monitoring the adherence to the Code of Journalists in Serbia in print media, for the period July 1st – December 31st, 2021]. Retrieved on March 1st, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/9w>

¹⁵⁹ Dragan Vučićević (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10th, 2021 from <https://link.crtars/a4>

¹⁶⁰ Projektno sufinansiranje medija u Srbiji [Project co-financing of the media in Serbia] (n.d.). Retrieved on February 20th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/18>

¹⁶¹ Ipsos Srbija (2020). MEDIAPuls. Proprietary data purchased by CRTA

¹⁶² Gemius Audience (2021). Country: Serbia. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/7h>

¹⁶³ Raskrikavanje (2019, August 29th). Advokat blizak Siniši Malom registrovao firmu koja kupuje Večernje novosti [A lawyer close to Siniša Mali registered a company that buys Večernje novosti]. Retrieved on January 12, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/a5>

¹⁶⁴ Projektno sufinansiranje medija u Srbiji [Project co-financing of the media in Serbia] (n.d.). Retrieved on February 20th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/18>

¹⁶⁵ Ipsos Srbija (2020). MEDIAPuls. Proprietary data purchased by CRTA



studies are needed to deepen our understanding of disinformation on TV, especially knowing that this is the primary source of information for citizens.

TV Pink is the second most popular TV station (after RTS 1), with a share of 16% for the period January – May 2021.¹⁶⁶ Through his company Pink Media Group d.o.o., Željko Mitrović¹⁶⁷ is the owner of TV Pink. Although it did not receive funds through the project co-financing instrument, the state granted more than €10 million to TV Pink in the form of various loans, as well as guarantees from the state-owned Serbian Export Credit and Insurance Agency (AOFI).¹⁶⁸ In addition, TV Pink was granted an option to repay approximately 1.52 billion dinars of tax debt in instalments.¹⁶⁹

CRTA analysis shows that out of the total amount of state advertising on TV channels with national coverage in 2020, TV Pink received the largest share or 37% (21,3 million Euros). It is followed by TV Happy TV which received 24% (13.6 million Euros), and B92 and TV Prva, having the same owner, received 15% (8.4 million Euros) and 14% (7.9 million Euros) respectively. RTS 1 received the smallest amount of total state advertising: 10% (5.7 million Euros).¹⁷⁰

Two out of the three local TV stations in our sample have a significant number of disinformation – Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo. RTV Novi Pazar is the only media in our sample in which we did not find disinformation.

Data on local media in Serbia are generally scarce, both in terms of their viewership, and market position and revenues. Analysis done by CRTA shows that Radoica Milosavljević¹⁷¹ bought a total of 13 local media – among them RTV Pančevo in our sample – in the privatisation process. In November 2020, the company Tačno, in which Milosavljević has 60% of shares, and Minacord (owner of another 3 TV stations) 40% of shares, offered the only bid at the auction for a ten-year lease of four trademarks of Tanjug news agency, including four logos and the slogan “Tanjug. Tačno.”¹⁷² The analysis done by the CRTA shows that local media owned by Milosavljević received 671,253 euros from project co-financing in 2020. In the same year and from the same source, the owner of Novosadska TV received 400,546 euros. Since 2015, Novosadska TV received the total 1,089,770 euros on the basis of project co-financing.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, data obtained by CRTA.

¹⁶⁷ Željko Mitrović (n.d.). *Media Ownership Monitor Serbia*. Retrieved on December 10th, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/a6>

¹⁶⁸ CINS (2018, January 24th). Pink extended loan by AOFI again. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/1c>.

¹⁶⁹ CINS (2018, February 22nd). Data on tax debts must be public. Retrieved December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/1b>.

¹⁷⁰ Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, data obtained by CRTA.

¹⁷¹ “Radoica Milosavljević” (n.d.). *Istinomer*. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/1m>

¹⁷² “Rešen” problem privatizacije Tanjuga, Sekulić kaže – pitanje gimnastike [The problem of Tanjug privatisation is solved, Sekulić say - a matter of gymnastics]. (2020, December 25th). N1.info. Retrieved on December 20th, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/a7>

¹⁷³ Projektno sufinansiranje medija u Srbiji [Project co-financing of the media in Serbia] (n.d.). Retrieved on February 20, 2022 from <https://link.crta.rs/18>

CRTA:

The data on the frequency of disinformation viewed against the data on different sources of state financing of the media show that the media that are prominent generators of disinformation receive substantial amounts of public funds. This trend can be observed across the markets. In online news media, two media (Alo and Kurir) that spread more disinformation than others (Blic, N1 and Nova) receive more support from project co-financing and from state advertising. Two printed dailies (Informer and Večernje novosti) in which disinformation is found almost on a daily basis, also receive public money. The least funded TV station in terms of state advertising (RTS 1), has fewest news items that contain disinformation, whereas the TV station with the most frequent occurrence of disinformation (TV Pink) received the most from state advertising (and other benefits). Finally, in the local TV market, RTV Pančevo and Novosadska TV confirm this trend, whereas RTV Novi Pazar stands as an exception.

This conclusion can be contextualised further by observing topics, creators and targets of disinformation. False, misleading and manipulative information is produced around a set of topics, most notably relations between government and opposition, but also around Kosovo, and events such as the environmental protests, protests against the mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić, or the letter of a group of the US congressional representatives. It seems that conflictual and polarising topics are the drivers of disinformation found in hard news. Events, such as protests, led to heightened media reporting and served as a framework within which dichotomies, such as government–opposition or Belgrade–Priština, are accentuated and reaffirmed, through the use of disinformation. Further studies are needed to confirm our preliminary observation that, similar to other populist regimes,¹⁷⁴ Serbian populism¹⁷⁵ articulated these dichotomies in the media in such a way to bring all “political others” under one umbrella – opposition parties, critical intellectuals, journalists and investigative media.

What this study shows is that disinformation is frequently spread when it is about those who challenge the government. In over half of the news containing disinformation, opposition parties and individuals were targeted in the online news medium Alo, national TV channels TV B92 and TV Pink, and local TV channels Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo. With environmental protests occupying a large topical scope of news items that had false, misleading and manipulative claims, citizens were also targeted and labelled as supporters of opposition.

The distribution of originators and creators of disinformation can also be discussed against the data on media funding from public money. Our analysis shows that a number of media that receive the biggest portion of state funding and advertising are also at the same time among the largest creators of disinformation (Alo, Novosadska TV, Informer, RTV Pančevo) – usually by giving misleading headlines (*false connection*), or by producing the type of news which we categorised as *extreme bias* since it misrepresents events and gives voice only to one side.

¹⁷⁴ Tumber, H., & S. Waisbord (eds.), *The Routledge companion to media disinformation and populism*. London: Routledge.

¹⁷⁵ Spasojević, D. (2019). Transforming Populism – From Protest Vote to Ruling Ideology: The Case of Serbia. In Besirević, V. (ed.), *The new politics of decisionism* (pp. 125–140). The Hague: Eleven publishing.

Beyond the media and journalists, frequent originators of false and misleading claims are high officials – the President and members of the government. Their frequent presence in some media is already noted in other studies.¹⁷⁶ Our analysis shows that some media uncritically report on these sources, failing to mark some of their claims as disinformation (and thus contributing to further dissemination). For that reason, the media that give ample space to these social actors are at the same time the media in which we find disinformation.

At least in part, this can explain the case of RTV Novi Pazar which was found not to broadcast disinformation. Like the other two local media, RTV Novi Pazar was included in our sample as the media that received a substantial amount of public funds. The analysis done by the CRTA shows that in 2020 RTV Novi Pazar d.o.o. received 447,082 euros from the project co-financing instrument, making it the second largest recipient of this type of state funding. Nonetheless, unlike the other two local media, RTV Novi Pazar usually does not cover national politics, its key actors or events, and avoids conflictual topics. Without this coverage it is the least prone to spread disinformation.¹⁷⁷

Our rather limited insights about the spread of disinformation on Facebook show that the media that receive state funding (Alo, Kurir, Blic) usually do not post hard news on politics, social, economic or international affairs on their Facebook pages. And consequently, disinformation in hard news is not spread from their accounts. On the other hand, N1 and Nova, as the media without state funding, post more hard news on Facebook in general, and with them also the news that contains disinformation. The reasons behind this can only be hypothesised. One explanation can be found in the fact that for the voters of the parties in government, traditional news, primarily TV, serves as the main channel for gaining information, which discourages the media from seeking engagement on social media. Another explanation can be that the media that receive state funding do not need additional revenue that would come from social media. Or they generate revenue on social media from soft news. Further studies are needed to test these possible answers and deepen our understanding of the flows of disinformation on social media.

Overall, our study established the presence of different types of disinformation in the Serbian media. It indicates that disinformation is primarily oriented towards domestic lines of polarisation, whereas international affairs serve primarily as their background. These findings can be influenced by the social and political context at the time of analysis, during which domestic topics were prevalent (see Annex to the report that presents observations about the war in Ukraine, that was not included in our sample). In such circumstances, there is a strong indication that the spread of disinformation is linked to state funding and pro-government orientation of major news providers.

In a broader perspective, this means that a public policy response to combat disinformation needs to be connected to the structural elements of the Serbian media system. For example,

¹⁷⁶ CRTA (2017). Predsednički izbori 2017: Izveštaj CRTA posmatračke misije „Građani na straži”. Retrieved on January 10th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/a8>

Jarić, I., & Laban, D. (2019). 'Rezultati istraživanja'. *Kvartalni medijametar: Analiza štampanih medija u Srbiji* 5(1). 29–100.

¹⁷⁷ This does not mean that other aspects of news on RTV Novi Pazar are unproblematic, however those were not under the scope of our study.



the key strategic document, The Media Strategy for the period 2020-2025,¹⁷⁸ envisages more transparent funding, together with a proposal that compliance with the Press Code should be considered when state funds are awarded. These and similar proposals still need to be implemented in the changes of the Law on Public Information and Media, which were announced for 2021.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Strategija razvoja sistema javnog informisanja u Republici Srbiji za period 2020–2025 [Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2020–2025]. (2020). *Službeni glasnik RS*, 30/18.

¹⁷⁹ NUNS (2021, November 30th). Šta se dešava sa izmenama i dopunama Zakona o javnom informisanju i medijima. Retrieved on January 15th, 2022 from <https://link.crtars/a9>

XIII RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that can be made on the basis of this study cover three areas of intervention, each serving a precondition to the subsequent.

- Structural elements of media system
- Wider policy response to disinformation
- Regulatory response to disinformation

Recommendations for the **structural elements of the Serbian media system** are related to the media regulation and governance, and the role of the state in the media market:

- The Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media has to secure independence from any political influence;
- Procedures and criteria related to the election of the Council members should be more transparent and precise;
- The REM should adhere to the procedures and exercise the law consistently;
- Both the internal and the external monitoring systems of the REM should be established;
- The legal framework that regulates the competitive co-financing system should provide other means aside from the administrative dispute within the appeal procedure;
- Procedures and criteria related to the competitive co-financing system have to be more transparent and precise;
- An adequate monitoring system of the media competition process should be established (this especially applies to the competitions organised by the local governments);
- The Law on Public Procurement has to be clear and precise;
- Media coverage contracts between the local media and public companies should be more transparent and available to the public;
- The media register system has to be improved;
- The money flow tracking should be included as an additional means for determining the exact nature of the media ownership.

Wider policy response to disinformation should recognise the multifaceted nature of disinformation and following the EU approach it should aim towards engagement of multiple stakeholders (public authorities, platforms, media, fact-checkers, academics, teachers, civil society). These recommendations should build on top of the ones related to structural elements of the media system or otherwise their impact will be limited.



- Journalistic professionalism should be promoted in the journalistic community, in journalism education and in the wider public;
- The law that regulates the safety of journalists has to be improved;
- Public service broadcasting should take part in fact-checking and promote factual, unbiased reporting;
- A media self-regulatory system should be enhanced;
- The Press Council, as an independent self-regulatory body, should be supported by the entire media community;
- The Press Council authority should be recognised by the government;
- Independent fact-checking organisations should be supported systematically;
- Transparency of data and access to public information should be improved;
- Implementation of media literacy programmes, in formal and informal education, together with public campaigns is needed to foster societal resilience to disinformation;
- Academic researchers and civil society organisations should be encouraged to monitor the scale, techniques and tools, and the precise nature and potential impact of disinformation.

Regulatory response to disinformation is related to legislation and identification of rights and obligations of news providers and distributors, platforms, media regulator, and citizens. Unless implemented only after the previous two sets of recommendations, regulatory response is in jeopardy of infringing on freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

- Code of practice as a self/co-regulatory mechanism should be developed in such a way to allow protection of citizens against disinformation while securing full exercise of freedom of expression;
- Code of practice should identify commitments of platforms in relation to limiting manipulative behaviour, strengthening user empowerment tools, increasing the transparency of political advertising;
- Efforts should be made to demonetise creation and circulation of disinformation.



Appendices:

The Appendices contain an additional report that presents observations about the war in Ukraine, that were not included in our time frame and sample.

Appx.1: Disinformation on the war in Ukraine

The most important event in 2022, the war in Ukraine was not included in the “Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media” study since the analysis covered the last quarter of 2021. Because of its crucial importance for all the countries in Europe, and especially for Serbia as a candidate for EU membership, we are inclosing the CRTA’s findings on the war in Ukraine in the Appx.1. These findings are the result of the CRTA’s continual media monitoring of foreign influence. The sample of the media monitoring of foreign influence covers four TV channels (public broadcaster RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Happy, and TV Prva) with national coverage (more specifically Central news and Morning shows), and four national most-read daily newspaper (Informer, Blic, Kurir, and Večernje novosti). In addition, in Appx.1 we combine the data from media monitoring with the findings of the CRTA’s daily overview of all national newspapers’ front pages¹⁸⁰ and headlines in central news on TV channels with the national coverage¹⁸¹ that the CRTA has started to conduct when the war in Ukraine started.

For understanding the media scene in Serbia from the beginning of the war in Ukraine it is important to understand the media landscape before the war. The CRTA’s main findings from media monitoring show that the reporting of different foreign actors was biased in 2021. While China and especially Russia were dominantly positively represented in the Serbian media, the Western countries on the other side were mostly negatively represented. According to the CRTA’s findings, from January to December 2021, Russia was by far the most positively represented foreign actor. The highlight of positive reporting on Russia was reached in November when an agreement between two presidents, Vladimir Putin, and Aleksandar Vučić, on a favourable gas price for imports to Serbia was achieved. On the other side, although with the lowest achieved positive tone of reporting in 2021 among all foreign actors, the positive highlight for the EU was achieved during Angela Merkel’s and Ursula von der Leyen’s official visits to Serbia in September and October 2021.

In such a polarised media atmosphere, the crisis and later the war in Ukraine came into the focus of Serbian media and became a huge challenge for them. According to the CRTA’s media monitoring findings, the tone of representation has changed since the beginning of the war.¹⁸² A fragile distinction between a neutral tone on one side and a positive and negative tone of reporting on the other has become even more delicate. The media avoid openly supporting any sides in the conflict. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the highest

¹⁸⁰ Daily newspapers are the following: Informer, Blic, Večernje novosti, Kurir, Alo, Srpski telegraf, Politika, Objektiv, Danas, and Nova.

¹⁸¹ Central news on TV channels with the national coverage are the following: RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy, TV B92.

¹⁸² The war in Ukraine encompasses the period from February 24th to March 31th

increase in the negative tone of reporting is recorded towards the EU. In addition, all the other foreign actors directly involved in the war in Ukraine are presented more negatively compared to the previous period. At the same time, China is the only country that is presented less negatively than in the period before the war in Ukraine. Although Russia is presented more negatively than it was in the period before the war, it is the only country presented more positively than negatively among countries that are directly involved in the war.

The main reason for more positive representation of Russia is primarily due to TVs' editorial policy and the selection of journalists and analysts as well as political party officials as interlocutors. TV channels more often welcome the individuals who glorify Russia and especially Vladimir Putin and justified Russia's aggression against Ukraine. More specifically, from March 10th to April 12th, the director and one of the editors in the national daily Srpski telegraf, Saša Milovanović was the most frequent interlocutor on two commercial televisions, TV Pink and TV Happy. According to the Press Council's data on monitoring the violation of the Journalists' Code of daily newspapers, Srpski telegraf violated it 968 times from July to December 2021.¹⁸³

The second most frequent interlocutor (who appeared 17 times from March 10th to April 12th) was a public official, the director of the National Academy of Public Administration and the president of the GONGO called Centre for Globalisation Studies, Dejan Miletić. Miletić is known for his pro-Russian standing and for one specific, misogynistic statement that he gave on the television with the national coverage, TV Happy: *"women are not inclined to political thinking"*.¹⁸⁴

Another interlocutor with the same number of appearances (who also appeared 17 times from March 10th to April 12th) is Dragoslav Bokan. Bokan is a film director and politician, also known for his extremist opinion and as one of the leaders of the paramilitary section of the party known as the White Eagles. In November 2021 he verbally assaulted an opposition leader Marinika Tepic, in a live program on TV Pink, accusing her of being an enemy of the Serb people because she is an ethnic Romanian.¹⁸⁵ Due to this event, the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media issued a warning to TV Pink because it allowed Bokan to use hate speech against the opposition leader on the ground of her nationality.¹⁸⁶ In its explanation, the REM reported that the TV Pink anchor also failed to react appropriately to Bokan's statements. All of this did not stop TV Pink to welcome Bokan many times after the incident.

Bojan Bilbija, the editor of the oldest Serbian national daily, Politika, was the interlocutor 16 times while Ljubinka Milinčić, the EiC of Sputnik in Serbia even eight times. Bojan Bilbija was the first journalist that had taken over the news from Russian media about the biological weapon against Russia. From March 10th to April 12th, nine out of 11 monitored interlocutors

¹⁸³ Press Council, Violation of the Code of Journalists of Serbia in the dailies (April-June, 2021), <https://link.crtars/a9>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

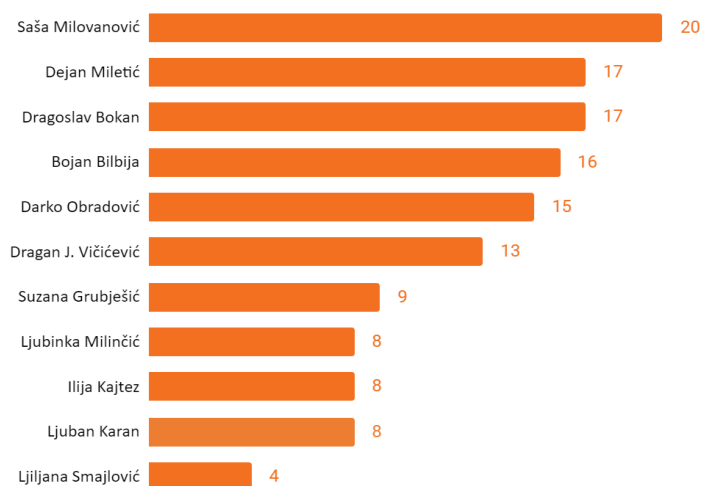
¹⁸⁴ Dejan S. Miletić, poznat po skandaloznoj izjavi, dobio državnu funkciju: Vređao žene, pa postao direktor Nacionalne akademije (30.12.2020). Žena.rs. <https://link.crtars/aa> (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁸⁵ Former paramilitary chief attacks Serbian opposition leader Tepic on live TV (29.11.2021). N1. <https://link.crtars/b1>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁸⁶ Serbian media watchdog says remarks against Tepic were discriminatory, (01.12.2021). N1. <https://link.crtars/b2>, (accessed April 20th, 2022.)

were pro-Russian oriented. Five of them are EiC or journalists in some printed pro-Russian dailies, the other six are mostly presented as analysts, military retirees, or members of “Civil Society Organisations”. (Figure 28)¹⁸⁷

Figure 28: Number of appearances by different interlocutors on TV channels with the national coverage



The majority of these TV appearances were on two pro-government and the most biased TV channels, TV Pink and TV Happy while rather rarely on TV Prva and RTS 1. In addition, these guests were dominantly the interlocutors in the morning shows on TV channels with the national coverage.

On the other side, the daily press has a similar editorial policy as the television and a noticeable stand on the side of Russia. The two pro-government national dailies, Večernje novosti, and Informer, are leaders in promoting the pro-Russian narrative.

There is a strong connection between the morning programmes and the daily press, because editors and journalists from newspapers close to the ruling political parties, appear as common analysts in the morning shows, as explained above. They present events in a sensationalistic way, often using unverified information, and conspiracy theories that serve to justify Russia.

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine in the Serbian media

Since the war in Ukraine started after data collection for the “Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media” study, in the Apxx.1, only headlines of central news on TV channels with

¹⁸⁷ Darko Obradović – research in Center for Strategic Analysis; Dragan J. Vučićević – EiC in Informer daily newspaper, Suzana Grubješić – vice-president of Center for Foreign Policy; Ilija Katez - military retiree, Ljuba Karan - military retiree; Ljiljana Smajlović - journalist

national coverage and in daily newspapers are included. Furthermore, the CRTA's media monitoring data on foreign influence are also used to explain the way of reporting about the war in Ukraine in the Serbian media. The classification used in the study of mapping disinformation in the Serbian media was not conducted. Still, the main narratives and the tone of reporting from the first month and a half of the war in Ukraine are noted.

The main findings from this period indicate that the Russian disinformation was accepted and further disseminated and legitimised in the Serbian media. Most of the disinformation related to negative reporting concerning NATO, the US, and the EU while disinformation related to positive reporting regarded Russia. At the same time, China was not in the focus of the Serbian media during this period. Further findings show that the main producers of disinformation are the Informer, TV Pink, TV Happy, and the Večernje Novosti.

Two main narratives stand out for negative depiction of the EU since the war in Ukraine began. One is related to the economic and energy weakness of the EU; the media reports about famine in the world and food shortages in Europe as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. The second narrative is connected to the pressure on Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia.

1) Some of the most striking headlines supporting the narrative about the economic and energy weakness of the EU were:

- a. Kurir – *"EU begs for gas"*,
- b. Blic – *"Economic collapse threatens the EU because of the War?"*,¹⁸⁸
- c. Informer – *"Europe is running out of gas"*¹⁸⁹
- d. Alo – *"Europe is falling apart at the seams because of the war"*¹⁹⁰

2) Pressure on Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia was described throughout the following examples of headlines:

- a. Srpski telegraf – *"Senators deliver Biden's message: Give up Putin, you will enter the EU swiftly"*¹⁹¹
- b. Politika – *"Is the West ruining the "Open Balkans" because of Russia"*¹⁹²
- c. Večernje Novosti – *"The European Council decision includes the threat to Serbia: You will have gas after you impose sanctions on Russia"*¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ PRETI LI EVROPI EKONOMSKI KOLAPS? Šta ako eskalira rat u Ukrajini: Dva scenarija su moguća i ne zna se koji je gori (2022 April 9). *Blic*. <https://link.crtars/ad>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁸⁹ KATASTROFA U NAJAVI! Preti najveća kriza od Drugog svetskog rata! Evropa ostaje bez gasa (2022 March 31). *Informer*. <https://link.crtars/ae>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁹⁰ EVROPA PUCA ZBOG RATA Nenormalne cene goriva i hrane posledica sukoba u Ukrajini (2022 March 31). *Alo*. <https://link.crtars/ae>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁹¹ SENATORI DONOSE BAJDENOVU PORUKU: Odrecite se Putina, ući ćete u EU ekspresno! ČITAJTE U SRPSKOM TELEGRAFU! (2022 April 19). *Srpski telegraf*. <https://link.crtars/ag>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁹² Da li Zapad zbog Srbije ruši „Otvoreni Balkan“, (2022 April 16). *Politika*. <https://link.crtars/ah>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

¹⁹³ EVROPSKA UNIJA UCENJUJE SRBIJU: Ako hoćete naftu, uvedite sankcije Rusiji (2022 April 15). *Večernje novosti*. <https://link.crtars/ai>, (accessed April 19th, 2022.)

d. Objektiv – *“Crisis from Ukraine spreads to the Balkans – Strikes on Serbia from three sides”*¹⁹⁴

e. Večernje Novosti – *“Brussels even stroke the church because of the Russians”*¹⁹⁵

f. Večernje Novosti – *“Grain is worth as much as gold; They even falsify contracts to get to our wheat”*¹⁹⁶

On the opposite side of the spectrum is Russia, mostly positively portrayed through the narratives about Vladimir Putin’s domination and glorification, Russian military domination in the war, and the intention to justify Russian aggression in Ukraine.

1) Some of the most striking headlines that glorify Vladimir Putin were the following:

a. Objektiv – *“Putin is printing dollars!”*¹⁹⁷

b. Srpski telegraf – *“Putin won the heart of Europe, will control steel, space programme production and coal”*¹⁹⁸

c. Objektiv – *“New Kremlin manoeuvre – Putin’s blow to the dollar”*

2) Narratives about Russian military domination had existed in the Serbian media for a long period of time long before the war in Ukraine started and some of the most striking headlines since the war are the following:

a. Informer – *“Putin will crush Kyiv!?”*

b. Kurir – *“OFFENSIVE: A 67-kilometer-long Russian military column in front of Kyiv”*¹⁹⁹

c. Srpski telegraf – *“Putin’s order: Finish off everything in 72 hours”*²⁰⁰

3) Justification of Russian aggression in Ukraine is explained mostly through reporting that the Ukraine regime was Nazi, that the genocide was committed in Donbas, and even that the Ukrainian side attacked Russia.

¹⁹⁴ Danas u novinama Objektiv: Kriza iz Ukrajine širi se na Balkan, uhapšen Veljin vojnik (NASLOVNA STRANA) (2022 March 11). *Objektiv*. <https://link.crtars/aj>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

¹⁹⁵ BRISEL ZBOG RUSA UDARIO I NA CRKVU! U Rezoluciji EP SPC na tapetu jer u Srbiji i RS promoviše Moskvu kao zaštitnicu (2022 March 10). *Večernje novosti*. <https://link.crtars/ak>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

¹⁹⁶ ZAPAD U OFANZIVI: Ruse izbacuju iz UN, a jača pritisak na našu državu (2022 April 13). *Večernje novosti*. <https://link.crtars/al>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

¹⁹⁷ “Putin štampa dolare”: ŠOK tvrdnje iz Amerike, u sve upleli i Severnu Koreju (2022 March 15). *Objektiv*. <https://link.crtars/am>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

¹⁹⁸ OPERACIJA “MARIJUPOLJ”: Putin osvojio industrijsko srce Evrope (2022 March 21). *Srpski telegraf*. <https://link.crtars/an>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

¹⁹⁹ OFANZIVA: Ruska vojna kolona duga 67 kilometara pred Kijevom! (2020 March 2). *Kurir*. <https://link.crtars/ao>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

²⁰⁰ PUTIN NAREDIO: Završavajte za 72 sata! (2022 March 3). *Srpski telegraf*. <https://link.crtars/ap>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)

- a. Informer – *“Ukraine attacks Russia”*²⁰¹
- b. Večernje Novosti – *“Neo-Nazis’ bursts in the back of civilians”*²⁰²
- c. Informer – *“German Nazis are at war in Ukraine”*
- d. Večernje Novosti – *“Russian intelligence confirms – Ukraine was making a “dirty bomb”; Kremlin evidence: Kiev and the United States are preparing an attack with anthrax, plague and cholera”*²⁰³
- e. Informer – *“Russians: We will exterminate Azov”*

4) With the escalation of the conflict, the number of disinformation increased and became more extreme. Therefore, the audience could find out that the Ukrainian side is developing chemical/biological weapons together with the US, that Russian war crimes are fake and a consequence of Western propaganda, the economy of the EU and US are collapsing, the Russian economy is stable, there is the disunity of the West against the strong support which Putin enjoys. Some of the most striking headlines, especially regarding the conspiracy theory related to the development of chemical/biological weapons were:²⁰⁴

- a. Politika – *“Who collects DNA samples from ethnic Russians”*²⁰⁵
- b. Objektiv – *“The Pentagon made a virus against the Slavs in Ukraine?!”*²⁰⁶
- c. Večernje Novosti – *“Virus carrying bats ready to attack the Russians”*²⁰⁷
- d. Objektiv – *“Secret affairs of the USA and Ukraine – Biological war looming against Russia – Experiments with coronaviruses were conducted in Ukrainian biolabs, financed by the USA, the aim of which was to create a mechanism for secretly spreading deadly pathogens – new strains of Covid, swine flu and anthrax in Russia”*²⁰⁸
- e. Objektiv – *“They planned to sow the plague and anthrax with the help of drones!”*

²⁰¹ Ukrajina napala Rusiju (2022 February 22). *Informer*. <https://link.crtars/aa>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

²⁰² RAFALI NEONACISTA CIVILIMA U LEĐA: Humanitarni koridori u Ukrajini “mrtvo slovo na papiru”, bataljoni divljaju na jugu zemlje (2022 March 13). *Večernje novosti*. <https://link.crtars/ar>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

²⁰³ UKRAJINA PRAVILA “PRLJAVU BOMBU”: Ruska spoljna obaveštajna služba tvrdi da je Kijev potajno radio na pravljenju atomskog oružja (2022 March 6). *Večernje novosti*. <https://link.crtars/as>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

²⁰⁴ The examples for other narratives are presented earlier in the Appx.1.

²⁰⁵ Ko sakuplja DNK etničkih Rusa (2022 March 9). *Politika*. <https://link.crtars/at>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

²⁰⁶ ŠOK tvrdnje Rogozina: “Pentagon u Ukrajini pravio virus protiv SLOVENA” (2022 March 23). *Objektiv*. <https://link.crtars/au>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

²⁰⁷ SLEPI MIŠEVI SPREMANI ZA UDAR NA RUSE: Koliko su opasni agensi za koje Moskva tvrdi da su ih SAD i Ukrajina proizvodili za bioterorizam (2022 March 12). *Večernje novosti*. <https://link.crtars/ax>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

²⁰⁸ Danas u novinama Objektiv: Spreman biološki rat protiv Rusije, Vlada Srbije donela mere (NASLOVNA STRANA) (2022 March 10). *Objektiv*. <https://link.crtars/av>, (accessed April 21st 2022.)

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52. OFANZIVA: Ruska vojna kolona duga 67 kilometara pred Kijevom! (2020 March 2). *Kurir*. <https://link.crtars/ao>, (accessed April 21st, 2022.)
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- Pančevo bridge on foot, due to road blockade] (2021, December 4). *A/o*. Retrieved on December 5, 2021 from <https://link.crta.rs/90>
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