

Serbian media: Threat to democracy, opportunity for anti-EU narratives

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The issue of media freedom was often at the centre of debate about European integration and democracy in Serbia. Both local actors and international observers were quite vocal about the state of media freedom in the country in recent years, but instead of improvements in this area through the process of EU accession, there has been further deterioration and more controversy. Moreover, the state of Serbian media is no longer just a problem for democracy in the country and fulfilment of EU accession requirements, but a genuine threat for the EU's own reputation and long-term European perspective of Serbia, as anti-EU propaganda and disinformation dominate public space, with influence across the Western Balkans.

Media freedom in Serbia has been deteriorating in recent years according to the most relevant international indexes. According to the [World Press Freedom Index](#) of Reporters Without Borders, Serbia dropped 39 places on the list since 2014. IREX [Media Sustainability Index](#) places the country as the worst in the Western Balkans and only ahead of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan among all former socialist countries, even behind Russia and Belarus. The European Commission's yearly reports on Serbia assess that no progress has been made in freedom of expression since at least 2015 and numerous EU officials have singled out media freedom as an important issue for the country's EU accession process.

The issue of media freedom became one of the most important contention points in Serbian politics as well. Unsatisfied with electoral conditions and especially representation in media, a large part of the Serbian opposition boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections and is currently advocating for media representation to be improved through the inter-party dialogue facilitated by the European Parliament. Serbian civil society organizations indeed report huge disbalance in media coverage. [One report](#) from 2020, for example, shows the Serbian president 147 times more present on TV stations' news programmes than the most-present opposition leader. Data from previous election cycles are perhaps somewhat less dramatic, but still demonstrating complete dominance of the ruling party and its leader in both electronic and print media.

The fact that media freedom in the country deteriorated in parallel with EU accession negotiations was often used as evidence of "stabilitocracy", the policy of the EU and its member states in the Western Balkans where preference is given to stability and fulfilment of the EU's own foreign policy goals instead to democratic transformation of the candidate countries. In any case, **further deterioration of media freedom and the ensuing political crisis have seriously jeopardized Serbia's EU accession prospects.** Not only does media freedom find itself within the key negotiating Chapter 23: Judiciary and fundamental rights, but has raised the question of fulfilment of key Copenhagen criteria for membership. Serbia did not open any negotiating chapters in 2020 due to rule of law concerns and it can be expected that these issues will be under even more scrutiny within the revised enlargement methodology.

However, there is one more serious threat to Serbia's EU perspective that comes from the problem of media freedom. Namely, anti-EU narratives dominate the Serbian media scene and Serbia represents, similarly to other Western Balkan countries, [a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns](#). But even though the focus of the international community is often on external disinformation, mainly coming from Russia and China, **in Serbia it is the pro-government media that is the most important source of disinformation, frequently directed against the European Union**. Euro-scepticism in Serbia is much stronger than in other countries of the region. According to the [Balkan Barometer](#) 2020, only 26% of Serbian citizens believe that EU accession would be good for their country and 46% believe that Serbia will never join the European Union. These results highly differ from other countries in the region, including those with much weaker EU membership perspective. If we take a look at one of the current most pressing points, the COVID-19 pandemic, [we will see](#) that **75% of Serbian citizens believe that China delivered most aid to Serbia, 10% believe it was Russia, while only 3% believe that it was the European Union**. It should be noted that this data comes from late 2020, before the vaccination campaign, where Chinese and Russian distribution of vaccines captured even more media attention.

Here we will present briefly the key problems with media freedom in Serbia, after which we will examine specifically the issue of reporting on the European Union. **We argue that the problems with media freedom in Serbia do not only hurt Serbian democracy and the EU accession process, but the country's general orientation towards the EU through tarnishing the EU and praising its geopolitical adversaries.**

The mechanism of media capture in Serbia

Most television stations and daily newspapers in Serbia hold an overwhelmingly pro-government stance. Domination in the media sphere is often seen as a crucial factor in explaining the dominance of the ruling party and President Aleksandar Vučić in elections and public opinion polls.

Currently all four private televisions with national coverage are owned or managed by individuals close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and President Aleksandar Vučić. The government also exerts influence on the public broadcaster through financing from the state budget and appointment of board members by a nominally independent body, Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), practically controlled by the ruling parliamentary majority.

There is a consensus among media researchers that television, in particular public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), remains the main source of information for the citizens of Serbia, despite the increased role of internet portals and social media in recent years. However, reporting of the television channels with national coverage is extremely lopsided in favour of the ruling party and its leader.

For example, Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) [found that](#), during March 2021, representatives of the ruling parties appeared in 87% of the time on the prime-time news slots of the televisions with national coverage, while opposition representatives appeared only 13% of the time. President Vučić addressed the public live on 29 out of 31 days in March.

Imbalance in reporting of the **public broadcaster RTS** can be explained by the fact that its management, including the Director-General and the Governing Board, are elected by the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), whose members in turn are **elected by the ruling majority** in the National Assembly of Serbia. Several members of REM, including its current President Olivera Zekić, have been accused by the opposition of being close to the ruling party and biased towards it in her decision-making. The election of several new members of REM was one of the primary reforms agreed on in the Inter Party Dialogue in Serbia mediated by the European Parliament in 2019, but, following the resignation of one of the new members Slobodan Cvejić, the mediators Vladimir Bilčik and Tanja Fajon themselves [stressed](#) that REM still did not have the trust of the public.

When it comes to the **private television channels** with national coverage, *Pink, Happy, Prva* and *B92*, its owners are widely regarded as close to the ruling party and beneficiaries of favourable business deals with state institutions and selective enforcement of taxation. The case of the channels *Prva* and *B92* is emblematic, as there is suspicion that the **two television channels were acquired, at least partially, with taxpayers' money**. In November 2018, Telekom Serbia, a telecommunications company majority owned by the Government of Serbia, acquired Kopernikus Technology, the country's second largest cable operator, from businessman Srđan Milovanović, who then bought the Greek-owned *Prva* and *B92* for a similar amount of money. Telekom was later also accused of inflated business deals with the media businessman Igor Žeželj, who then used the money to buy pro-SNS tabloid *Kurir*. Though no definite proofs have been given, SNS is suspected of [weaponizing](#) state-owned Telekom to curb media freedom.

In addition to *Kurir*, tabloids *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf* and *Alo* are overwhelmingly pro-SNS and involved in smear campaigns against the opposition and individuals critical to the ruling party. These pro-government tabloids are the champions of disinformation in Serbia, as research shows that they [published](#) 945 fake news only on their front pages in 2019 and [more than](#) 700 in 2018. These papers have presented Russia and its President Vladimir Putin in an exclusively positive light, with Putin appearing more than 60 times on *Srpski Telegraf* front pages in 2018 in a positive context. The papers also deliberately stir nationalist tensions with disinformation. *Srpski Telegraf* and *Informer* have announced the dangers of wars and conflicts 265 times on their front pages in 2018, referring to wars with Croats 37 times and with Albanians 30 times. Media analysts [have been describing](#) the ways in which **these newspapers receive most of the co-financing projects** from the state and local budgets, even though they drastically violate the journalists' code of ethics on a daily basis.

This situation leaves only cable television channels *N1* and *Nova S*, as well as newspaper *Danas*, as a place where opposition can appear regularly. Due to their low circulation and reach, these media do not provide an effective counterbalance to the

pro-government media, which was also assessed by ODIHR Report in the wake of the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Reporting of Serbian media on the European Union

Despite the fact that EU membership is declared as a strategic goal of the Serbian government and that there is practically a consensus among major political parties about this orientation, **the popularity of the EU and the support of Serbian citizens are diminishing**. While this fact alone could be explained in different ways, the reporting of Serbian media about the European Union certainly represents one of the most important factors for these results.

[Research](#) by the Centre for Contemporary Politics about the reporting of the Serbian media on the European Union in 2020 clearly shows that **president Vučić is the main source of information and creator of narratives about the European Union, but that there are significant differences between pro-government media and media critical of the government**. While pro-government media represent the EU and EU accession based on the narratives created by the government itself, critical media question these narratives and report much more thoroughly about the EU accession process.

The research focused on four issues of importance for 2020: Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, European Commission report on Serbia 2020, COVID-19 pandemic and the EU – Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb. Differences between pro-government and critical media could be observed when it comes to each of these topics.

Regarding the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, pro-government media presented President Vučić as a defender of Serbian national interests against the pressures and blackmail from the European Union. To quote the CSP report: **„What is noticeable in the media coverage of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is the idea that Serbia is facing pressure and blackmail from the European Union**. This narrative comes mainly from the Serbian President himself, who is portrayed by the pro-government media as the one who successfully resists these pressures and wins rounds of dialogue as a kind of a battle.“

When it comes to the European Commission report 2020, highly critical of Serbia in regard to the rule of law, media freedom and democratic institutions, pro-government media provided the space for government officials to push through a narrative according to which the EU treats Serbia unfairly and condemns it because of its successes. To quote the CSP report, “one gets the impression from the narrative that **the European Commission is the one that criticises the positive results for Serbia, which are the purchase of weaponry and good relations with China and Russia, as well as that there is a gap between the interests of the European Union and the citizens of Serbia**, and that the President presents himself as the protector of the people from EU criticism.“ Pro-government media featured the headlines such as [„Vučić conquers with the truth“](#) and [„EU criticised Vučić, he responded sharply“](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic was perhaps the most sensitive topic, as it attracted most media attention and has brought the largest amount of anti-EU propaganda. **Pro-government tabloids heaped praise on China and published emotionally charged content when reporting on Chinese aid**, which could have been seen in the headlines: [“Serbia, do not cry, China is with you”](#), [“Serbia must not forget this: Chinese sent messages of solidarity with Serbia which are tightening up the throat”](#). **On the other hand, pro-government media openly criticized EU for the lack of support within the pandemic** and its own management of the crisis, writing how Brussels left the Western Balkans “in the lurch”, how the [“Brussels bureaucratic imaginary was exposed”](#) and how [“The EU is fatally wounded! It would let the Serbs die!”](#), as well as that “the corona destroyed the European dream”. Headlines like [“The Corona tears up the EU: What is the point of an alliance when the aid is coming from the enemy?”](#) were also appearing later. The EU was also criticized for closing its borders to Serbian citizens with headlines such as [“EU corona fascism! Scandalous policy by Brussels, they do not like the fact that we are the best!”](#).

This research is just one of the publications that demonstrate strong anti-EU narratives among the Serbian media, and especially the pro-government tabloids. It was already mentioned that these media outlets published hundreds of fake news on their front pages and quite often heaped praise on Russia and China while criticizing the EU and promoting hate speech and war-like rhetoric. The numerous examples of such headlines and articles were given here, clearly demonstrating a strong anti-EU bias.

Conclusions and recommendations

The problem of media freedom and media capture in Serbia has significant consequences for democracy in Serbia and the country’s EU accession process. However, it appears that the government’s media influence also produces disinformation and propaganda directed against the EU with possibility to do serious damage to the country’s foreign policy orientation and support for EU membership in the years to come.

Having in mind a strong grip of the ruling party over the Serbian media scene, the aforementioned anti-EU propaganda and disinformation should not be seen as a coincidence and a consequence of editorial decisions, but as government policy. In fact, occasionally even the most blatant disinformation against the EU by the tabloids actually represents a follow-up on the statements of government officials. CSP’s research on Serbian media reporting on the EU provides ample evidence of this.

The apparent paradox that a government pursuing EU membership would promote anti-EU propaganda can be easily explained by three factors. First, by the need of the ruling party to keep its popularity among its anti-EU or anti-Western electorate. Secondly, it represents an attempt to delegitimise recent criticism of the rule of law and state of democracy in Serbia by EU institutions, which could clearly be seen within CSP’s research. As pro-government media would argue, while the EU criticizes Serbia unfairly because “they don’t like the fact that we are the best”, Serbian president

responds by “conquering with the truth”. Finally, it could be argued that Serbian population’s rising anti-EU sentiments provide President Vučić with a more important role as the only credible pro-EU force in Serbian politics from the perspective of the EU.

Having this in mind, here we propose the following recommendations for the European Union and its member states:

1. **More attention should be given to media freedom within the EU accession process.** Even though this issue currently finds itself in one of the crucial negotiating chapters, it should be regarded as a separate issue. EU institutions and officials need to be very clear about its importance for EU accession and make it clear to everyone what Serbia needs to improve in order to advance in the EU accession process.
2. **The EU should devise new instruments for assessing media freedom and media capture.** Special reports on media freedom, possibly by expert groups mandated by the European Commission, could provide a better focus on key issues in this area. The new methodology provides new opportunities for such instruments.
3. **The EU should shift its focus from disinformation by external actors to local political and media context which enables disinformation.** In Serbia, media capture by local political elites not only brought anti-EU propaganda, but opened up the space for a stronger influences of external actors and their own narratives. For example, even Sputnik’s pro-Russian narratives are promoted primarily by Serbian pro-government media.

The following problems should be at the focus of attention when it comes to improving media freedom in Serbia:

1. **Transparency of media ownership and financing needs to be ensured.** Laws covering these issues need to be improved and applied in full to allow functionality of the media market. Especially important is the involvement of the state in ownership and financing, which needs to be fully transparent and limited.
2. **Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) needs to be independent and fully functional.** This institution is responsible for granting and revoking national TV frequencies, appointing the management board of the public broadcaster and issuing fines or bans to television stations if they breach the law. Due to different improper legal solutions, as well as undue political influence of the government and its allies, this institution is neither independent nor fully functional and is the root of most problems with Serbian electronic media.
3. **Balance in presence of government and opposition representatives on national television stations needs to be ensured.** Currently there is a very high imbalance between government and opposition representatives, as all national coverage TV stations and the national public broadcaster are biased in favour of the government. National frequencies, however, are a public good, obliging TV stations to appropriate standards of objective reporting. Enforcing of these standards is a responsibility of REM.

Centre for Contemporary Politics

The **Centre for Contemporary Politics** is a think tank from Belgrade, founded in 2012. The main goals of the organisation are development and promotion of democracy, the support for the EU integration process and the promotion of European values, as well as regional stability and cooperation.

In 2014, the Centre for Contemporary Politics founded the ***European Western Balkans*** web portal, a regional web portal in English language, on European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, through which it realises its media projects.

Since 2017, the Centre has published the annual shadow report ***State of Democracy in Serbia***, which assesses political criteria in the context of EU integration and attempts to raise concerns over problematic areas.