

## **Montenegro and the War in Ukraine: A Divided Country**

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It has been 100 days since the War in Ukraine began. On this occasion, the Embassy of Ukraine in Montenegro organized a support march in Cetinje. In contrast, this city has also been known for protests to support the Russian invasion. Similar contrasts are visible in the decision of Montenegro to join EU sanctions against Moscow in April, including a ban on Russian airlines in its airspace and Russian state media. Sanctions were adopted after three failed attempts due to differences in opinions within the Government of Zdravko Krivokapić. Despite this, the stand of Montenegrin citizens is straightforward: every invasion should be condemned. Montenegro's controversial and complicated relations with Russia also reflect political and media coverage of the War in Ukraine. This paper aims to show how the War in Ukraine has been presented in the Montenegrin media and what are the official views of the Montenegrin establishment. We will analyze in what way and how (un)biased the Montenegrin media presented the development of the situation from day today and how this reporting influenced the formation of public opinion.

*Keywords:* Montenegro, Ukraine, Russia, EU, invasion, sanctions, media

### **Introduction**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine opened up numerous geopolitical issues, including the security of the Western Balkans. Russia has always been considered an essential ally in this region, where it had a significant political influence. Therefore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected all aspects of society and prompted different reactions from high Montenegrin officials.

On April 8, Montenegro joined the countries that formally imposed sanctions on Russia. The Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MVP) expelled four diplomats from the Russian Embassy in Montenegro just a day before. Recently, six more Russian diplomats were declared *persona-non-grata* by the MVP. With these decisions, Montenegro harmonized its foreign policy with the official positions of the European Union (EU) but also provoked the anger of the Russian side. Russia retaliated by closing the Consular Department of the Embassy in Montenegro, as a decision made “*in the face of the hostile attitude of the Montenegrin Government.*” (Anadolu Agency, 2022) The decision of the Montenegrin Government to support sanctions against Russia has put Montenegro on the list of enemy countries together with more than 50 states. With this proclamation, Montenegro and Russia found themselves on opposite sides for the first time in Montenegrin history.

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The overall historical experience of Montenegro as a country going through a democratic transition, together with the most recent political scandals that involved Russia and deeply rooted nationalistic division, caused different reactions to happenings in Ukraine. Not only did Montenegrin citizens have divided opinions on the War in Ukraine, but the politicians also had a hard time reaching a unanimous decision on further foreign policy actions. This kind of deep division within society and the political scene was also evident in the media reporting of the Russian invasion and how facts were presented.

Keeping in mind the complex dynamic of the relations between two countries, this article will present the deep division in media reporting in Montenegro regarding Russian actions and the invasion of Ukraine.

We aim to show how public opinion on the events was formed based on media coverage. We will analyze in what way and how (un)biased the Montenegrin media presented the development of the situation from day to day and how this reporting influenced the formation of public opinion. Therefore, we are going to tackle several important factors that had an impact on media reporting in Montenegro. Additionally, we will analyze representative media outlets from both sides of the political spectrum, including the most-read foreign media outlets. In the end, an overall conclusion will be given, accompanied by personal opinions on the roots and causes for this kind of media reporting.

### **Setting the Scenery**

War in Ukraine and Russian aggression extensively shaped the media reporting in Montenegro. Notably, this process was impacted by several factors that will be elaborated on to understand better the media standpoint and public opinion of Montenegrin society towards this issue.

As already stated, several factors impacted the overall media reporting in Montenegro, among which the most important ones include: Montenegro's long historical ties with Russia, thus shared religion; the divided political scene in Montenegro; comparison between the situation in Ukraine and the NATO bombing of Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in 1999<sup>1</sup>.

The historical relations that will be elaborated on in a more detailed manner in the upcoming part were also impacted by the recognition of the Serbian Orthodox Church's supremacy in Montenegro. The religious issue, on top of national identity issues, led to the historic change of Government in the summer of 2020.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the religious issue was deeply connected to the overall

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<sup>1</sup>NATO's bombing of FR Yugoslavia is one of the most controversial events in which the entire international community was involved. The decision to intervene by NATO didn't have the approval of the UN Security Council, and the bombing took place under the guise of humanitarian action. The legality and legitimacy of the use of force in order to implement humanitarian action is still a matter of many debates amongst researchers. Question that still occupies scientific pens today is the search for answers to the logically imposed topics of.

<sup>2</sup>In 2020, for the first time after the introduction of multi-party system in 1991, Montenegro got a government that did not consist of a majority from the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

perception of Russians and Montenegrins as orthodox brothers, creating an even stronger bond between the two nations.

Regarding the third factor, the analogy between NATO bombing and Russian aggression is somewhat unclear except for the violence it caused. At the protests organized in Nikšić, Montenegro, by a group of Serbian nationalists, exclamations that glorify Russian President Putin could be heard.

The gathered protesters supported Putin and Russia, as they expressed their beliefs that Russians are their brothers by religion and shared history. Additionally, during the protests, we could hear that the Serbs in Montenegro experienced the same history as Russians in Ukraine. Therefore Russian aggression towards Ukraine is justified, and in a way, it could be viewed as a rightful payback for the NATO intervention in FRY (Reuters, 2022). In their view, NATO has proven incapable of protecting their allies and friendly countries, which in a sense encourages the public perception that they were never the right cause for the intervention in Yugoslavia.

In the opinion of the authors of the articles, this analogy is not rightfully set, and the only resemblance is in the suffering from the terrors of war that both nations experienced.

### **Russia and Montenegro and Their Centuries-Long Alliance**

None of the Balkan states can say it had a longer and more dynamic relationship with Russia than Montenegro. Montenegrin ties with Russia date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1711) when Montenegrins, at the call of Russian Tsar Peter the Great, joined Russians in their fights against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup> This was when Montenegro was perceived as the loyal ally of Russia in the Balkans. In the upcoming centuries, Russian-Montenegrin relation has been based on a dependent relationship where Russia provided financial support to Montenegrins as long as it coincided with Russian broader strategic and geopolitical political interests.

As the fights against the Ottomans did not abate, and at the same time, with the strategic interests of Russian foreign policy, the heads of Montenegrin state were often guests at the Russian court, where they asked for financial aid for the Montenegrin people who were exhausted by the constant battles against the Ottomans. However, Russia's help was not only based on financial aid but also secular, religious, and spiritual aid. As a "mother" and a protective brother state, a cult of Russia was created, which has continued to exist. Montenegro and Russia are furthermore connected by the same Orthodox Christian religion and cultural solid belonging to the Slavic peoples. After the recognition of the Montenegrin state at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Russia and Montenegro formally established their diplomatic relations, and in 1878 a Russian consulate was opened in Cetinje, Montenegro. On the occasion of the visit of Montenegrin Prince

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<sup>3</sup>The emissary of the Russian Emperor Peter the Great came to Montenegro in 1711 and brought a letter calling on Montenegrins and other Christian nations to stand up and fight against the Ottoman occupier. The year of 1711 was considered as the year of formal establishment of Montenegrin-Russian political relations, and on that occasion in 2011, 300 hundred years of political relations has been celebrated.

Nicholas to Russia, Russian Emperor Alexander III said that “Montenegro is the only true friend Russia has” (Vukićević, 2017, p. 125).

Although the Montenegrin Government has been known as pro-Western and pro-American since 1997, when Milo Djukanović became the country’s President, Russia recognized the independence of Montenegro in 2006, before Washington and European countries, which speaks of good political and economic relations. The recognition of Montenegro on June 12<sup>th</sup>, the day before the national holiday Day of Russia, was considered symbolic due to the historical connections and cultural-religious heritage that connects these two nations. Two countries reciprocally opened embassies in the capitals, first Russia in 2007 and then Montenegro, confirming their desire and readiness to continue developing good friendly relations.

This was a time of significant Russian investments, especially on the Montenegrin coast, the largest of which was the privatization of the Aluminum Plant in Podgorica (KAP), owned in 2005 by Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska, close to Vladimir Putin.<sup>4</sup> Right after the independence of Montenegro in 2007, around 30 thousand Russians had bought land and real property in Montenegro, while Russian FDI in Montenegro amounted to nearly 2 billion USD in the same year (Gardašević, 2018). Rationalized conditions for starting a business, taxation, and real estate investment have created a real tourism boom, as the relations between Russia and Montenegro were extensively based on tourism, property purchasing, and industry. The investment trend has continued, as evidenced by the fact that in 2016 FDI from Russia to Montenegro represented around 30% of Montenegro’s GDP, as Russia was the country’s single largest investor in that year. (Conley and Melino, 2019) Increased economic penetration was interpreted as a Russian way of creating a well-grounded basis for further political action in the Balkan region. Russian influence in Montenegro became so vast that Montenegro was commonly referred to as “Moscow-by-the-Sea” (Reguly, 2014).

Montenegro and Russia had good relations and mutual interest in the economic sphere until 2013/2014. In 2012, Montenegro opened the membership negotiation process with Brussels, and two years later, in 2014, it joined the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia due to the annexation of Crimea. Additionally, as Montenegro clearly defined its Euro-Atlantic path, the relations between Russia and Montenegro have dramatically worsened. Russian diplomacy representatives were loudly against Montenegro’s entry into the NATO pact, hoping to prevent the last section of the Adriatic coast from coming under the NATO umbrella. When Montenegro became a member of NATO in 2017, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, declared that Montenegro would sacrifice its economic relations with Russia to join NATO.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, owner of “Rusal”, bought a 58.7% stake in Aluminium Plant Podgorica (KAP). At the time of sale KAP accounted for 51% of Montenegro’s exports and 15% of the GDP (Bechev, 2018).

<sup>5</sup>In 2016, a group of Serbian citizens supported by the Russian establishment was involved in the attempt of trying to topple Montenegrin President Djukanović on the day of parliamentary elections, with the goal of deterring Montenegrin entrance to NATO Alliance.

This short overview of the historical genesis of Russian-Montenegrin relations is significant for a better understanding of Montenegro's position towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in the first place, Montenegrin stance towards Russia, its century-old ally.

### **The Political Scene in Montenegro**

All previously mentioned factors are relevant for this analysis since the political scene in Montenegro in recent years has been very diverse and deeply divided regarding several issues closely connected to the previously discussed factors. One of the most present divides is based on the national identity and historical interpretation of facts, which strongly correlates to the feeling of national identity and proximity to the Serbian state.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Montenegro is a multiethnic state, Montenegrins (35%) and Serbs (30%) represent the two most prominent national groups. As previously mentioned, Serbs in Montenegro strongly rely upon the sentiment of Serbia as their mother country, Orthodox religion, relations with Russia, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Knowing this, certain political parties (Socialist People Party SNP, Democratic Front DF, True Montenegro) in Montenegro kept alive this form of tradition, strongly dividing society into those who consider themselves Serbs and those who think of themselves as Montenegrins.

At the beginning of the War in Ukraine in February, Montenegro was led by the newly elected Government and its Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić. He is a university professor with no prior political experience. Krivokapic was very vocal during the protests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which helped him gain popularity and eventually win the elections.<sup>7</sup> After taking over his position as the country's Prime Minister, he was recognized as a pro-Russian-oriented leader with deep conservative tendencies and support for the Serbian Orthodox Church.

However, due to internal struggles and a deep divide in the coalition formed around Krivokapić, his Government lost the no-confidence motion in February 2022. This motion was led by the civic movement URA – former members of the Krivokapic's Government. The new ruling majority was a more pro-European and Western-oriented Government, with a coalition of minority parties. Consequentially, these changes impacted Government's public response towards steps in sanctions against Russia, which were more prompt.

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<sup>6</sup>After Montenegro regained its independence at the 2006 referendum, around 45% of citizens who were in favour of staying in the State Union with Serbia were left infuriated, denying the existence of Montenegro as a state and Montenegrins as a nation.

<sup>7</sup>In 2019, the Law on Freedom of Religion was adopted, which stipulated that the state becomes the owner of all religious buildings that were built before December 1918 - unless religious communities prove ownership, which caused stormy reactions. Part of the opposition and representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church believed that this law was unconstitutional and demanded that it be withdrawn from the procedure. This led to mass protests throughout Montenegro, which resulted in early parliamentary elections and the fall of Djukanović's government.

### **Reaction to the Invasion by Political Elite**

The historical background and nationalistic narratives as visible are very influential on Montenegrin society and the political environment. This further impacts media outlets due to their affiliation with political parties in the countries.

Therefore, the media presentation of the war in Ukraine is deeply impacted by the political situation in the country. In this way, we will discuss in this chapter the overall political scene in Montenegro and how prominent political figures reacted to the situation in Ukraine.

Many politicians have voiced their opinions regarding Russian aggression in Ukraine using Twitter accounts. What is worth mentioning is that the media reported on this matter solely by citing shared content from Twitter without any analysis.

President of the country, Milo Djukanović, was among the first to come forward and vehemently oppose Russian aggression. Soon afterward, a public announcement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro strongly condemns Russian decisions. It was stated that Russian actions violated Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Minsk Agreement, and international law. (Jovanović & DFC Team, 2022) The current minister of foreign affairs, Ranko Krivokapic, is in line with the MVP, who also condemned the Russian invasion.

Further on, the media reported on the Ministry of Defense of Montenegro and their decision to condemn the Russian violation, together with the statement of the current Minister of Defense, Raško Konjević (Twitter, 2022). Not long after, Aleksa Bečić (Twitter, 2022), former speaker of the Parliament and leader of Democratic Montenegro, Miodrag Lekić (Vijesti, 2022), leader of Demos and SNP (Vijesti, 2022) issued their official statements. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) proposed a resolution to condemn Russia's attack on Ukraine within the Parliament, eventually signed by 44 MPs (Gradska, 2022).

Support for Ukraine was also given by the incumbent Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister at the time Dritan Abazović. Abazović expressed regret that Russia chose war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, it should be noted that just one day later, Abazović attended a meeting attended by almost all the famous Russian exponents in Montenegro who strongly supported Russian aggression (Jovanović & DFC Team, 2022). Any mainstream media barely reported this happening.

Similar reactions were seen when Russia decided to recognize the independence of Ukrainian territories Lugansk and Donetsk. The cause for the concern was the lack of prompt response by the Democratic Front and Democrats, as well as the public announcements of their leaders. This was also severally reported in the media by the pro-DPS outlets.

### **(Non) Unified Response to the Russian Aggression**

Since its independence, Montenegro strongly shifted towards Western values and aligned its foreign policy with the European Union. In this regard, the question was how prompt the new Government responded to sanctions against Russia.

Even though many officials from both ruling and opposing parties have come forward and shared their points of view regarding Russian aggression, a more unified response was absent. It took three government meetings and almost two months after the initial attack happened for the Government to vote on the sanctions on the Russian Federation. This is a result of the lack of support and acceptable solution for all members of the Government. All this also impacted how citizens have been reported regarding the vents in Ukraine and Russia's decisions in this regard.

The main issue leading to the divide and prolonged decision was the unconventional approach the Prime Minister wanted. The new approach relied on the premise that a new body within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be created to deal with this issue. Many government members and prominent lawyers deemed this move as unconstitutional and operationally challenging to perform.

The sanctions against Russia were adopted on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 2022. This comes after the Montenegrin Parliament voted non-confidence of the Government and the appointment of the new Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović (Vijesti, 2022). Sanctions against Russia at that point included freezing the assets and economic resources of Russian citizens and companies in Montenegro who were considered close to the Kremlin and banning the operation of Russian government media. The Democratic Front (DF), one of the leading opposition parties, announced that they are against the sanctions against Russia, which will negatively impact the tourist season.

“We respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine, we are against sanctions against Russia, and as a small country, we should stay away from geopolitical conflicts as much as possible,” said DF official Milan Knežević (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022).

The Democratic Front did not excessively comment on the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Their official statements mostly followed the narrative about the hypocrisy of Western countries and pro-Western parties in Montenegro for calling for respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine while the territorial integrity of Serbia is being threatened.<sup>8</sup>

One thing worth noting is that political turmoil, shift toward pro-Russian and Serbian values and the indecisive standpoint of the Government deeply impacted public opinion regarding the War in Ukraine.

### **Media Reporting in Montenegro**

As mentioned in the introduction, this article aims to observe the comprehensive reporting about the war in Ukraine from a traditional and social media perspective. As a visible, highly polarized political statement, historical narratives, fake news, and open messages from the officials of the Montenegrin Government have indeed impacted how the narratives have been created and how media outlet reports on specific issues.

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<sup>8</sup>Here, above all, we mean the recognition of Kosovo's independence.

It is important to note that many media outlets and political parties have used traditional discrepancies and political uncertainties to fuel a further divide. Even though, in the end, we have all leaders condemning the Russian attack on Ukrainian sovereignty, the overall media reporting has been subjective.

The first day of the War in Ukraine was widely covered by all Montenegrin newspapers, media outlets, and electronic websites. Hashtags *Ukraine* and *Ukrajina* were one of the main topics trending on Twitter. At the same time, the reactions of Government officials and politicians, some through media, some through social channels, were not absent. Naturally, it is expected to observe either pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian media reporting.

Another premise is that the overall pro-European narrative every actor in Montenegro uses, the strong anti-Ukrainian narrative will not be seen, but more likely, it will be observed as a lack of information or preferential reporting of the Russian side. Therefore, the following chapter will observe the focal points of foreign media in Montenegro and domestic media reporting, separated by their political affiliation – opposition and pro-government media outlets.

### Foreign Portals in Montenegro

Currently, on the media scene in Montenegro, there are no active newspaper outlets or websites in Russian media.<sup>9</sup> In April 2022, as a part of the package of sanctions against Russia suggested by the EU, the Council of the Electronic Media Agency of Montenegro (AEM) unanimously adopted a decision on restrictive measures against the Russian media “*Russia Today*” and “*Sputnik*,” and the exclusion of those programs and their contents (Kajosevic, 2022).

Besides the business of the local media scene, the influx of Serbian-based media visibly polarizes the media scene in Montenegro. The content is full of sensationalism, fake news, and misinformation, further deepening the divide. In this respect, the two most notable examples of this kind of reporting are “*IN4S*” and “*Borba*”, also present in Montenegro, which seems to have powerful reporting in line with the views of official Moscow. This comes as no surprise knowing the official standpoint of the Serbian Government and the strong historical ties these two nations share.<sup>10</sup>

The overwhelming majority of articles are used from other major media outlets such as “*Sputnik*” and further translated, which is often the case with many media companies in the Balkan region. Compared to Montenegrin domestic media, which we will discuss further, the “*IN4S*” has a much higher number of articles and opinion pieces signed by the authors. The most prominent examples

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<sup>9</sup>In 2017, it was reported that five new pro-Russian websites were registered in Montenegro. These websites were founded by local journalist who are pro-Russian oriented, and who support the opposition parties in Montenegro. These website outlets were established right after Montenegro joined NATO in June 2017 (Tomovic, 2022).

<sup>10</sup>For years, Serbia and Montenegro were considered the two main ally states of Russia in the region of Western Balkans. After Russia and Montenegro’s political courses went in different directions, Serbia stayed the only country that unconditionally supported the policy of Kremlin. Particularly after the Government in Serbia was formed by the majority of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), the nationalist course in the political life of Serbia re-appeared.



are the articles “*Fascism in Ukraine*” (IH4C, 2022), and “*Why Russia wins*” (Kreveld, 2022).

Another indicator that this reporting is subjective and Russian-oriented is the references to “special military operation” and crisis in Ukraine. Their immense impact is visible in that “*IN4S*” was the third most read portal in Montenegro (Jovanović & DFC Team, 2022). The increasing number of news published from the Russian perspective is visible in these two outlets, while the Ukrainian perspective does not get the same media space.

Fueling headlines also do not help impartial and genuine reporting. One of those articles, please, from the portal of “*Radio-free Europe*” titled “*War in Ukraine further divides gap in Montenegro*” (Durović, 2022). Similarly, we encounter articles such as “*The Serbian Church follows Vučić’s neutrality on the Russian invasion*” (Tomović, 2022), continuing the narrative of the divide among the population. Even though this news portal is considered very prominent and famous for its objective, the reporter’s subjectivity could be visible in many articles on this topic, impacting readers’ views.

### **Domestic Pro-Government and Pro-Opposition Media**

In this section, the two most frequently represented pro-government and pro-opposition media that reported intensively on Ukraine’s events will be elaborated. Those are “*Vijesti*” and “*Portal Analitika*”.

Regarding domestic media outlets, one of the most prominent portals in the country that have been traditionally opposed to the DPS rule but firmly open to European influences is “*Vijesti*”. Their comprehensive reporting was thorough and since this media portal has a separate section dedicated to the war in Ukraine, with 116 pages containing at least 15 headlines per page.

The overall analysis of the type of news/blogs/articles posted majority is taken from social media as publishers are esteemed politicians, PR statements, or prominent analysts. Most news is a basic translation of the reports covered and published by massive media outlets such as “*BBC*” or “*CNN*”. Only several articles originate from the journalists from “*Vijesti*”, which is understandable due to limited funding. Yet a clear distinctive pattern can be visible even in this small sample.

At first glance, the number of reporting’s that point out the Russian side of the story is not comparable to the number of press conferences of Russian representatives, their elaborations on the UN assembly as well as their press releases regarding failed peace negotiations or non-compliance with obligations that they pledged to perform. Among the first 60 headlines in “*Vijesti*”, there is barely any news that reports on the official standpoint of Russia, as well as a personal statement from Vladimir Putin, Sergei Lavrov, or Natasha Zaharova.

The overwhelming majority of reports are in strong support of the Ukrainian side with biased headlines such as “*Russian army faced with determined resistance*,” “*He draws the nuclear sword to divide Europe*” (Bogetić, 2022), and “*Putin’s imperial delirium*” (Bilt, 2022).

The situation is somewhat better when reporting how Montenegrin officials and day-to-day politics reflect on the war in Ukraine. The reporting is in line with a formal and straightforward statement of facts as the official press releases/Twitter posts/interviews of politicians.

“*Vijesti*” is also famous for its statement pieces, such as those written by Balsa Brkovic. Even though there are personal pieces from the author, it is still visible that narratives of comparison between Montenegro and Ukraine and tendencies of a more substantial Serbian presence are filling up media space. Examples are pieces “*Ukraine*” and “*Other Russia*.”

The breaking headlines of “*Analitika*” on the first day of the War, February 24, 2022, were “Ukraine is under fierce attack, from the east to Kyiv and Odesa” and “Zelenski declared martial law: We are ready for anything, we will win.” The newspaper digital platform published the first reactions of the EU officials and world leaders, condemning this act of Russia. “*Analitika*” also published the first official statement of the President of the country, Milo Đukanović, who condemned the attack and stated that “Russia violates all fundamental principles of international law, undermines European security and threatens its stability.” (Portal Analitika, 2022). In addition, the newspaper published comments of the members of the Montenegrin Parliament from both ruling parties and opposition parties.

On February 24, “*Portal Analitika*” published 50 titles on its digital platform regarding Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. Over the past six months, hundreds of articles and stories have been published in Ukraine. The newspaper continued regularly reporting on the development of the situation from day to day, transmitting reports from the world’s media and publishing interviews, photos, and videos from all over Ukraine. On the newspaper website, a subsection “From hour to hour” was available, where happenings in Ukraine were reported hourly. “*Analitika*”’s reporting was limited to the conveyance of already published news by foreign media, as well as news that consisted of translations of tweets by foreign world officials and statements by Montenegrin officials. Occasionally, the newspaper would publish personal opinions and comments of local political analysts.

The war in Ukraine was a hot topic in Montenegro during the first couple of weeks of the conflict. The eyes of the entire Montenegrin public were focused on Ukraine and the development of events. At the beginning of the war, the national public service “*RTCG*” devoted more than half of its evening news “*Dnevnik*” to the topic of the war in Ukraine. “*RTCG*” reporters and journalists reported live from the Polish-Ukrainian border for seven days. On the *RTCG* electronic portal, a special page was added exclusively dedicated to events in Ukraine. Also, as part of the foreign policy show “*Focus*” on Wednesdays at 8 p.m., mainly topics related to the war in Ukraine were dealt with.

## Social Media

In recent times, Montenegrin media space has been extensively shaped by the social media accounts used for promotion, campaigns, and sharing the institutions’

personal statements and official attitudes. This expansion has been vastly visible since the Government shift in Montenegro happened. Twitter has become, at some point, the main channel for politicians to address the public due to COVID-19 and the extensive presence of citizens on this social network. This is more than evident in the case of Ukraine.

According to the opinion of many analysts, the war in Ukraine is not the first war happening in the age of digital media, but it is the first war to go viral, thanks to social media. War propaganda, hate speech, fake news, viral posts, and censorship of expression are some of the phenomena that marked this war.

Almost all of the politicians in Montenegro declared their support for Ukraine and condemned Russian aggression. In this manner, we have a prompt and open response in real time, where citizens can view all of the positions clearly without media intervention. Some institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense, also used Twitter to inform the public about the official standpoints and potential activities that should be performed.

This social network introduced in December 2020 a new feature called Space. It is live audio conversations on Twitter where people can meet and discuss different topics at any time. For the first days of the war, the so-called “space rooms” were organized by Montenegrin citizens, primarily students, and journalists, where people would join and discuss the most recent happenings in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Very often, political analysts and journalists from the region would join these spaces and embark on debates related to the accuracy of the obtained information and events from the war front.

This Twitter feature was frequently used by DPS, its party members, and other parties to discuss political topics, among which war in Ukraine. In this manner, an influx of fake news and information can be spread or prevented as it is a free platform accessible to anyone on Twitter. Some media outlets also used the information gathered in Space as material for their reporting or to announce that one politician would be a guest on a specific topic, which was very often the case.

## **Conclusion**

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is indeed very hard to find impartial and objective news reporting regarding any issue. We live in an era where questioning everything is the only way to catch a glimpse of objectivity and have the ability to analyze anything from this standpoint.

Media reporting also belongs to this category. Additionally, war reporting is never impartial, neither historically nor today, and we dare say it never will. Their impartiality is somewhat more complicated if the media lacks financing and journalists are often the targets of violence, such as in the case in Montenegro.

Therefore combining these obstacles is difficult or even impossible, which is why we are not surprised that Montenegrin media outlets and journalists are subject to influences, especially those of political elites or societal narratives.

With both authors living in Montenegro, we analyzed media with the hypothesis that the party affiliation might strongly influence the reporting on the

Ukrainian war. And our view was proven right! The overall downgrade of media culture and the somewhat chaotic political situation confirmed our presumptions.

Therefore, it is tough to expect a difference in objective journalism regarding the war in Ukraine. This is especially notable because this issue also includes extensive differentiation on the national identity, and political usage of this divide impacts how the media portray this war. Based on the visible material, if somewhat media outlet coincides with pro-DPS forces or a more pro-European perspective, the coverage of the conflict is extensively based on Ukraine's perspective. This means that we usually lack information about the official Russian standpoint.

The same scenario is very much visible among the pro-Serbian oriented news outlets where the official standpoint of Serbia profoundly impacts the subjective reporting in favor of Russia. The Ukrainian moves are often interpreted as weak or the last resource options to give an illusion of Russian victory.

From the analysis of 5 media outlets and over 15 social media accounts of public officials, the conclusion can be drawn that the public in Montenegro relies on highly subjective reporting or purely personal perspectives of a few publicly present individuals. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that this polarization further divides the people, and much essential information gets lost in interpreting the facts to suit the reporting side.

This analysis is limited to the first two months of the Ukrainian war due to the format in which it has been written. Our advice at the end is to extend our initial idea by combining more media outlets with further analysis of the discourse used, which can contribute to the understanding of the position of the political elites and public about the war.

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