



RECLAIMING
THE
FUNDAMENTALS

(RE)ANIMATION OF THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

REGARDING THE PROCESS OF
SERBIA'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Analytical Framework

The text before you contains the analysis of the media presentation of Serbia’s EU integration process, as well as recommendations derived from a two-dimensional, normative-structural and media-attitudinal analysis.

To examine and describe the state of media presentation of the EU integration process in Serbia, that is, to formulate recommendations based thereupon, we will first outline Serbia’s current EU integration process. Next, we will describe the general media environment in the country, with a focus on the normative-structural component. We will then separately present the findings on media coverage and public opinion. Based on all the above, we will define recommendations that should improve, first of all, that which was defined by the Zagreb Declaration¹ of 2020, which outlined the importance of “clear communication with the public” as an indicator of the credibility of countries from the Western Balkans as candidates for EU membership.

Table 1. Analytical Matrix

Normative-structural component		Media-attitudinal component		Activities in the field of communication of EU integration
State of the EU integration process	State of the media	Reporting on the EU integration process	Public opinion	
Recommendations				

Methodologically speaking, the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) believes that, to understand public opinion, it is necessary to synchronously establish the factual, media and attitudinal aspects of the researched phenomenon.

The State of Serbia's EU Integration Process

Since Serbia signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement,² when it received the status of associate member (1 December 2013), the country opened a total of 22 out of 35 chapters as part of the EU integration process, and closed (only) two. Of the above-mentioned 22, the following chapters have been opened: 4 - Free movement of capital, 5 - Public procurement, 6 - Company law, 7 - Intellectual property law, 9 Financial services, 13 - Fisheries, 14 - Transport policy, 15 - Energy, 17 - Economic and Monetary Policy, 18 - Statistics, 20 - Enterprise and Industrial Policy, 21 - Trans-European Network, 23 - Justice and Fundamental Rights, 24 - Justice, Freedom and Security, 27 - Environment and Climate Change, 29 - Customs Union, 30 - External relations, 32 - Financial control, 33 - Financial and budgetary provisions, and 35 - Other issues, while Chapters 25 - Science and Research and 26 - Education and Culture were opened and closed.

In addition to the above, Serbia submitted the negotiating positions regarding the following Chapters: 2 - Freedom of movement for workers, 3 - Right of establishment and freedom to provide services, 10 - Information society and media, 16 - Taxation.

Also, the criteria have been determined for opening chapters that include benchmarks that have not yet been proclaimed as adopted: 1 - Free movement of goods (two benchmarks), 8 - Competition policy (six benchmarks), 11- Agriculture and rural development (two benchmarks), 12 - Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy (three benchmarks), 22 - Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments (one benchmark).

In the case of Chapter 31 - Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, discussion on screening reports is still under way³

The decision to open Cluster 1 - Basics⁴ was made after the expansion methodology was revised at the twelfth International Conference (2021).

The document prepared by a team of experts of the European Movement in Serbia,⁵ edited by Vladimir Medjak, precisely emphasises that Serbia *"had presented a plan to be ready for EU membership by the end of 2018 at the opening of negotiations at the first Intergovernmental Conference in January 2014. Progress in raising the level of Serbia's readiness for membership in the period 2014-2020 was minimal and is not in line with the proclaimed strategic goal of joining the EU, or with the plan from 2014. As regards political criteria, the assessment in 2020 is the same as it was in 2015, i.e. 2.2 (on a scale of 1 to 5). In terms of readiness for membership from the standpoint of economic criteria, Serbia has improved its score of 3.00 in 2015 to a score of 3.25 in 2020. Certain progress was also noted in the Legal Criterion (Chapter 35), where Serbia has improved its readiness for membership rating to 3.03 in 2020, from 2.88 in 2015"*.

According to the data presented on the website *EU for You*, Serbia received more than EUR 2.5 billion from the European Union through 291 projects in 17 sectors from pre-accession funds, as well as more than EUR 6.5 billion in soft loans. Viewed by sectors, the European Union has donated the most funds to the field of transport (EUR 507.6 million), democracy and human rights (EUR 503.6 million), culture (EUR 170.7 million) and energy (EUR 156.7 million).⁶

General Media Situation in Serbia

Asymmetric Media Confederation

With more than 2,500 registered media outlets, Serbia can only apparently be placed in the group of countries with media pluralism. In reality, we have an “asymmetric confederation of two media images of life in Serbia”, still dominated by television as the main source of obtaining information. According to all relevant surveys, the audience in Serbia (about two thirds of it) receives information primarily by watching television.

One group of members of the media confederation consists of pro-government media outlets, led by the (only on paper) public broadcasting service RTS, commercial television stations with national coverage (*Pink*, *Happy*, *Prva* and *B92*) and cable television stations offered by MTS - a cable television provider whose sole shareholder is the state of Serbia (with the exception of cable channels *In sajder* and *Al Jazeera*). These media outlets, as sources of information, are watched by more than half of the television audience in Serbia. From a socio-demographic point of view, people who watch these channels are older (65+), have secondary and elementary education, are employed in the public sector, or are retired. This part of the audience primarily votes for parties that are already in power.

On the other side of the spectrum are cable channels *N1* and *Nova S*, along with *In sajder* and *Al Jazeera*, which can be seen by both “media Serbias”. *Nova S* and *N1* are owned by the Luxembourg-based company United Media. This group of television media outlets is critical of the government and provides the opposition with a place to express its views. Only every fourth respondent in Serbia uses these two channels as the source of information. Due to the geographical aspect of the availability of *N1* and *Nova S*, people who watch these two cable channels live primarily in the cities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Niš, and in the urban areas of Vojvodina and central and western Serbia. These are primarily persons with a university degree or college-level education, under the age of 65, employed in the public or private sectors. In the elections, they tend to either vote for a variety of opposition parties or abstain altogether.

As a result of the above-mentioned media division, i.e. dissatisfaction with the media offer, as well as the technological changes that made it possible to obtain information (and have conversation) via social networks, about one fourth of the (especially) young and educated people decided to self-inform, primarily using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This type of information brings with it the challenges of any information that does not include professional newsrooms that respect media laws and professional codes, be they on the Internet or, conditionally speaking, classic media. From this perspective, important for the idea of the media situation in Serbia are the findings of a study that was carried out for the needs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) of the European Parliament,⁷ in which the authors concluded that, in the case of Serbia, international actors play a relatively secondary role when it comes to disinformation, i.e. that “the media image in Serbia is dominated by SNS and President

Vučić. The primary role in the state-sponsored disinformation campaign is played by TV stations (especially TV Pink) and tabloids, including Kurir, Informer and Srpski Telegraf. These have a serious reach and are used for the ruling party's campaigns against the opposition. The social media analysis conducted for the needs of this study meanwhile revealed that a number of nationalist publications (Nacionalist, Crvene Beretke, Intermagazin.rs, Sandžačke) and a few prominent individuals (including politicians and a well-known economic commentator) played a particularly important role. These media and individuals are characterised by negative reporting about the EU, NATO and the West in general, while at the same time fostering a pro-Russian discourse".⁸

Regulation and Self-Regulation in the Media Field

Among the above-mentioned media actors is also regulation, that is, the politically dependent and ineffective Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) as the supreme authority in the field of electronic media. Since 2014 and the adoption of a new set of media laws, REM has been operating unlawfully because it has not aligned its internal acts (the Statute and the Rules of Procedure) with the Law on Electronic Media. During the same period, REM has refused to sanction media service providers (MSPs), including television stations with a national frequency, for their continuous untrue and non-objective information based on disinformation and manipulation, which grossly violates the media's obligation to inform people in a truthful, timely and objective fashion (Article 47 of the Law on Electronic Media).

Also, REM has for years systematically refused to sanction MSPs' hate speech and violence (verbal and physical) present in programme content that is broadcast even in daytime hours, when children and minors watch television, although they are obliged by law to react and sanction media that violate the provisions of the law governing the prohibition of hate speech, the obligation to protect human dignity, and the obligation to protect children and minors from harmful content that could endanger their mental and spiritual development. Such behaviour violated the provisions of the Law on Electronic Media (Articles 47, 50, 51, 67), as well as the provisions of the Rulebook on the Protection of the Rights of Minors in the Field of Media Services (Articles 3-8, 20, 22-24 and 27-28).

While assigning national frequencies, the REM violated the law and by-laws (Regulation on minimum requirements for the provision of media services and the Decision-making criteria in the procedure for issuing licenses for the provision of media services based on public tenders, Articles 10 to 33) by assigning them to television stations for which it was established, by REM itself, that they did not comply with obligations they assumed in their programme studies.

It should be pointed out that, when determining the number of national frequencies, the REM did not analyse the media market to make it possible for the owners of national frequencies to organise their business operations in a sustainable way, i.e. in accordance with the law and the submitted programme studies.

According to the REM's four-month-long monitoring of commercial broadcasters,⁹ TV B92 did not comply with any of the three obligations from its programme studies, including the quota of European audio-visual works, the quota of European audio-visual works created by independent producers, and the quota of its own production. In the observed period, TV *Happy* failed to fulfil its obligation regarding the quota of European audio-visual works created by independent producers.

REM's failure to act has consequences for the legal and political order in Serbia. Through its inaction, the REM made it possible to create the impression in the public that Aleksandar Vučić, as the President of Serbia, has powers that - according to the Constitution of Serbia (Article 123) - belong only to the Government.

All the above has resulted in the creation of a social environment that is not in favour of Serbia's EU integration process, namely: the denial of citizens' constitutional right to truthful, complete, objective and timely information; the legalisation and legitimisation of hate speech and violence due to the absence of sanctions by REM, but also due to non-sanctioning of hate speech by members of the REM Council; the violation of human rights and human dignity, both in media content and in the entire public space, with a special emphasis on the violation of the rights of children and minors who, despite being legally protected, are constantly exposed to harmful content full of violence and vulgarity, which has had, and is continuing to have, unfathomable consequences for their moral, mental and spiritual development; the existence of economically unsustainable MSPs that serve the interests of political actors and owners of media capital, rather than the public interest; the creation of a media environment that is dominated by promotion, propaganda and labelling as forms of media behaviour in the field of politics.

At the same time, entertainment programmes continue to dominate at the expense of the much needed scientific-educational, documentary and children's content.

The absence of functional regulations results in the creation of a "populism industry" whose mission is to undermine the rule of law, the integrity of institutions and the free public for the purpose of achieving personal power in a captive state with an anaemic and disorganised society.

In such an environment, partners for change may be sought in media self-regulation mechanisms, primarily in the Press Council, or in weak professional journalists' associations, of which some are influenced by media publishers. Certain media publishers, though, united in the association, are in favour of changes. They have the role of employers, and if journalists as members of the working world (not) united in trade unions want to be a part of the changes, they must recognise the need and importance of inter-(social) dialogue, both in their own interest and in the interest of media freedom.

We will not be saying anything new by stating that the executive branch of power is led by the President of the Republic, whose power outside the institution is much stronger than that which is granted to him by the Constitution and the law. In its reports on the election processes in Serbia since 2016, the ODIHR observation mission has been pointing out that this is not just a local view of things.

One such report is the one from 2020, where it was stated that *“The continued engagement of Mr. Vučić as a head of state and the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) afforded him unparalleled public exposure, without clear differentiation of his roles. The blurring of the line between the SNS campaign and media coverage of the president and government, including in response to the COVID19 crisis, challenged paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.”*¹⁰

In its report on the 2016 presidential elections,¹¹ the ODIHR observation mission cited the findings of the Anti-Corruption Council from media reports¹² on the relationship between the government and the media, stating that *“the content published by the media is generally not the result of free, objective and investigative journalism”, and that “most media do not work for the purpose of better informing citizens, because they are financially dependent and connected to the political economic elite and power centres.”*

The ODIHR mission repeated the same observation in a shorter form the following year, in the report on the campaign for the presidential elections. At that time, it noted that *“most media do not work for the purpose of better informing the citizens, because they are financially dependent and connected to the political economic elite and power centres.”*¹³

In the latest Progress Report on the European Integration of Serbia for 2022,¹⁴ it was stated that *no progress had been made* in the area of freedom of expression. Despite the established institutional mechanisms, in the form of working groups made up of representatives of competent state bodies and journalists' associations, cases of threats and violence against journalists are still causing concern, and the entire environment needed for unhindered exercise of freedom of expression still needs to be further strengthened in practice. The conclusions from the Report indicate that there are increasing delays in the implementation of the Media Strategy, which means that there is a delay concerning the amendment of the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media. Said amendment includes the EU directive on audio-visual content becoming part of the local legislation, which is currently not the case. The Progress Report points out that the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has allocated all four national frequencies (valid for 8 years) to the same television channels as in the previous period.

The Media Component of the Analysis

In the case of the media and communication strategy of the European integration of Serbia, we would like to single out the following: 1) the EU as a whole, 2) the media in Serbia, 3) those in power in Serbia (President, Government, Ministry for European Integration), and 4) the EU community in Serbia (the EU Delegation in Serbia, embassies of EU member states). Accordingly, the recommendations are presented separately for each of the above-mentioned actors. The recommendations will overlap, cross over into and complement each other; this is conditioned by different actors, as well as the nature of Serbia's European integration. Therefore, some of the recommendations that are grouped under one actor can be, in their entirety or with minor adjustments, also grouped under another. Recommendations will be accompanied by a lapidary presentation of the state of affairs to which they refer.

Recommendations are based on the analysis of the Bureau of Social Research entitled *Media Narratives about the European Union - The Case of Serbia and Montenegro*,¹⁵ on findings from our own media monitoring, and on conversations with individuals (journalists, experts¹⁶) knowledgeable of the media and communication strategies relating to Serbia's European integration.

The EU as a Whole

Even the highly informed and Eurointegration-friendly analysts/researchers cannot see a consistent media-communication strategy. Regardless of whether this is a misperception or a more or less objective view, it is clear that the media-communication strategy of the EU at the macro level should be more persistent, consistent and connected.

From the standpoint of citizens and the media in Serbia, the EU is perceived as non-transparent when it comes to Serbia's European integration. There is no doubt that this is one of the major reasons for criticism of the EU in the local public. Considering the media and communication capacities at its disposal, the EU could, and should, be more transparent regarding Serbia's European integration.

As for the attitude of EU officials towards the political situation in Serbia, even the part of the local public that is in favour of European integration notices significant contradictions. On a broader level, it is necessary to make the European officials' communication with the regime in Serbia coherent, so that the public could better understand the relationship of the European Union towards Serbia and its citizens. For example, critical messages from the European Commission's annual reports on the progress of Serbia or EU officials on certain topics are often disavowed by public appearances of some of top EU officials. At bilateral meetings with the holders of power in Serbia, EU officials should not demonstrate behaviour the general public interprets as a form of support for them.

In recent years, geopolitical constellations (Kosovo, the war in Ukraine) have been at the epicentre of media and communication to such a degree that everything else was put on the back burner. No matter how inevitable it sometimes seems, and regardless of how much EU officials try to express it using more subtle forms, the logic of conditioning (blackmail, demands, pressures, threats) does not fare well in Serbia at all, either as a form of communication or in the media.

When it comes to geopolitical constellations, a negative narrative according to which the EU is asking Serbia to end its friendship with Russia and China is noticeably present in the media. Of course, this is not good for the image of the EU in Serbia, considering the affection of local citizens towards those two global actors. In the communication strategy of EU officials, there is a need to apply a tolerant rhetorical repertoire.

A specific negative narrative about the EU is articulated in the media involving another global actor, the USA. Namely, in the media it is possible to come across a narrative according to which the EU (or some of its members) is subservient to the USA. Such a narrative is doubly negative, be it due to the alleged subordination of the EU, or due to the fact that the EU is subservient precisely to the US, which is a global actor that is not viewed favourably by the local population. In this regard, the EU's communication strategy should be based on the principles of proportional independence and autonomy of the EU in relation to the USA.¹⁷

The media analysis of the Bureau of Social Research showed that the narrative related to the issue of Kosovo particularly stands out among the negative narratives concerning the EU. There is a highly present narrative which we have identified as bias/dysfunctionality of the EU when it comes to solving the problem of Kosovo. In that regard, EU officials do not have much communication space for manoeuvres, but they should be using the little they have in a diplomatically skilful way.¹⁸

Regardless of whether this is completely correct or not, the local public often gets the impression that the EU is acting in a patronising fashion. Such behaviour is causing an irrational aversion to European integration; thus, in terms of communication and media, work should be done to deconstruct this widespread perception.

In the local media and the public, there is a negative narrative that is very bad for European integration – that the EU is hypocritical and unprincipled. It is of far-reaching communication importance for the support of European integration in Serbia that such a perception of the EU in Serbia is gradually dismantled.¹⁹

The view that the perspective of the EU as a whole is not exactly great is often expressed in Serbian media. Consequently, the EU communication strategy lacks the dimension of self-confidence and the promise of a certain future, which is an important assumption required for increased support for European integration in Serbia.²⁰

EU officials relatively often reach for a narrative that emphasises Serbia's strategic commitment to European integration.²¹ This is to be expected; however, the narrative solutions would benefit from a little more creativity and suggestiveness.

EU actors and people from the Serbian government (the President of Serbia and the Government of Serbia, but especially the Prime Minister) prevail in media announcements about Serbia's European integration. The media and journalists in Serbia should look at European integration through a more diverse framework of actors, regardless of whether representatives, bodies and groups are from the EU or from Serbia.

Even if we assume that the Ministry for European Integration, for whatever reasons, is insisting on a more passive media approach, it is up to the journalists to pay significantly more attention to the Minister and the Ministry that, formation-wise, is in charge of the European integration.

How many journalists in Serbia have dedicated themselves to the European integration as a topic that is extremely important for our society and country? The fact that today's media logic is not looking for journalists who will devote him/herself thoroughly to certain topics over a long period of time, should by no means serve as an alibi for superficial, ceremonial and reactive dealing with the topic of European integration. In short, it is up to the media to find ways and means to follow the European integration of Serbia in proportion with its importance.

Media workers (un)voluntarily participate in the creation of pseudo-events, which are not lacking when it comes to European integration. To the contrary. Mechanical and repeated transmission of announcements from press conferences, conversations with the President and the Prime Minister of Serbia, their posts on social networks... all of this is overrepresented in the media. It is up to the media to subject such content to professional editing. At the same time, there should be as few pseudo-events in the media as possible, or more precisely, they should only be used if they are about to bring some valuable information to the public.

The views of politicians/officials, either domestic and foreign (EU), are presented in the media too often when it comes to the area of European integration. The fact that the views of politicians/officials dominate to such an extent among the patterns of argumentation is by no means a sign of an enviable media culture. Especially regarding a topic such as European integration, the media should cultivate forms of argumentation such as analysis, statistical data and normative acts.²²

When it comes to the European integration of Serbia, the absence of an extremely important social actor – citizens – is quite disturbing. It is precisely their voice that should be heard in various ways in the media, regardless of whether they are in favour or against European integration. That kind of media openness to citizens could only contribute to the democratic legitimisation of Serbia's European integration.

Even a superficial glance into Serbia's media reality shows that, in all this time, the capacities required to approach the topic of European integration in a meaningful way have not been built. The public and society need media platforms where Serbia's European integration will be discussed in an argumentative, responsible and deliberative manner.

In the pro-government media, this topic is completely conditioned by the agenda of the President of Serbia and the Government of Serbia. It is highly important to view the European integration as something of general social and far-reaching importance, which goes beyond the current or future holders of power.

Much like the citizens, in most media in Serbia, especially those that are pro-government, civil society organisations (CSOs) are almost completely absent. Since various CSOs, from various fields, play a very important role in sensitising and mobilising the public for European integration, it is up to the media to make them as visible as possible.

It is noticeable that analysts/experts are very often present in the media when it comes to the thematic framework of Serbia's European integration. There is room to further improve this media practice by expanding the circle of analysts/experts and by opening up the space for dissonant voices and critical dialogue.²³

Due to its monitoring, the Social Research Bureau is highly aware of the fact that there is a marked imbalance in the media. Namely, opposition parties are not at all represented in the pro-government media, except when they are subjected to defamation. In the name of media culture and democratic ethos, it is necessary for media to have proportionally represented opposition parties.

It has turned out that, in most cases, the media in Serbia approach the topic of European integration from a purely informative point of view. Without denying that information is enormously important, the media should also nurture other media approaches, especially surveys/analysis.

As the media analysis of the Bureau of Social Research shows, the media in Serbia predominantly employ a neutral narrative when talking about European integration.²⁴ This reflects the confusion of the local public regarding this topic. A differently set media strategy, with many more articles containing a positively intoned narrative, would significantly contribute to ensuring that support for European integration does not remain simply declarative.

Government in Serbia

As the ongoing media monitoring of the Bureau of Social Research shows, the Ministry for European Integration and the Minister who heads it are almost invisible in the media. The Ministry that covers European integration should be much more represented in the media, especially concerning Serbia's strategic direction. The absence of the Minister for European integration indicates that she is busy with the ongoing work, that European integration affairs are stagnating, or that integration is not being given any special attention at the moment. The matter is simple in this regard: determination of the authorities/Government of Serbia in terms of European integration would be confirmed by the greater media presence of Minister Tanja Mišćević.

When talking about the European integration of Serbia, the government uses ritualised, repetitive, un-nuanced, non-binding and often contradictory rhetoric. When, in a specific public address, one of the high-ranking government officials casually and unconvincingly says that 'Serbia is on the European path', that does not have a great media and communication potential. The government should articulate an approach that will advocate for the European integration of Serbia in an essential, innovative, multi-layered, responsible and consistent manner.

The government is not transparent when it comes to the progress of the EU accession process, or regarding the obligations and the time frame predicted for Serbia to become a full member of the EU. One of the reasons why Serbian citizens' support for European integration is not greater is certainly the impression that much is being deliberately concealed from them. Consequently, it is up to the authorities to make the negotiation process with the EU significantly more transparent.

During media monitoring by the Bureau of Social Research, years ago, it was observed that pseudo-events are generated mostly around the President of Serbia; however, in this regard he is closely followed by the Government of Serbia, especially the Prime Minister. This often proves to be very useful from the standpoint of the technology of government, but the logic of pseudo-events in the field of European integration of Serbia can be, to say the least, inexpedient. In order for the European integration of Serbia to gain fullness and credibility in terms of media and communication, pseudo-events under the direction of the President and the Government of Serbia should be reduced to their proper, i.e. minimal amount.

The approach of the Government of Serbia is radically non-inclusive when it comes to the process of Serbia's European integration. The above especially applies to citizens, who – and it is difficult to exaggerate here - are completely excluded from the entire process. It is reasonable to assume that European integration would gain additional legitimacy, as well as support, if citizens were better informed and more involved in the process.

Among other things, it is obvious from the media monitoring by the Bureau of Social Research that the ruling structures of Serbia are placing discursive emphasis on the current/future economic benefits of European integration. That sort of superficial economism, especially since other dimensions of European integration are overlooked, is not an expedient a long-term communication strategy. Of course, the economy is an important part of the European integration of Serbia, but its overemphasis ignores other, equally important dimensions.²⁵

We already mentioned that the government's rhetoric on European integration is often contradictory, as shown in the most obvious way through the cultivation of a kind of Euroscepticism. In this sense, the national interest (state sovereignty, territorial integrity, disposal of natural resources, preservation of traditional values) is the area that fosters the growth of Euroscepticism. As much as some of the topics in this domain are definitely delicate in and of themselves, there is an entire series of areas

(economy, quality of everyday life, rule of law, functioning of institutions, shared value heritage) where the government, especially the Ministry for European Integration, could effectively reduce Euroscepticism.

This is well reflected in the media, where those who govern Serbia present themselves as people who strive for geopolitical equidistance. From a common-sense perspective, such an approach conflicts with Serbia's principled commitment to European integration. Bearing in mind the attitude of the citizens of Serbia towards Russia and China, this is functional for the government from a communication point of view, but it undermines the European integration processes in many ways.

When it comes to European integration, much depends on what the authorities emphasise. What is visibly missing in terms of communication and media is the value dimension of European integration, as well as ways in which it will contribute to the citizens' everyday lives. The emphasis should therefore be on the fact that the EU and Serbia, in essence, share the same set of values. The fact that citizens are uninformed, and sometimes also misinformed, about what European integration brings in terms of everyday and concrete life shows that the government has failed in this regard.

There is an anthropological thread that has become established in the communication strategy of the authorities in Serbia, which - judging by public opinion surveys - has not proven to be effective. Based on the already mentioned economism, it is the goal-rational direction that predominates in the approach to European integration. In order for the communication strategy to be more balanced and expedient, it is necessary to include, in addition to the value dimension, the emotional dimension as well.²⁶

Instead of viewing the CSOs as someone who will help society and the state in the process of joining Serbia to the EU, the government distances itself from them. In terms of communication, it would be desirable for more social actors to cooperate in the process of European integration. With their position, experience and capacities, it is precisely the CSOs that can play one of the key roles in the process of accession. The fact that the Government of Serbia has formed GONGOs in an entire range of sectors in order to simulate cooperation with CSOs, is not of any great benefit. To the contrary.

Parties in Serbia are extremely polarised, making the space for dialogue and cooperation on European integration extremely narrow. The government's communication strategy should be articulated differently so that pro-European opposition parties would be more motivated to cooperate with the government regarding Serbia's European integration.

Unlike EU officials, the government in Serbia uses the narrative of strategic direction toward European integration much less often. The aforementioned finding can hardly be interpreted in any other way than as a confirmation that the government in Serbia is approaching European integration in a merely declarative fashion. The more frequent use of that narrative by those in power in Serbia would unequivocally demonstrate true commitment to European integration.²⁷

It can be concluded that the representatives of the EU community are not sufficiently present in the Serbian media. Without going into the entire range of possible reasons for this, much more work must be done to improve the media visibility of all the ways in which the EU community in Serbia is contributing to our society and economy.

Albeit to a lesser extent than the Serbian authorities, the EU community in Serbia also likes to emphasise the economic benefits of European integration. It is necessary to introduce communication and media mechanisms that will place the focus on the value and emotional dimension of Serbia's European integration.

The EU community in Serbia is thus reduced to a more or less generous financier of various projects. At the same time, citizens, as a rule, play the role of subordinate recipients of services. In terms of media and communication, it would be more fruitful to emphasise cooperation in the implementation of projects.

Fully aware of the fact that the fault is not theirs alone, the EU community in Serbia is insufficiently influential when it comes to creating a narrative about European integration. Not only does the government decisively shape the dominant narrative, but opponents of European integration are also more visible in the media than the EU community in Serbia. In addition to increasing media visibility, it would be of immeasurable communication benefit if the EU community in Serbia would articulate an impressive and authentic narrative about European integration.

At the micro level, communication strategies of the EU were not found to be differentiated in line with the structure of the local society. It would be good to design specific communication strategies for different social groups.

It is simply assumed that only those who are initially interested in European integration are looking for information related to the process. At the micro level, the EU should start from the opposite starting point in its communication strategy: that reliable and well thought-out information should reach every single citizen.

Public Opinion on EU Integration

Public Opinion on EU Integration from the State's Point of View

In this part of the analysis, we will deal with attitude as a basic element of public opinion about someone or something, in this case the European integration of Serbia as a process, but also with actors involved in the process aimed at Serbia becoming a member of the European Union. Accordingly, our focus will be on showing, from three perspectives, how the attitude towards EU integration and the actors involved in this process is measured, and should be measured.

The first perspective is of an informative nature and consists of determining the so-called cognitive components, i.e. how familiar the survey's target groups are with the topic of European integration and the actors involved in this process, and from which sources, i.e. media they receive information. The second dimension is the so-called emotional component, which includes emotions, stereotypes and preconceptions about the European integration of Serbia and the actors engaged therein.

Finally, the third dimension is conative. It refers to the motivation and interests showed by the survey target group in relation to both the process of Serbia's European integration and its membership in the EU.

First, we will deal with the research base of the Ministry of European Integration,²⁸ which keeps data on public opinion surveys on the topic of integration since 2006.

Reviewing public opinion surveys on EU integration, we can clearly see that there is a shallow, insufficiently precise and un-systematised indicator strategy for researching the opinions of Serbian citizens when it comes to measuring the three mentioned components of the attitude about EU integration and actors who participate in the process. Questions that are crucial to the quality of collected data must be the result of indicators, and indicators must be the result of the process of operationalising survey objectives. From the point of view of communication, survey objectives must be part of some communication strategy, i.e. the intention that actors in the EU process – primarily those on the side of the Serbian state - wish to achieve in order to make the integration process legitimate for most citizens.

The analysis of the topics is secondary, and the question is whether the surveys were based on questions that had inadequate explanatory power, because the topics were: Serbia's membership in the EU, attitude towards the EU, what the EU means for the respondent, the topic of EU identity, benefits of EU membership, information about the EU, EU values, travel, EU and reforms, obstacles in the EU integration process, Kosovo and the EU. Some of the question had to do with the respondents' view of conjunctural topics (cooperation with the UN Tribunal, recognition of Kosovo's independence).

The authors of public opinion surveys did not bear in mind that public opinion surveys are a means of deliberation, in this case at the level of the European integration process. In addition, they missed the opportunity to have, today, research that would give us a

systematic picture and explanation of how we went from unquestionable support for Serbia's membership in the EU in 2009 (73%), to almost half of that 13 years later, in December 2022 (43%).

Differently conducted surveys would have made it possible to become aware that there was a need to respond to challenges. Segmentation of the results according to socio-demographic variables could have helped, as it was present in part of the conducted surveys and could have provided the reader with a precise picture of the survey participants' opinions about the EU.

Besides the methodological comments, it is necessary to also point out the heuristic dimension. Although the publication of public opinion surveys does deserve praise, the Ministry of European Integration should publish machine-readable databases and questionnaires on its website so that the professional and academic public could have the opportunity to analyse the data that was collected at the expense of the state, with the obligation to submit their analyses to the Ministry.

In an attempt to show the ways to use the available material, we will refer to the findings of the last survey from December 2022.²⁹ Looking at replies to the question why they would vote against Serbia's membership in the EU, we can see an answer that is shallow in content, based on principled opposition, with the presence of principled conservative attitudes. These findings tell us that the previous media communication of EU actors with the citizens of Serbia was not conducted at the appropriate level, as some of the citizens who are against EU membership did not have any substantial arguments. There is another piece of data that speaks of the ineffectiveness of media promotion of EU integration in Serbia; namely, almost four out of 10 citizens do not know what the most important event of the last year was. This survey, too, showed the issue we pointed out in the part of the media analysis: that there is a problem of presenting the fulfilment of measures from 35 chapters. They are inadequately presented to the public not as a way of reforming society, but as an instrument of imposition and conditioning. In this survey, that was the main problem for 28% of respondents. Three pieces of data speak in support of the fact that the informative component of the position on EU integrations is at a particularly low level. The first is that 83% of respondents do not know how much pre-accession aid Serbia received from the EU, and the second is that two thirds of respondents have not heard of a single EU-supported project in Serbia.

Looking at the survey that was conducted a year earlier, in December 2021,³⁰ we can note the absence of a clear indicator-based concept of a public opinion survey that would provide answers that would be useful for improving communication of the topics related to the European integration of Serbia. Instead, we mostly see a hodgepodge of questions which, had there been a secondary analysis, could have been useful for improving communication regarding Serbia's membership in the EU.

In this survey as well, we can note the presence of the low level of familiarity with Serbia's integration into the EU. Only 3% of the respondents said that they were fully familiar with the integration process. Together with 28% who said they were mostly familiar, they make up barely a third of those who said that they are familiar with the

integration of Serbia into the EU. Half of the respondents (50%) see themselves as responsible for the lack of information about the most important social process in Serbia, because they do not really follow the news on the topic.

As for the conative component, i.e. interest in being more informed about Serbia's EU integration, 63% of the citizens gave a negative answer. This finding would have a greater research benefit if the socio-demographic perspective was presented as well, i.e. if we knew what the answers were depending on age, education and employment status.

All this would be easy to understand if earlier surveys, from 2010, did not show that 56% of respondents (which was the highest percentage) suggested shows with "ordinary" citizens as their preferred form of obtaining information. This was an indicator that citizens did want to be informed.

| The Public Opinion Survey Conducted by BIRODI

In order to notice the possibilities for improving communication on the subject of EU integration, it is very important to look at the broader social context. We will now present the social context that dominates in Serbia, based on the survey that was conducted by the Bureau of Social Research at the end of 2022, which tells us that priorities directed towards meeting basic needs at the level of legal regulation of the state, i.e. realising the needs of citizens in the field of employment, health and education, belong to the category of post/neo-material values.

On the one side stands the conservative priority of "relying on tradition and history", while on the other side we have the pro-liberal "respect for the right to diversity/own choice of all citizens", "more democracy" and "more capitalism". Openness to other countries is a low-ranked priority, with the remark that the society is somewhat more open towards the East than towards the West.

The state's greater concern for employment, medical treatment and education, the rule of law, i.e. respect for the right of all citizens to choose are the priorities that were listed as the most important by respondents aged between 18 and 34. Respondents who belonged to the age groups of 35 to 54, that is, 55 years and older, singled out the state's greater concern for employment, medical treatment and education as their main priorities, followed by the rule of law and peace and order in society.

For respondents aged 35 to 54, the fourth priority among the most important was the protection of strategic economic areas in Serbia, while for respondents over 55 the fourth priority was reliance on tradition and history. The same age group, older than 55, preferred Serbia's cooperation with the East.

The need for democracy stands below half in all three age groups. The same can be said for the need for capitalism, where the percentages are significantly lower.

The students' main priorities are the state's greater concern for employment, medical treatment and education, followed by respect for the right to diversity/choice of all citizens and the peace and order in society. For the retired part of the sample, the main priorities are the state's greater concern for employment, medical treatment and education, peace and order in society, i.e. the development of solidarity among citizens, while for housewives, in addition to the state's greater concern for employment, medical treatment, education and the protection of Serbia's strategic economic areas, the main priorities are peace and order, i.e. reducing the difference between the rich and the poor.

The topic of the survey was the perception of anomie. The results of the survey on the perception of the level of anomie in society show that, on average, slightly fewer than six out of 10 respondents believe that there is an anomic situation in Serbia. Small deviations are clearly obvious when we compare the findings from 2016 to those from 2022. First of all, they are reflected, in a positive direction, in the field of material security. The percentage, although low, has still doubled in 2022 compared to that of 2016. On the other hand, the attitude about constructiveness and the existence of optimism has decreased by about one sixth in both cases. Compared to the findings from 2016, we see a small but significant upward trend in the view that morality, as such, has less influence today than it did six years ago. The same applies to responsibility and seriousness of people.

By crossing the data on the perception of anomie with socio-demographic data, we arrive at a statistically significant link with the material position. We can see that anomie is somewhat less among those who defined their material position as excellent.

Part of the survey was also devoted to the emotional attitude towards the EU. The majority of respondents feel indifference and respect for the Union. If they had the opportunity, they would send their children to be educated first of all in EU countries, where they would also opt to go for medical treatment. They would look for a job in EU countries first, where they also believe they would have a fair trial. If they had the opportunity to start a business, they would first choose EU countries as their companies' headquarters.

In an online survey that was conducted by BIRODI using the sample of 1,761 citizens,³¹ when asked about the main obstacle to Serbia's progress towards the EU, most people answered that it was Kosovo, the second reply on the list was that the EU does not want Serbia, while the third was related to the state of the rule of law and democracy. Respondents from all age groups, levels of education and places of residence recognised Kosovo as the main obstacle.

We asked the survey participants what the EU wants from Serbia. The majority believe that the EU wants access to cheap labour, followed by EU's wish to separate us from Russia and China. Access to the labour market, a better standard of living and easier travel were the main benefits that were cited by respondents when they were asked about the benefits of Serbia's membership in the EU for citizens.

We asked the survey participants if they ever heard of the "EU for You" campaign. Only every fifth respondent gave a positive answer.

Conclusions

As predicted by the analytical matrix, there are two clearly visible levels of factors that influence the fate of the media presentation of Serbia's European integration process.

The first is systemic. Serbia is a country with a clearly established *industry of populism*³² - the instrument of legitimising personal power with the aim of undermining the rule of law and the integrity of institutions, i.e. strengthening the trend of public passivisation through hybrid public forms such as controlled media, pseudo experts and bot factories. The bot factories are explained in a Stanford University study authored by Daniel Bush.³³ The consequence of the so-described situation is media disorganisation, where the media tend to become an unsanctioned means of promotion, propaganda and retaliation in an environment where the REM, as regulator, does not perform its legally defined duties while self-regulation mechanisms are unable to influence the situation, which is not compatible with the values and institutional-normative framework that Serbia's membership in the European Union requires. For this reason, we are experiencing a slowdown in the EU integration process all the way to a halt, because the process itself is viewed as a danger to the existing political order. The issue of Kosovo greatly helps anti-European actors both in Belgrade and in the EU, because the solution for both Serbia and Kosovo is actually their Europeanisation.

On the second level, we have the media/public opinion component.

Our media analysis, media monitoring and interviews with key actors unequivocally show that the communication and media strategy of European integration is generated from and around the power embodied in the President of Serbia. Bearing in mind the degree of that inviolability, as well as the associated technology of governance, it can be concluded that European integration is being held hostage by the local government. The media discourse and the rhetoric of the authorities reflect and encourage the negative attitude of our society and citizens towards European integration.

The media show this in quite an obvious way; there is a lack of open, thought-out and constructive confrontation on the topic of European integration between political and social actors. Monologic media-political logic is at work in the field of European integration, too, although this is not in the best tradition of European culture.

In order to promote and protect particular interests, the communication strategy is often not in line with the public interest. The trouble is all the greater due to the fact that the media strategy is set in such a way that it ignores the interest of the public. Topics are imposed according to particular interests (authorities, media owners/editors, EU actors), while their media processing is too frequently not based on the principles of objective, accurate and timely information. It is not an exaggeration to say that the European integration of Serbia, from the communication and media point of view, is currently at an impasse.

What is most worrying is the role of local media in the entire European integration process. They should uncompromisingly mediate between the citizens and the authorities, articulating and defending the public interest. The media in Serbia have generally resigned themselves, and not only regarding European integration. The beginning of the (re)conceptualisation of the communication strategy of the European integration of Serbia should be based on empowered, confident and independent media. Is it too much to ask that they strictly adhere to their own ethos, and be fully aware of the valuable role they play in society? When it comes to EU actors, both at the macro and micro level, it is clear from all the above that there are plenty of reasons and room for improving the communication and media strategy. It is necessary to bear in mind the socio-cultural features of Serbia, but also to point out in an involved and careful manner how everyday lives of the citizens of Serbia can be improved. That which is usually neglected - the true knowledge about everything that makes up the European integration process of a society like Serbia - can be of inestimable use.

Recommendations

Extending and strengthening the existing infrastructure of the deliberation on the integration of Serbia (EU deliberation) in the form of a strategic document appears to be a solution that would have the following results: increasing citizens' information about the process itself and the situation in the European Union, which would prevent false information (cognitive component); prevention of stereotypes and untruths about the EU integration process (emotional component); developing awareness of the outcomes and benefits of Serbia's membership in the EU for its citizens; and the involvement of citizens in the process of Serbia's integration into the EU as consultants and evaluators (conative dimension).

The EU deliberation is a democratic response to existing anti-democratic processes that aims to change the social environment, i.e. a process that should create citizens' "psychological ownership" of the process of Serbia's integration into the EU, which would give this extremely important process essential legitimacy.

The analysis of media reporting on the EU and integration shows that the media approach is primarily based on information, news about current events, and announcements of future events. Surveys/analyses are present in approximately every tenth media publication. Especially in Serbia, similar to surveys/analysis, a significant percentage of media publications have to do with advocacy, propaganda and promotion. The educational media approach should be intensified because, when it comes to European integration, there is not enough education in reporting.

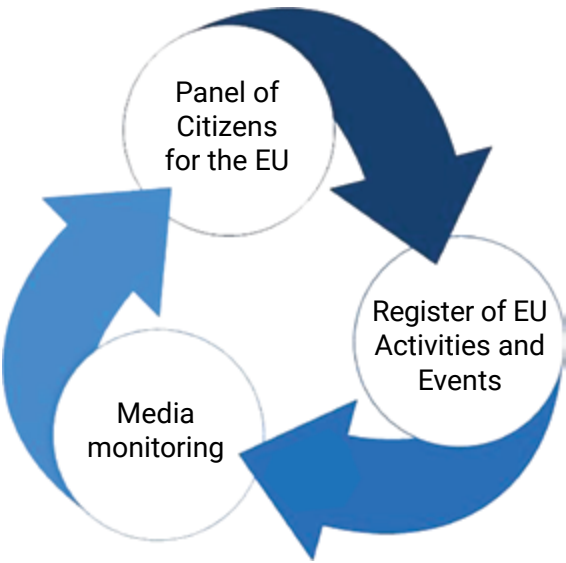
The next step in EU deliberation is the formation of the "Panel of Citizens for the EU", an online platform based on the model of deliberative research. Deliberation would be conducted on two levels: general and special, i.e. at the level of chapters. Each of the chapters would have a coordinator who would be chosen from among the members of the panel. Each member of the panel would have his/her own account, and within the account his/her socio-demographic characteristics and data from the initial, access questionnaire, which would be standardised based on the previous operationalisation of the three components of the position on EU integration. A standardised questionnaire created in this way would be offered to anyone who conducts public opinion surveys on the EU, including the Ministry for European Integration. All conducted surveys would be stored in the EU integration public opinion survey database based on the ALLBUS model.³⁴

Along with the creation of the "Panel of Citizens for the EU", it is necessary to create a Register of EU Events and Activities, that is, to upgrade the existing website *EU for You*³⁵ as a mechanism for publishing information related to EU integration. The purpose of the Register of Events and Activities would be to present activities/projects, organisers, target groups, regional representation, planned and expected results and obstacles in the realisation of activities/projects to citizens through communication channels.

Such activities/projects would be evaluated by members of the “Panel of Citizens for the EU”. Every seven days, activities/projects would be presented on Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) as a public service - before or in the News programme - or on other interested media, including the results from the perspective of project users. This would serve to achieve two effects. The first would be informative, familiarising citizens with EU projects and activities, while the second would represent a sort of monitoring of project implementation, including the efficiency and legality of spending EU funds in Serbia.

An essential component of the development of public opinion is the monitoring of the media on the subject of EU integration, which would include monitoring of reporting on the EU integration process at the general and chapter/cluster level, as well as actors who are in charge of, or interested in, the EU integration process. Media monitoring would be carried out by trained high school students and students of sociology, journalism and political science.

Chart 1. Three components of public opinion concerning EU integration

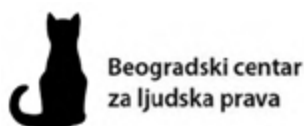


Based on the collected data, a report on the state of public opinion concerning EU integration would be prepared once per year and presented in Serbia, as well as before the EU Parliament.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This publication is written within the project “Fundamentals in focus: European integration beyond action plans”. The overall objective of this project is to substantively contribute to the sustainable rule of law reforms in Serbia and Montenegro by bridging the gaps between political criteria and the rule of law reforms under Cluster I within the new EU enlargement methodology.

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 2. Ivana Djurić, Ministry for European Integration, Head of Communications Department
 3. Tamara Filipović, NUNS (Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia)
 4. Dr. [Irina Milutinović](#), Institute for European Studies

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Belgrade, September 2023