

BEYOND ABSOLUTE CONTROL

HIDDEN MALIGN DOMESTIC
AND FOREIGN
“GREY ZONE” MEDIA INFLUENCE
IN SERBIA

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This paper is the summary of the results of a research project lasting over six months, covering domestic and foreign hidden malign influence activities pursued through the so-called “grey zone” media in three countries – the Czech Republic, Serbia and Hungary –, during a period of heightened international tensions related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Political Capital has assessed in numerous studies how the Kremlin or the Hungarian hybrid political regime has used their extensive media empire to conduct active measures or political smear-campaigns in service of political or geopolitical goals. In this study, we set out to understand the inner workings of clandestine disinformation campaigns carried out by mostly anonymous media actors to conduct or influence political campaigns, specifically in the run-up to the Czech, Serbian and Hungarian elections, and destabilise the region in general after the outbreak of the war. For more information on the project, please visit our website.

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Authors of this paper: **Nikola Burazer**

Contributors: **Brady Hills, Adam Lelonek, PhD**

Country contributors: Kristína Šefčíková [Czech Republic]; Lóránt Győri, Ákos Keller-Alánt, Csaba Molnár [Hungary]; Nikola Burazer [Serbia].

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Central-Eastern Europe, a so-called “grey zone” has emerged in the media, which tries to influence public opinion and pre-election political campaigns through hyper-partisan and sometimes even extremist – often anonymous or only seemingly “independent” – political communication, utilising conspiracy theories and ignoring the standards of ethical journalism.
- What differentiates the “grey zone” media from the mainstream in most cases is a specific media strategy that attempts to mask or remove the original partisan sources of messages and not to rely on traditional media organisations to manipulate or hide authorship, editorial, or ownership background.
- Our media research in Serbia has, therefore, looked at the Serbian political campaign communication between November 1 and December 31, 2021, as well as January 1 and March 31, 2022, to map and reveal the Serbian “grey zone” media ecosystem, their role in the “dirty campaign,” and the war-related rhetoric before the general elections in April 2022.
- In Serbia, the hybrid political regime headed by PM Aleksandar Vučić dominates the media landscape from tabloids, such as *Informer* and *Srpski telegraf*, to mainstream newspapers, such as *Politika* and *Večernje novosti*, while independent or critical media are far and few between. The Serbian “grey zone” media is partly a direct result of the hybrid regime in which governmental forces try to expand their media outreach beyond their mainstream media empire in order to either promote the government or hurt the opposition. Some of the fractured opposition parties, movements and other actors attempt to create their own media, lacking a free and balanced media space.
- Accordingly, the Serbian “grey zone” media ecosystem consists of two politically antagonistic parts. The pro-government grey zone media is made up of mostly anonymous hyper-partisan sources and “independent” GONGOs, trying to spread governmental propaganda under different brands, such as *Pristojna Srbija* or *Srpska digitalna inicijativa*. There are also recently registered private online media such as *24sedam* or *Pobednik* that have a clear purpose of promoting the government. More numerous and influential, however, are the right-wing “critical” grey zone media outlets, mostly conspiracy/clickbait sources, which are often critical or both the government and the leading opposition parties since they serve as some form of a substitute for the non-existent nationalist mainstream independent media.
- Grey zone media in Serbia have an outsized impact on the political discourse given the weakness of the mainstream independent media and tend to spread anti-West and/or anti-government narratives on issues such as the environment (Rio Tinto lithium mine), crime, or corruption. The invasion of Ukraine has hardened the grey zone media’s general pro-Kremlin or Eurosceptic stance even more thanks to their nationalist ideology regardless of political sides, as well as dependence on Russian information sources. Pro-Russian sentiments in the Serbian population also created a favorable environment for such messages.

- Consequently, many grey zone media outlets continue to legitimise the Russian aggression by disseminating the Kremlin's strategic disinformation narratives, about, for example, the aggressive posture of the West or NATO, Ukraine's alleged genocidal acts, or fascism.
- The network analysis based on the hyperlinks found in articles or posts published by the media under investigation has reaffirmed that the grey zone ecosystem is mobilized and organized around opposition pro-Russian outlets of *Novi Standard* and *Pravda*, which directly reference the Kremlin's mouthpiece *Sputnik Srbija*.

INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the new social media platforms in the early 2000s, which have simultaneously reinvented and marginalised classical mass media, new media technologies have enabled the development of new political manipulation techniques based on algorithm-enhanced individual targeting, artificial intelligence, bot- or troll armies etc. More importantly, the new media platforms and technologies have disrupted the local elites' traditional communication with their publics or electorates by allowing local or foreign political actors abroad to bypass entirely – with the help of social media platforms' cloud-based online infrastructures – traditional political or media organisations, as they seek to reach and manipulate target audiences. The latest iteration of malign domestic or foreign manipulation attempts may be observed in so-called “hybrid political regimes,” such as Hungary and Serbia, or more clear-cut autocracies, such as Russia or China, which use a variety of semi-transparent, non-transparent, or anonymous forms of new and social media outlets and accounts to influence publics at home or abroad, in order to exert “soft” or “sharp power” in addition to their traditional media channels.

RESEARCH FOCI

Our novel research focused on the mapping and public exposure of the so called “grey zone” media that have been established in the last several years by parties, foreign powers, NGOs, lesser-known entities or unknown actors and financed through obscure channels to influence public debate around key topics in Serbia, alongside other Central-Eastern European countries. These include the anti-LGBTQ law in Hungary,^{II} patriotism in Serbia,^{III} the corruption of politicians^{IV} or the anti-vaccination movement in the Czech Republic.^V The Czech and Serbian country case studies are to be found in separate studies on the project homepage of Political Capital.^{VI}

This new breed of the so-called “grey zone” media ecosystem has not (re)invented political propaganda as such: it has rather found new ways to disseminate it in a covert way in order to manipulate or deceive news consumers unable to discern who and why is communicating on specific issues, and to whom. We have chosen to investigate the “grey zone” media ecosystem from a comparative perspective in the run-up to three general elections in two fundamentally different political systems in Central-Eastern Europe: the 2021 general elections of the Czech Republic, which is a liberal democracy with a high-functioning democratic public sphere; and the 2022 election campaigns of the “hybrid regimes” in Hungary and Serbia, where the political, economic and media systems are institutionally dominated and distorted in favour of the ruling parties to restrict basic political and human rights, including the freedom of speech or media. Therefore, the fundamental role and functioning of the “white” or “grey” media is markedly different in these countries. Whereas the “grey zone” media represent a rather small niche, as compared to the robust and mostly independent mainstream “white” media, operated by fringe actors in the Czech Republic, the Serbian or Hungarian governments use “grey zone” media to further expand their already dominant positions in their respective media spaces by targeting unaffiliated or even opposition-minded audiences.

Likewise, opposition actors or parties in hybrid regimes or autocracies are also reliant on the use of “grey zone” media to compensate for the lack of a strong, independent “white” media.

DEFINITION OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA

Our research distinguished between “white,” “grey” and “black” propaganda and related communication infrastructures. While “white” propaganda would be open about their intent, sources etc., “black” propaganda would pretend to be a source other than themselves. Between the white and black propaganda is the “grey zone” media and propaganda which differs in four key aspects from independent mainstream media: (1) they primarily disseminate party or some sort of political propaganda; (2) their content-production relies extensively on the use of disinformation, not adhering to any journalistic ethical standards; (3) they do not establish traditional media organisations; finally, (4) they hide or somehow manipulate the transparency of authorship, or their editorial or financial backgrounds.

We consider websites or social media pages “grey zone” media if they either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote the governmental parties’ or the opposition parties’ political messages through the aggressive use of new or social media. A media outlet was classified as part of the “grey zone” if the nature and content of the site met the two predefined mandatory criteria (hyper-partisanship or news manipulation) and at least two of the five secondary criteria (time of establishment; reproduction of partisan content; hyper-partisan memes; editorial or financial opacity; intermediary funding) – for the full list and explanation of the selection criteria please see Annex 1. In this respect, we regarded official think tanks, GONGOs or other organisations financed by parties as part of the “grey zone” strategy of a party if they were engaged in the coordinated dissemination of party propaganda before the elections.¹ **As these media can also convey external, malign Russian or Chinese influence due to their editorial policy or ownership,² or general anti-West and Eurosceptic political platforms, we have examined their rhetoric about the war between 1 January and 1 March 2022 in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.**

1 We did not consider, however, governmental, organisational or individual webpages, blogs, YouTube channels etc. fringe media since these are communication or public relations channels of certain individuals or organisations without the need or expectation to report on any other matter than their individual activities or interests.

2 We specifically included local pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing outlets that had been established to convey specific geopolitical positions in our initial list of media for each country under investigation.

METHODOLOGY

Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodology to monitor and collect historical media data present on Hungarian “grey zone” webpages and Facebook pages, Twitter or YouTube accounts. We have monitored the pre-election period between September 1 and October 31 in the Czech Republic, and the November 1 - December 31 period for Serbia and Hungary. **Given the unexpected invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, we also monitored narratives about the war between January 1 and March 1, 2022 in all three countries under investigation.** The quantitative dataset used in the analysis was generated using the SentiOne social media listening platform, which allowed us to access the data of websites, public Facebook pages and groups to conduct trend, sampling, statistical and network analysis of media content production. For more on methodology see please Annex 2.

Our main hypothesis asserted that the “grey zone” has been created either to directly manipulate the electorate or will be used indirectly by domestic or foreign actors to shape the electoral outcome and the public debate around essential issues on the political agenda during the elections.

To test our assumption and reveal the “grey zone” media, we have defined five research goals:

1. Mapping the size of the “grey zone” network in terms of numbers and their interconnectedness – based on the networks generated using the hyperlinks in elections-related messages.
2. Revealing the main political, economic or other reason behind the establishment and modus operandi of the sites under consideration.
3. Identifying influence operations orchestrated by certain actors or mostly uncoordinated media campaigns and narratives around central issues that have been carried out before, during or after the elections.
4. Establishing the possible links between the “grey zone” media and other domestic or foreign pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing media.
5. Raising awareness of the presence and manipulative nature of the “grey zone”, the actors behind these media in all the three countries under consideration among journalists, local policymakers, the foreign and domestic general audiences.

To adequately measure media and their networks employing a “grey zone” media strategy, we have defined seven categories of media to be measured that meet our initial set of criteria and are engaged in a specific type of media production in each country: (1) anonymous hyper-partisan sources; (2) the top 10 conspiracy sources;³ (3) the top 10 clickbait sites; (4) the top 10 GONGOs sources; (5) the top 10 pro-Kremlin local sources; (6) the top 10 pro-Beijing local sources; (7) other types of sources. For a detailed explanation of our media categories, please see Annex 1.

3 We defined a minimum number of sites, which could be extended by our research partners in each country.

THE SERBIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM AND MEDIA SPACE

The chapters on the political system, the media space and the political campaigns in each country serve as a context to understand how and why each “grey zone” functions, and how grey zone media communication is dependent (in a negative or positive way) on mainstream media, political parties’ and politicians’ communication.

The Serbian political system is dominated by the centre-right Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. The SNS has been in power since 2012, but always included other parties in the government such as the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (SDPS), Party of United Pensioners of Serbia (PUPS), Socialist Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and United Serbia (JS). Vučić himself is by far the most important figure of the government, despite his presidential role being largely ceremonial. As a president of the SNS and the most popular politician in the country, he has positioned himself above the government, often stepping out from his constitutional competences.

Prior to the 3 April 2022 parliamentary election, the ruling coalition was supported by 243 out of 250 MPs in the Serbian national assembly, as opposition parties either boycotted the 2020 parliamentary election or failed to pass the 3% threshold. The Serbian opposition was therefore entirely out of the parliament and can be broadly divided in two groups. The first is the group of harsh critics of the government, which have largely boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections. The other group are often considered to be “loyal” opposition, as they are mild in their criticism of the government and are given space on pro-government media. This group of parties has taken part in 2020 elections but failed to win any parliamentary seats.

Atomization of political landscape is one of the main traits of the Serbian political system, as opposition parties tend to be rather small and weak.⁴ All but one of the lists that entered the national parliament on the 3 April election were coalitions of political parties or movements. When it comes to the ruling parties, the coalition around SNS won 42,9% of the vote while the list around SPS won 11,4%. Five opposition lists entered the parliament. The centre-left opposition coalition “United for the Victory of Serbia”, comprised of the Freedom and Justice Party (SSP), People’s Party (NS), Democratic Party (DS) and Free Citizens’ Movement (PSG) won 13,6% of the vote, “Moramo” green-left coalition of Together for Serbia (ZZS), Ecological Uprising and Do not Let Belgrade Drown

4 The most important parties from the “harsh opposition” are the centre-left Freedom and Justice Party (SSP) led by Dragan Đilas, centre-right People’s Party (NS) led by Vuk Jeremić, centre-left Democratic Party (DS) led by Zoran Lutovac, liberal Free Citizen Movement (PSG) led by Pavle Grbović, centre-left Together for Serbia (ZZS) led by Nebojša Zelenović, green civic movement Do Not Drown Belgrade (NDBGD) led by Dobrica Veselinović, right-wing Dveri led by Boško Obradović and populist Enough is Enough (DJB), led by Saša Radulović. Opposition parties considered to belong to the “loyal” group are far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS), centre-left League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV), liberal Liberal-democratic Party (LDP), far-right Zavetnici, centre-right Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the monarchist Kingdom of Serbia Renewal Movement (POKS).

(NDBGD) won 4,7%, “Nada“ Coalition of DSS and one fraction of POKS won 5,4%, Zavetnici won 3,7% and the “Patriotic bloc” around Dveri and another fraction of POKS won 3,8%.⁵

When it comes to the Serbian media landscape, there are more than 2000 media outlets registered in the Serbian business registry and the total value of the advertising market in 170 million euros per year. Over 6 million Serbian citizens watch TV, 3.6 million listen to radio, 4.8 million use the internet, while printed newspapers are bought by 1.5 million people and weekly magazines by 2.5 million.⁶

Media system is also dominated by the ruling SNS. All four private television stations with national coverage (Pink TV, Happy TV, Prva TV and TV B92) are in the hands of individuals close to the ruling party and hold a strong pro-government line, often turning into political propaganda.⁷ Most daily newspapers are also strongly pro-government, ranging from pro-government tabloids owned by loyalists such as *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf*, *Alo* and *Kurir*, to more mainstream newspapers such as *Politika* and *Večernje novosti* with suspicions of covert state ownership.⁸ Pro-government media are supported by public funds through different media content co-funding schemes, commercial contracts with government institutions and advertisements by public enterprises, as well as through Telekom Srbija, a joint-stock company in majority ownership of the state whose funds were used to found, finance and purchase media outlets.⁹

Independent or critical media are few and are significantly lagging behind pro-government media when it comes to readership. Privately-owned United Group owns two critical television channels, news channel N1 and a mainstream channel Nova S, as well as two daily print media *Danas* and *Nova*. Besides United Group’s media, there are several weekly magazines such as *Vreme*, *Nedeljnik*, *NIN* and *Novi magazin*, as well as specialized and local web portals that are mainly funded by international donors.

As a result, there is a strong pro-government bias in media. Research shows an enormous dominance of ruling party candidates in electoral campaigns, which is also recognized as an important problem by the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Commission. For example, the latest European Commission report on Serbia from October 2021 states that the ruling parties received

5 “RIK: Rezultati parlamentarnih izbora sa 98,73 odsto biračkih mesta, lista SNS ima 120 mandata - IZBORI 22 - Dnevni list *Danas*,” April 6, 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/izbori22/rik-rezultati-parlamentarnih-izbora-sa-9873-odsto-birackih-mesta-lista-sns-ima-120-mandata/>

6 “Media Consumption,” Media Ownership Monitor, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/context/media-consumption/>

7 “National Television Stations in the Service of the Government,” Media Ownership Monitor, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/local-media-concentrations-below-the-radar/>

8 “Print,” Media Ownership Monitor, accessed January 24, 2022, <http://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/media/print/>

9 „Media Freedom in the Western Balkans,” Aspen Institute, accessed January 21, https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021_Aspen-Germany_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf

93% mostly positive or neutral media coverage on national news programmes from July 2020 to June 2021, while the opposition received 7% of coverage, most of which were negative.¹⁰

Serbia fell 39 places in the World Press Freedom Index of the Reporters without Borders (RSF) since 2014 and currently finds itself in 93rd place, only behind Montenegro among Western Balkan countries.¹¹ The RSF considers that “Serbia is a country with weak institutions that is prey to fake news spread by government-backed sensational media, a country where journalists are subjected to almost daily attacks that increasingly come from the ruling elite and pro-government media”.¹²

The work of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has been a subject of much controversy, as this body, in charge of issuing and revoking broadcasting licenses and monitoring electoral campaigns, is considered to be a captured institution serving the interests of the government.¹³ The composition of the REM was a topic of the inter-party dialogue mediated by the European Parliament in 2019 and 2021, but the ruling party remained in control of this institution. The lack of independence of REM has a strong impact on media freedom in the country, also because this body appoints the governing board of the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS).¹⁴

There is a presence of Russian and Chinese state-owned media in Serbia. Russian state-owned Sputnik Srbija is an influential media outlet, whose content is often republished by other media, both fringe pro-Russian media and mainstream media close to the government.¹⁵ China Radio International also has a Serbian version of its website, but its impact seems to be quite limited. Pro-Chinese messages often originate from Serbian government officials and are later disseminated by pro-government media, especially tabloid newspapers.¹⁶

10 “Serbia Report 2021,” accessed January 21, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021_en

11 “Serbia : Fight against Impunity Continues | Reporters without Borders,” RSF, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

12 “Serbia : Fight against Impunity Continues | Reporters without Borders,” RSF, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

13 “Cvejić: The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media Does Not Perform Its Basic Function in Serbia,” European Western Balkans, December 25, 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/12/25/cvejic-the-regulatory-body-for-electronic-media-does-not-perform-its-basic-function-in-serbia/>

14 “Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media: The Key for Media Freedom and Inter-Party Dialogue in Serbia,” European Western Balkans (blog), May 25, 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/05/25/regulatory-authority-for-electronic-media-the-key-for-media-freedom-and-inter-party-dialogue-in-serbia/>

15 „Kosovo Is the Serbian Crimea,“, Political Capital, accessed January 22, 2022, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/zinc_revisionism_country_report_rs.pdf

16 “Izveštavanje medija u Srbiji o EU u 2020. - Ljubav iz Kine i šamari iz Brisela,” Centar savremene politike, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://centarsavremenepolitike.rs/biblioteka/izvestavanje-medija-u-srbiji-o-eu-u-2020-ljubav-iz-kine-i-samari-iz-brisela/>

CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION BEFORE THE ELECTIONS

This chapter outlines the state of the mainstream campaign and campaign communication, political strategies, main political scandals, issues or narratives that might be used by the “grey zone” media to push their messages, reinforce or weaken the mainstream campaign communication of political parties.

Extraordinary parliamentary elections were held together on 3 April 2022 including the regular presidential election, the Belgrade municipal election, and a few other municipal elections. After the results of the 2020 parliamentary election led to a practically single-party parliament, president Vučić announced already in October 2020 that the next parliamentary elections will be held by Spring 2022. It was later decided that all three elections will be held on the same day, 3 April.¹⁷

These elections were of high importance for several reasons. First, they represented an opportunity for the opposition to return to the parliament after almost two years of electoral boycott. Second, the return of the opposition to the parliament could have led to normalization of political life, but also further escalation in electoral irregularities. Thirdly, they represented a chance for an opposition victory, especially in Belgrade, where polls showed that defeat of the SNS’ coalition was a realistic scenario. This made the Belgrade elections even more important than the other two, but the merging of the elections led to the dominance of national over local topics during the campaign, which was further strengthened by the War in Ukraine.

In the political campaign, Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS mostly focused on economic growth, rise of salaries, reduction of unemployment and improvements in infrastructure as their main achievements since coming to power in 2012. In the 2022 campaign, their slogan was “We Can Achieve Anything Together”. According to their narrative, Serbia was devastated from 2000 to 2012, when the country was ruled by the parties of the “old regime” (democratic forces which ousted Milošević in 2000), and Vučić and his party have achieved historical political and economic successes since coming to power. Similar to the economic fall and rise narrative, the SNS presents itself as a patriotic force that brought pride back to Serbia, which is respected in world politics more than ever before. The existing opposition forces are presented as a continuation of the “old regime”, which wants to bring Serbia backward and continue with the theft and betrayal of national interests regarding Kosovo. Vučić’s campaign somewhat shifted after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. **Faced with requests to join EU sanctions on Russia and the inability to adopt a highly unpopular anti-Russian stance, the government and pro-government media shifted the focus to “existential threats” and the effort the government makes to maintain stability and avoid economic and political catastrophe by aligning with either the West or Russia. The main slogan of the SNS was now “Peace. Stability. Vučić”.**

17 “Nova.rs: Predsednički, parlamentarni i beogradski izbori 3. aprila,” N1, October 23, 2021, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/nova-rs-predsednicki-parlamentarni-i-beogradski-izbori-3-aprila/>

The opposition is mostly focused on criticizing Vučić and the government for corruption, links with organized crime, deterioration of democratic institutions and free media, as well as electoral theft. Different opposition groups have additional claims. For example, right-wing and center-right opposition parties portray the government as “treacherous” due to its engagement in the dialogue with Kosovo, good relations with NATO, and dedication to EU membership. Centre-left and liberal opposition, on the other hand, criticizes the government because of the lack of progress in EU accession and democratic backsliding. **The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Serbian government’s shy, but evident pro-Western turn strengthened the campaign of right-wing political parties which spoke against introducing sanctions on Russia. Pro-EU political parties largely condemned the Russian invasion but did not present strong opinions about Serbia’s stance on the war and generally avoided the topic unless directly asked. The topic was seen as potentially damaging for the pro-EU opposition, having in mind prevalent pro-Russian sentiments within the Serbian population.**

Another new element had arisen in 2021, with environmental protests taking center stage and bringing thousands of citizens to the streets to protest environmentally harmful projects, especially the controversial lithium mine project in Western Serbia, implemented by the Rio Tinto multinational company. The mine would, according to some experts, permanently damage the environment in a large part of Serbia, including drinking water, for negligible economic gains. In late November and December 2021, massive protests led to Vučić accepting the demands of the protestors - the repealing of two laws believed to be related to the Rio Tinto mining project - despite explicitly claiming he would never do that only days earlier. The increasing centrality of environmental issues in Serbian politics is a novelty and led to the electoral success and a parliamentary status of a predominantly green coalition (Moramo) for the first time in Serbian political history.

THE SERBIAN “GREY ZONE” MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

The summary of the “grey zone” media provides an overview and a basic understanding of the “grey zone” ecosystem in Serbia, their background, and modus operandi in relation to the mainstream politics or media, including the local pro-Russian or pro-Chinese media in each country. We used investigative methods, quantitative and qualitative analysis of narratives, time-trends of message dissemination, and network analysis to understand the basic composition and content-production of all the media under investigation.

THE FUNCTIONING AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOP GREY ZONE OUTLETS

Serbian mainstream media space is characterized by prevalence of pro-government media and polarization between pro-government and media critical of the government. Mainstream critical media are much fewer and weaker in comparison, but they nevertheless have strong influence in the part of the electorate critical of the government. These media are mostly pro-Western and pro-EU, leaving the right-wing opposition electorate without mainstream media outlets to present their views.

The Serbian grey zone media under consideration also broadly fall into two categories. The first are the pro-government media and social media pages that spread pro-government propaganda, mostly focused on attacking the opposition. **By having a dominant position in the Serbian media space, the ruling parties have also reached the relative limits of their media outreach based on centralised propaganda. Therefore, they have an interest in reaching new audiences through sources that do not seem to be linked with the government and which can be used to criticize the opposition, but also spread some of the government’s key messages.**

The other group consists of media outlets and social media pages that criticize the government, either broadly or from a right-wing viewpoint. The right-wing grey zone media outlets are more numerous and influential, which can be explained by a lack of mainstream independent media outlets with such an ideological position. These outlets, however, are often critical of both the government and the mainstream opposition, making it unclear whether their messages help or hurt the opposition.

Among grey zone media in Serbia, the most relevant categories are anonymous hyper-partisan sources and conspiracy/clickbait sources. While pro-government sources dominate the first category, a large majority of conspiracy/clickbait sources are anti-government, with a strong right-wing component and lack of support for any opposition parties.

Hyper-partisan sources are mostly Facebook pages and websites with unknown ownership and financing or recently established media with a clear focus on the upcoming Belgrade elections. There are both pro-government and anti-government sources, with prevalence of the former, as seen in Table 1. The leading *Beograd* page appears as a local page for Belgrade, but actually reposts

articles from pro-government media. The *Opozicionar* page posts anti-government media articles, but not only political content. Bora Konj is an anonymous individual with a strong anti-government stance and does not appear to be linked with any political parties.

Table 1 - Top 3 Anonymous hyper-partisan sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
<i>Beograd</i>	Unknown	Government (SNS)	414 093
<i>Opozicionar</i>	Unknown	Anti-government (unspecified)	201 236
Bora Konj	Individual	Anti-government (unspecified)	193 892

Conspiracy sources are mostly YouTube channels and web portals with anti-government leaning, but without a strong anti-government bias in order to reach out to as wide of an audience as possible. They are practically all right-wing, as seen in Table 2 below, meaning that there is also lack of support for centrist or pro-EU opposition parties. These media provide space for all kinds of conspiracies, from COVID-19 vaccines to alien invasions. The leading *Webtribune* is a conspiracy web portal, while *Balkan Info* and *HelmCast* are popular YouTube channels.

Table 2. Top 3 Conspiracy sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
<i>Webtribune</i>	Private media	Anti-government (right-wing)	145 211
<i>Balkan Info</i>	Private media	Anti-government (right-wing)	48 957
<i>HelmCast</i>	Private media	Anti-government (right-wing)	18 951

Clickbait sources are also predominantly anti-government and right-wing, as seen in Table 3, with one notable exception. There is a thin line between conspiracy and clickbait sources when it comes to media content as they are both hunting for clicks and views by trying to shock their audiences. However, media categorized under clickbait sources here have a stronger anti-government bias. They mostly feature strong anti-government headlines, pointing at some form of political treason by the government. All three media listed in the top sources are web portals without official media registrations.

Table 3. Top 3 Clickbait sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
<i>Srbija Danas</i>	Unknown	Anti-government (right-wing)	152 868
<i>Srbija javlja</i>	Unknown	Government (SNS)	38 712
<i>Webherald</i>	Unknown	Anti-government (right-wing)	32 318

There are numerous smaller GONGOs or NGOs close to the government that spread messages relevant to the electoral campaign. GONGOs and pro-government NGOs are hard to pinpoint and prove their connection with the government, but a certain pro-government leaning appears evident. In Table 4, Nacionalna avangarda and Centar za društvenu stabilnost are both GONGOs with clear links with the government, among whose leading figures are even SNS members of parliament and government employees.

Table 4. Top 2 GONGO sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
Nacionalna Avangarda	GONGO	Government (SNS)	43 548
Centar za društvenu stabilnost	GONGO	Government (SNS)	4 879

There are numerous pro-Kremlin sources in the Serbian media space, some of which are pro-government, while others are critical of the government from a right-wing viewpoint. The most influential is the Russian state-owned Sputnik news agency, which leans more towards the government. The top sources, as seen in Table 5 below, are directly related to the Kremlin, but while Russia Beyond Serbia does not publish any political content, Sputnik Srbija is an important source of Russian media influence.

Table 5. Top 3 Pro-Kremlin sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
Russia Beyond Srbija	State media	None	243 225
Sputnik Srbija	State media	Government (SNS)	241 000
Vostok	Private media	None	78 637

Despite strong pro-Chinese narratives in mainstream pro-government media, there are few genuinely pro-Chinese media outlets, the most important one being the Serbian outlet of the China Radio International, displayed in Table 6. Besides the state-owned China Radio International's Serbian-language outlet, there are only a few civil society organizations and individuals with strong pro-Chinese positions, such as Centar za saradnju sa zemljama Azije and its director Zoran Spasić.

Table 6. The main Pro-Beijing source according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
China Radio International Srpski	State media	None	435 772

A specific single issue that had an impact on the electoral campaign is the question of Rio Tinto lithium mine in Western Serbia. Plans to build the mine despite ecological concerns led to massive protests in late 2021 and brought the issue to the centre of Serbian politics. There are, however, only a few pages and organizations that deal specifically with this issue. As seen in Table 7, among those we can find Kreni-Promeni, NGO which was one of the main organizers of Rio Tinto protests, as well as some other Facebook pages either in favour or against the lithium mine.

Table 7. Top 3 country-specific single-issue sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022

Top sources	Organisation type	Political orientation	Facebook followers
Kreni-Promeni	NGO	Anti-government (unspecified)	32 197
Rio Tinto marš iz Srbije	Unknown	Anti-government (unspecified)	7 484
Rio Tinto u Jadru, da, pa šta?	Unknown	Government (SNS)	608

INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS

This investigative research has set out to conduct a number of in-depth interviews with journalists, editors, financiers behind the grey zone media ecosystem or media experts to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events. Expert opinions can, therefore, support or refine some qualitative or quantitative research results of our media research.

We conducted three in-depth interviews with media experts, of which one was an experienced journalist and news programme director, another an expert on external actor influence, and one a disinformation expert and an editor of a fake news debunking portal.

According to the experts, grey zone media in Serbia emerged as a part of a global trend of mistrust in mainstream media and institutions, as well as an increasing reliance on the internet as a source of information. Internet and smartphones shifted the entire media ecosystem. Mainstream media expected to use social networks to increase their own outreach, but instead found themselves taken aback by different informal platforms and unregistered media which are not constrained by journalistic standards and are able to easily transmit messages to wide audiences. Furthermore, Facebook and other social media algorithms “bombard” citizens with content close to their beliefs, thus strengthening pages that transmit messages which readers would like to see. This is especially relevant in the times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine.

“Grey zone media are especially relevant at the time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine, but sometimes they are not relevant at all”, disinformation expert about the impact of grey zone media on public discourse.

According to the experts, local factors that contribute to the strength of these type of media in Serbia are also present. Very low media literacy in Serbia and the propensity for citizens to believe what they read on the internet contributes to the popularity of alternative media. This is further encouraged by very low journalistic professional standards of mainstream media, which are recognized as mouthpieces of the government. Information in these grey zone media occasionally also spills over into the mainstream, as mainstream media's business model is rooted in media manipulation and they also require readers, outreach and clicks to survive.

"There is always a reason to hide ownership, such as hiding political influence or sources of income", expert on disinformation about the transparency of ownership and funding.

According to the disinformation expert, registration in the Media Registry of the Serbian Business Registers Agency is practically unnecessary for media which operate solely on the web, as they do not receive public funds and do not apply for project funding. There were even cases of print newspapers which were unregistered and whose ownership was totally unknown for a short period after their establishment. According to her, the lack of registration could therefore be primarily seen as a consequence of improperly implemented legislation. Hiding ownership, however, is another reason for the lack of transparency, as media with a political agenda would prefer to hide these links. While this is practically impossible with mainstream media, it is a successful strategy within the grey zone.

According to the external actor influence expert, there are different kind of media within the grey zone, with very different goals and operational mechanisms. First, there are media which simply aim for clicks and funds from advertisements, often using clickbait headlines and aiming to shock their audiences to increase outreach and attract attention. Second, there are media under a certain political influence, which report in the interest of certain political actors or extremist groups, such as *Direktno* portal employing the same strategy of demonization of political opponents as pro-government media use against the opposition. Thirdly, there are media under influence by external actors, most importantly Russia, which are perhaps the most influential category. Lines between these categories of media are blurred, however, as many of them are opportunist and no clear links to political actors can be proven. Media with a political agenda need clicks just as clickbait media promote pro-Russian and nationalist narratives due to their popularity.

According to the news programme director, while some grey zone media outlets are formed ahead of specific elections, more media outlets and pages are in existence for much longer. And while some of them may find themselves under control of certain political actors at some point, others are serious, authentic projects, penetrating new audiences. According to him, they are an important part of the Serbian media ecosystem, especially as mainstream media are increasingly captured by the ruling party and thus lose a large part of their audience, already diminished due to the downfall of traditional print and electronic media.

“The government wants absolute control. They can’t control the internet, it hurts them. There is more concern about avoiding damage than inflicting damage on the internet”, says news programme director about the influence of the state on grey zone media space.

According to the external influence expert: *“It is not about getting new voters for the ruling party, but diminishing the chances of other political contenders.”*

According to the news programme director, the influence of the government on the grey zone media space is twofold. Namely, the government actively aims to control the entire media ecosystem but is unable to control the internet and numerous media and social media pages that operate exclusively on the web. It nevertheless attempts to influence this ecosystem as well, both by strengthening their own messages within this space and by hurting the chances of the opposition. Pro-government grey zone media outlets clearly fulfil the first role, spreading government’s messages (affirmative or directed against the opposition) to new audiences which have no trust in mainstream media. Also, media outlets that spread conspiracies and work to undermine the trust in the political process by representing an opposition to the entire establishment also serve the interests of the government, as they hurt the mainstream opposition as well. According to the external actor influence expert, the government does the same thing with political actors, encouraging or creating small political movements to hurt major opposition parties and movements.

According to the experts, the influence of the grey zone media on election results, however, is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, as the external actor influence expert stated, they might bring some new votes to the government by addressing new audiences, especially in the city of Belgrade. They also might, as the news programme director stated, have an effect on undecided voters, pushing them into apathy through the aforementioned strategy of diminishing trust in democratic institutions, including the electoral process. On the other hand, as noted earlier, some opposition actors use grey zone media with the same strategy as the government employs with mainstream pro-government tabloids: implementing a “dirty” campaign against political opponents using half-truths, disinformation and fake news. Experts agree that these media did not have major influence on elections in the past, but that this might change in the future, especially due to the strengthening of grey zone media since the beginning of the COVID pandemic and the disinformation campaigns regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

“Social media research^{VII} showed there are direct links between Russian official media and certain obscure media in Serbia. Critical tones from the Kremlin towards Vučić are absent from mainstream media”, expert on external influences about the Russian media influence.

According to external actor influence expert, external influences on the Serbian media ecosystem through grey zone media is an important issue, especially having in mind a clear anti-Western and pro-Russian bias of most grey zone media within our analysis. When it comes to direct influence, only *Sputnik Srbija*, a Serbian language service of the Sputnik news agency, operates as a direct propaganda tool of the Kremlin. When it comes to Serbian media, there are two distinct groups

media with pro-Kremlin messages. On the one hand, certain Serbian pro-Russian media outlets spread information by Russian state-owned media, directly promoting the Kremlin's viewpoint. It is hard to prove whether this is due to financial or political links, a matter of sincere conviction, or perhaps simply a clickbait strategy. Other grey zone media in service of governmental propaganda, similar to mainstream pro-government media, aim to project a positive image of cooperation of Serbian government with Russia, thus "hiding" real messages from Moscow if they are unfavourable and serving the interest of the government due to its large pro-Russian electorate. Experts believe that Russia and China do not invest in media influence in Serbia since they believe it is not needed: Serbian media do all the propaganda work by themselves. Russia, however, probably establishes direct links with certain far-right groups like elsewhere in Europe.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

With the help of the SentiOne platform, we generated a representative sample of 686 homepage articles and Facebook posts to reveal and categorize the main types of campaign narratives present in our dataset. The representative sample of all the messages' and sources' distribution within our timeframe between November 1 and December 31, 2021, allowed researchers to identify and categorize the main types of election- or campaign-related narratives in each country without the need to read through thousands of articles. Narrative analysis of samples revealed the differences between the "grey zone" and mainstream interpretation of the same topics and the use of country-specific manipulation techniques employed by specific actors to influence the public discourse before the general elections.

The main narratives found in the sample of grey zone media articles, as seen in Table 8 below, were both pro-government and anti-government, related to certain topics of importance for the upcoming elections.

Table 8. The number and ratio of the top 10 Serbian narratives in the representative sample between November 1 - December 31, 2021

Narrative	Frequency	%
Against Rio Tinto	122	17,8
Anti-Western / Pro-Russian/Chinese	76	11,1
Anti-government (crime and corruption)	42	6,1
Nationalist (without a political bias)	38	5,5
Promotion of candidates	34	5,0
Nationalist (anti-government)	25	3,6
Rio Tinto Neutral	20	2,9
Promotion of government	19	2,8
Against opposition	17	2,5
Belgrade (pro-government)	15	2,2

Around 27,3% of the articles in the sample were not relevant for the elections, referring to events in other countries in the region and beyond. The most important topic was certainly the Rio Tinto multinational company's lithium mine project in Western Serbia, followed by issues related to Serbian nationalism, crime and corruption, economy, and infrastructural development of Belgrade. There were also articles promoting or criticizing certain political actors, both from the government and the opposition. Anti-Western and pro-Russian/Chinese narratives were also strongly represented in the sample, clearly showing that there is a strong anti-Western and pro-Russian/Chinese bias among the grey zone media included in the research. The referendum on constitutional changes in the area of judiciary, which was scheduled for 16 January 2022, surprisingly did not represent an important topic in the sample, amounting to only for 0.9% of the messages, even though the observed period largely coincided with the referendum campaign. The referendum passed with a 60% majority, but weak turnout of less than 30%.¹⁸

The most dominant narrative with over 17% of the messages sampled was the opposition to the planned Rio Tinto multinational company's lithium mine in Western Serbia, which is described as bringing potential ecological disaster to the region,¹⁹ as well as being a potential issue of corruption due to the government allegedly agreeing on the project prior to the study of environmental impact.²⁰ The second most dominant narrative was Anti-Western and pro-Russian/Chinese which takes different forms, from promoting the Russian/Chinese opposition to the West (EU/NATO/USA)²¹ to promoting Russian interpretation of the emerging crisis in Ukraine.²² The third most frequent narrative was criticism of the government regarding corruption,²³ organized crime²⁴ and its authoritarian form of rule. This is followed by nationalist narratives that summarise some of the

18 "RIK: 59,73 odsto izašlih na referendum glasalo za promenu Ustava, nisu stigli prigovori na regularnost," BBC News na srpskom, January 16, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-60009903>

19 "GLUMICA UNIŠTILA VUČIĆA: Poslala Mu Otvoreno Pismo Koje Svi Treba Da Pročitaju! | Webherald.Rs," November 18, 2021, <https://webherald.rs/glumica-unistila-vucica-poslala-mu-otvoreno-pismo-koje-svi-treba-da-procitaju-3/>

20 "ВУЧИЋ И БРНАБИЋ У ВЕЛИКОМ ПРОБЛЕМУ: Рио Тинто не опрашта превару, покушавају да свој лични аранжман наплате грађанима Србије," accessed March 12, 2022, <https://pravda.rs/2021/12/5/vucic-i-brnabic-u-velikom-problemu-rio-tinto-ne-oprasta-prevaru-pokusavaju-da-svoj-licni-aranzman-naplate-gradjanima-srbije/>

21 "Руски политиколог открива skrivenu pozadinu novog dokumenta: Obnovljena Atlantska povelja odvešće SAD i Britaniju u konačni zaborav," WebTribune (blog), accessed March 12, 2022, <https://webtribune.rs/ruski-politikolog-otkriva-skrivenu-pozadinu-novog-dokumenta-obnovljena-atlantska-povelja-odvesce-sad-i-britaniju-u-konacni-zaborav-politika/>

22 "Neočekivani odgovor zbunio američkog predsednika," *Pobednik* (blog), December 20, 2021, <https://pobednik.rs/neocekivani-odgovor-zbunio-americkog-predsednika/>

23 "Санкције прете Андреју Вучићу и Николи Петровићу | Васељенска ТВ," December 11, 2021, <https://vaseljenska.net/2021/12/11/sankcije-prete-andreju-vucicu-i-nikoli-petrovicu/>

24 "ДА ЛИ ЈЕ У ТОКУ УКЛАЊАЊЕ ОПАСНОГ СВЕДОКА ПРОТИВ ВУЧИЋА? Хркаловић у Тешком Стању, Хитно Пребачена у Болницу," accessed March 12, 2022, <https://pravda.rs/lat/2021/11/13/da-li-je-u-toku-uklanjanje-opasnog-svedoka-protiv-vucica-hrkalovic-u-teskom-stanju-hitno-prebacena-u-bolnicu/>

traditional topics connected to Serbian nationalism, from the issues of Kosovo²⁵ and Bosnia and Herzegovina²⁶ to nationalist interpretations of the wars of the 1990s. The fifth category of articles could be seen as the promotion of political actors who are not part of the government, but tend to be part of the right-wing opposition,²⁷ either critical or loyal²⁸ to the government. The next narrative was the nationalist anti-government narrative, which represents criticism of the government from a nationalist standpoint, usually regarding Kosovo²⁹ or Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁰ The seventh category represents articles which report on the Rio Tinto mine from a neutral standpoint,³¹ neither promoting nor criticizing the project.³² The eighth category were articles promoting the government, especially president Vučić,³³ as a de facto leader of the government and president of the ruling party.³⁴ This is followed by a similar narrative directed against the opposition, which is criticized as being a part of the “corrupt old regime” of the centre-left and pro-EU Democratic Party, but also as not representing a true alternative to the regime,³⁵ as well as a narrative promoting the Belgrade government and

25 “ПЕЧАТ НЕДЕЉЕ: УЈЕДИЊЕЊЕ „КОСОВА“ И АЛБАНИЈЕ – ДОКЛЕ ЋЕ СЕ ЕУ ПРАВИТИ БЛЕСАВА?,” *Печат - Лист слободне Србије* (blog), December 2, 2021, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2021/12/pecat-nedelje-ujedinjenje-kosova-i-albanije-dokle-ce-se-eu-praviti-blesava/>

26 “Reljić: Ima li ko da čuje Orbánove poruke o Srbima? - Novi Standard,” *Нови Стандард* (blog), December 26, 2021, <https://standard.rs/2021/12/26/reljic-ima-li-ko-da-cuje-orbanove-poruke-o-srbima/>

27 “Стаматовић: Могуће Окупљање Патриотских Опција, Свака Од Тих Странака На Ивици Цензура,” accessed March 12, 2022, https://pravda.rs/index.php?id=1&L=834&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=157627&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bday%5D=13&tx_news_pi1%5Bmonth%5D=12&tx_news_pi1%5Byear%5D=2021&cHash=32d146183893ffb9ac4bf2bd7c3f0cec

28 “Др Милош Јовановић Једини Може Победити Вучића у Другом Кругу,” accessed March 12, 2022, <https://pravda.rs/lat/2021/12/21/dr-milos-jovanovic-jedini-moze-pobediti-vucica-u-drugom-krugu/>

29 “Brutalan odgovor Boška Obradovića - Odučio Dragaša od pisanja kolumni,” *WebTribune* (blog), accessed March 12, 2022, <https://webtribune.rs/brutalan-odgovor-boska-obradovica-oducio-dragasa-od-pisanja-kolumni-politika/>

30 “Đorđević: Najodaniji poslušnik Angele Merkel obećao da će Srbija odustati od BiH,” *Politički.rs* (blog), November 6, 2021, <https://politicki.rs/kolumne/djordjevic-najodaniji-poslusnik-angele-merkel-obecao-da-ce-srbija-odustati-od-bih/>

31 “Novi zakon: Da li je oduzimanje zemlje po hitnom postupku rešenje ili nova nevolja,” *WebTribune* (blog), accessed March 12, 2022, <https://webtribune.rs/novi-zakon-da-li-je-oduzimanje-zemlje-po-hitnom-postupku-resenje-ili-nova-nevolja-politika/>

32 “E. Kusturica: Ideja zaustavljanja Rio Tinta sigurno dobra, ali...,” *Нови Стандард* (blog), December 6, 2021, <https://standard.rs/2021/12/06/e-kusturica-ideja-zaustavljanja-rio-tinta-sigurno-dobra-ali/>

33 “Хитно се огласио! Вучић: ЧЕКАЈУ НАС ВАЖНИ РАЗГОВОРИ У МОСКВИ! Гас нам је приоритет, а грађане ускоро очекују НОВА ПОВЕЋАЊА! - СРБИЈА ЈАВЉА,” November 17, 2021, <https://www.srbijajavlja.rs/2021/11/hitno-se-oglasio-vucic-cekaju-nas-vazni-razgovori-u-moskvi-gas-nam-je-prioritet-a-gradjane-uskoro-ocekuju-nova-povecanja/>

34 “Boriću se sa svima koji bi da pljačkaju našu zemlju, idemo u najveću pobjedu do sada,” *Pobednik* (blog), November 27, 2021, <https://pobednik.rs/boricu-se-sa-svima-koji-bi-da-pljackaju-nasu-zemlju-idemo-u-najvecu-pobedu-do-sada/>

35 “Предраг Поповић: Српска опозиција постала је опозиција против грађана Србије,” accessed March 12, 2022, <https://www.srbijadanas.net/predrag-popovic-srpska-opozicija-postala-je-opozicija-protiv-gradjana-srbije/>

its projects,³⁶ especially the planned Belgrade Metro.³⁷ The next narrative represented praising of the government for its economic successes, from growth and business successes³⁸ to government's shrewd economic decisions, such as the decision to move all Serbian gold reserves into the country.³⁹

It is clear that the most important topic in the sample was the construction of the lithium mine in Western Serbia by the Rio Tinto multinational company with the most dominant narrative being opposition to this project due to ecological concerns. There are, of course, other narratives related to Rio Tinto, as there are also articles praising the project for its economic benefits, as well as a small, but interesting narrative - here labelled as Right-wing opposition to Rio Tinto - that tried to merge the opposition to this project with opposition to the West, EU or liberal order in general, thus also criticising the opposition and civil society that organized the protest against Rio Tinto as being no better than the government. Nevertheless, by far the most dominant narrative was opposition to Rio Tinto for ecological concerns, which is a narrative that is clearly directed against the government. This narrative is mainly driven by popular protests against the project that took place on several occasions in the observed period, most notably on 27 November and 4 December 2021, when massive protests and roadblocks across Serbia led to the government accepting the key demands of the protestors and amending and revoking the Law on Referendum and People's Initiatives and the Law on Expropriation, whose adoption triggered the protests in the first place.

The anti-Western and pro-Russian narrative actually represents a group of different narratives directed against the West, especially EU and NATO, and in favour of Russia and China. This is related to both global affairs and Serbia's own foreign policy orientation. These narratives seem prevalent across the observed media space, especially in pro-Russian, conspiracy, and clickbait categories of media. They are triggered by various events and are clearly helping tarnish the image of Western actors and promote its geopolitical rivals. Examples of these narratives are the promotion of the Russian position regarding Ukraine and the West,⁴⁰ promoting the image of China⁴¹ and criticizing

36 Kaldrma, "Dan u Kome Su Šine Prešle Savu," *Kaldrma.rs* (blog), November 5, 2021, <https://kaldrma.rs/dan-u-kome-su-sine-presle-savu/>

37 "Vučić na Makiškom polju: Oni koji pokušavaju da zaustave Srbiju u tome neće uspeti," *Pobednik* (blog), November 30, 2021, <https://pobednik.rs/vucic-na-makiskom-polju-oni-koji-pokusavaju-da-zaustave-srbiju-u-tome-nece-uspeti/>

38 24sedam, "Arapi zainteresovani: Srpski projektanti i dizajneri dogovorili poslove na Dubai EXPO2020," 24sedam, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/biznis/privreda/87657/arapi-zainteresovani-srpski-projektanti-i-dizajneri-dogovorili-poslove-na-dubai-expo2020/vest>

39 "Zašto Smo Zlato Vratili u Zemlju: Koliko Zlata Ima Srbija, Gde Ga Držimo i Zašto Je to Toliko Važno?," accessed March 12, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/biznis/finansije/96452/zasto-smo-zlato-vratili-u-zemlju-koliko-zlata-ima-srbija-gde-ga-drzimo-i-zasto-je-to-toliko-vazno/vest>

40 "(УЖИВО ВИДЕО) Путин: Како Би Американци Реаговали Да На Границу Са Канадом Или Мексиком Поставимо Ракете? - Печат - Лист Слободне Србије," accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2021/12/putin-kako-bi-amerikanci-reagovali-da-na-granicu-sa-kanadom-ili-meksikom-postavimo-rakete/>

41 "Kineski model razvoja dobar je za ceo svet - i za zemlje koje nemaju komunističku partiju - WebTribune," December 5, 2021, <https://webtribune.rs/kineski-model-razvoja-dobar-je-za-ceo-svet-i-za-zemlje-koje-nemaju-komunisticku-partiju-politika/>

the EU for its COVID measures and lack of democracy.⁴² Pro-Russian stance is dominant in this narrative. It is unclear, however, how these messages affect elections since these geopolitical stances are prevalent across the board with the exception of pro-EU opposition. Both the government and right-wing opposition attempt to show themselves as Russian/Chinese allies to their voters, with the government using numerous loyal media to spread anti-EU and pro-Russian/Chinese propaganda, criticizing the EU for its treatment of Serbia within the accession process and praising Russia and China as main geopolitical allies. It is clear, however, that these narratives hurt the position of the pro-EU opposition, which enjoys around 20% of support, as they turn the electorate away from EU integration and foreign policy alignment with the West. The war in Ukraine, however, appears to have made the impact of these narratives a lot stronger. Namely, the stance toward Russia and Serbia's alignment with EU sanctions was especially important in the campaign and appears to have strengthened parties which openly opposed sanctioning Russia during the campaign. **There is simply no counterbalance to anti-Western and pro-Russian/Chinese messages in the observed media.**

The third most dominant narrative presents the government as corrupt, authoritarian, and linked with organized crime. This narrative is very clearly anti-government and is almost completely absent from pro-government outlets. The narrative is relatively broad, encompassing different messages and is driven by various events related to organized crime, corruption, and political life in general. Examples of this narrative are the announcement of US sanctions against individuals close to the SNS⁴³ as well as the alleged ties of high government officials with the group of Veljko Belivuk, accused of kidnapping, torture, and murder.⁴⁴ It clearly presents a particularly negative image of the government different from other anti-government narratives which are related to nationalist issues, Belgrade development, the economy, or environmental causes. This narrative most certainly hurts the government ahead of the elections as it goes across all ideological barriers and common division points in Serbian politics and can be seen as broadly benefiting the opposition.

The fourth most dominant narrative in the sample is here labelled as a nationalist narrative. This narrative also represents a group of different, but similarly themed narratives related to traditional topics of importance for Serbian nationalism such as the issues of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and wars of the 1990s. These narratives are outward-looking, directed against the "others", describing threats to Serbian national interests and neither promoting nor criticizing domestic political actors. Also present in the sample are narratives labelled as "nationalist anti-government" and "nationalist

42 Vladimir Tanacković, "Smrt evropske demokratije: Kako je borba EU protiv koronavirusa ušla u opasnu fazu," 24sedam, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/97606/smrt-evropske-demokratije-kako-je-borba-eu-protiv-koronavirusa-usla-u-opasnu-fazu/vest>

43 "Притиснут са свих страна, Вучић ради једино што може, цвили и кмечи, сећајући се Андерсенових речи," accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.srbijadanas.net/pritisnut-sa-svih-strana-vucic-radi-jedino-sto-moze-cvili-i-kmeci-secajuci-se-andersenovih-reci/>

44 "Громогласно хапшени, тихо пуштени: Где су сада полицајци Веље Невоље," ОПОЗИЦИЈА На Једном Месту (blog), December 26, 2021, <https://opozicijanajednommestu.rs/gromoglasno-hapseni-tiho-pusteni-gde-su-sada-policajci-velje-nevolje/>

pro-government”, which represent usage of the same topics to either promote or criticize the government. When combined, these biased narratives show that nationalist issues remain an important tool for influencing the Serbian electorate, as seen in Table 9. Similar to anti-Western narratives, these “neutral” nationalist narratives seemingly do not benefit any particular actors, but they nevertheless tilt the electorate and the whole media space to the right and thus hurt the pro-EU opposition in the long term.

Table 9.: Main sources and their coverage of main narratives in the Serbian representative sample between September 1 - October 31, 2021

Source	Frequency	Against Rio Tinto	Anti-Western / Pro-Russian/Chinese	Anti-government (Crime and corruption)	Nationalist
www.pravda.rs	90	15	19	6	18
www.standard.rs	77	0	14	5	5
www.24sedam.rs	55	0	1	0	2
www.slobodaonline.rs	48	22	0	11	0
www.srbijadanas.net	37	29	2	18	0
www.pobednik.rs	31	0	2	0	2
www.srbijajavlja.rs	31	6	7	2	2
www.politicki.rs	29	2	0	2	0

Despite the end of major environmental protests and gradual shift of attention to other issues, in January and February 2022 the Rio Tinto lithium mine remained an important topic for grey zone media, as the mining project was not fully abandoned. Now, however, the government did not advocate for the mine, but attempted to persuade the public that it has indeed given up due to public pressure⁴⁵ and warned of repercussions if the contracts are cancelled. The emerging crisis in Ukraine and the Russian invasion on 24 February also gave impetus to the observed anti-Western narrative.⁴⁶

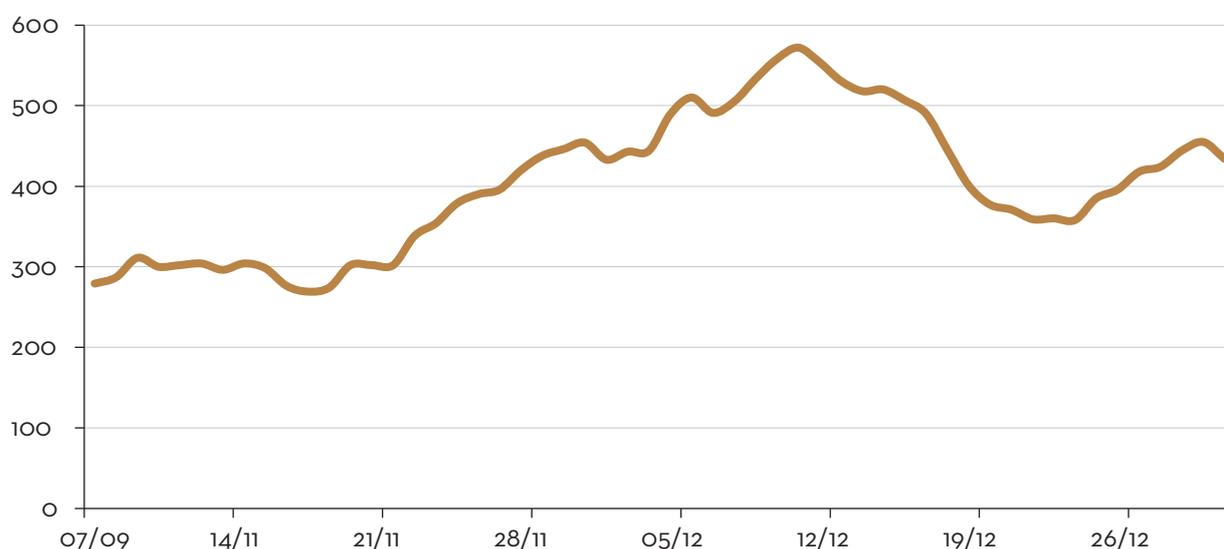
45 “Brnabićeva o Rio Tintu: Blizu sam odluke da ne ostaju u Srbiji, ljudi to neće,” WebTribune (blog), accessed March 14, 2022, <https://webtribune.rs/brnabiceva-o-rio-tintu-blizu-sam-odluke-da-ne-ostaju-u-srbiji-ljudi-to-neece-politika/>

46 “ЗАХАРОВА: НАТО Хтео Да Уништи Југославију, Русија Неће Украјину,” accessed March 14, 2022, <https://pravda.rs/lat/2022/2/25/zaharova-nato-hteo-da-unisti-jugoslaviju-rusija-neece-ukrajinu/>

TREND ANALYSIS OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA DISCOURSES

The trend analysis focused on general dissemination patterns of all the grey zone media and social media under review in terms of news peaks, top sources and drivers of discussions about the political campaign leading up to the elections. As seen in the Serbian time-trend table below, the examination of message distribution over time provided us with valuable insights into the grey zone media’s dissemination tactics that tried to reach out to hyper-partisan and/or conspiracy-minded audiences in each country based on the aforementioned main types of narratives. The most important peak in reporting of the grey zone media was the week between 6 to 13 December 2021,⁴⁷ followed by the week from 29 November 2021 to 6 December 2021.⁴⁸

The weekly number of relevant media contents (social media posts/website articles) dealing with the campaign in the Serbian grey zone media between 1/11/2021 – 31/12/2021 (7 day rolling sum)



The third most important peak could be observed between the week of 22 and 29 November 2021.⁴⁹ There was, therefore, one prolonged peak in reporting from 22 November to 13 December 2021, which was increasing over time. This period strongly coincides with the period of protests against

47 Example: “UDARNO: Istupio bivši pripadnik DB: Biće haos zbog litijuma – OVO SE DEŠAVA – VIDEO,” WebTribune (blog), accessed March 13, 2022, <https://webtribune.rs/udarno-istupio-bivsi-pripadnik-db-bice-haos-zbog-litijuma-ovo-se-desava-video-politika/>

48 Example: “Милов режим је пао због литија, а овај ће пасти због литијума! (ВИДЕО),” accessed March 13, 2022, https://pravda.rs/index.php?id=1&L=814&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=157472&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bday%5D=5&tx_news_pi1%5Bmonth%5D=12&tx_news_pi1%5Byear%5D=2021&cHash=a7e5b5d7fd2ec7a27e92a09af13b3765

49 Example: “Милов режим је пао због литија, а овај ће пасти због литијума! (ВИДЕО),” accessed March 13, 2022, https://pravda.rs/index.php?id=1&L=814&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=157472&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bday%5D=5&tx_news_pi1%5Bmonth%5D=12&tx_news_pi1%5Byear%5D=2021&cHash=a7e5b5d7fd2ec7a27e92a09af13b3765

the Rio Tinto lithium mine, which began after the adoption of two legal changes in late November, most importantly on 27 November and 4 December. The protests that mobilised tens of thousands of people across Serbia to block roads and bridges eventually pressured the government to accept the demands of the protestors and amend or withdraw the laws in question.

This strongly correlates with the finding that the opposition to Rio Tinto lithium mine was the most dominant narrative in the representative sample of the grey zone media. The protests and political turbulences in relation to this project have attracted the attention of most media outlets under analysis, especially clickbait media such as *Webherald* and anti-government hyper-partisan sources such as *Sloboda Online*, and an overwhelming majority of these articles have shown opposition to the lithium mine. This can be explained by two facts. First, Rio Tinto mine was indeed the single most important political issue in this period, encouraging all media to report about it. Second, research has shown that a significant number of citizens, including 14% of voters of the ruling parties, supported the environmental protests against the mine.⁵⁰ Thus, reporting negatively about the mine guaranteed clicks and shares that most media within the grey zone prioritized, except strongly biased pro-government sources. Grey zone media thus often used inflammatory patriotic and anti-government rhetoric that is completely absent from mainstream media, with headlines such as “There will be a final showdown with Vučić!” or “God is with the people!”⁵¹ Thirdly, opposition to Rio Tinto mine was not based solely on an environmentalist narrative, but also a patriotic narrative.⁵² The mine was presented as a colonial project that would endanger the health and survival of the nation by permanently polluting a large part of its territory. It managed to unite the political left-wing and the right-wing with both environmentalist and patriotic messages. This is an important finding, bearing in mind the apparent right-wing leaning of the grey zone media.

The three other dominant narratives (Anti-Western / Pro-Russian/Chinese, Anti-government based on crime and corruption, and Nationalist) were not substantially triggered by specific events or campaigns. However, the Anti-Western narrative gained momentum at the end of the year with the increasing crisis in Ukraine⁵³ when pro-Russian sources strongly promoted Russia’s stance on the issue⁵⁴

50 “Demostat: Ekološke proteste podržava 14 odsto pristalica SNS i stranaka vlasti,” N1, December 2, 2021, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/demostat-ekoloske-proteste-podrzava-14-odsto-pristalica-sns-i-stranaka-vlasti/>

51 “Bog Je Sa Narodom u Loznici, Podrinju i Celoj Srbiji, Zašto Patrijarh NIJE SA SVOJIM NARODOM? - Politički.rs,” accessed April 13, 2022, <https://politicki.rs/kolumne/bog-je-sa-narodom-u-loznici-podrinju-i-celoj-srbiji-zasto-patrijarh-nije-sa-svojem-narodom/>

52 “Bog je sa narodom u Loznici, Podrinju i celoj Srbiji, zašto patrijarh NIJE SA SVOJIM NARODOM?,” *Politički.rs* (blog), November 30, 2021, <https://politicki.rs/kolumne/bog-je-sa-narodom-u-loznici-podrinju-i-celoj-srbiji-zasto-patrijarh-nije-sa-svojem-narodom/>

53 “Neočekivani odgovor zbunio američkog predsednika,” *Pobednik* (blog), December 20, 2021, <https://pobednik.rs/neocekivani-odgovor-zbunio-americkog-predsednika/>

54 “Pepe Eskobar - Šta je Putin zaista rekao Bajdenu - Novi Standard,” *Нови Стандард* (blog), December 9, 2021, <https://standard.rs/2021/12/09/sta-je-putin-zaista-rekao-bajdenu/>

and blamed NATO and the West for escalation.⁵⁵ The anti-government crime and corruption narrative described suspicions of links between the government and the suspected organized crime group around Veljko Belivuk, arrested in early 2021 on charges of kidnapping, torture, rape and murder, when even government and ruling party officials admitted that he had some kind of “protection” from within the state apparatus. Another driver were US sanctions⁵⁶ against Kosovo Serbs close to president Vučić and his party on charges of corruption and human rights violations, as well as rumours of more sanctions against Vučić’s inner circle.⁵⁷ The Nationalist narrative(s) were mostly triggered by events in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the pressures on Republika Srpska leadership by the international community⁵⁸ and turbulences in Serbia-Kosovo relations.⁵⁹

Notable leading sources during the observed period were *Pravda*, *Novi Standard*, *24sedam*, *Webtribune* and *Sloboda online*. *Pravda*⁶⁰ is web portal of the now shut down Pravda daily newspapers which used to have ties with the far-right Serbian Radical Party. The portal is a right-wing, pro-Russian, and anti-government media outlet which publishes daily news. *Novi Standard*⁶¹ is a registered right-wing web portal with a long tradition. It has a high degree of analytical content, a significant pro-Kremlin bias and a mild anti-government bias. *24sedam*⁶² is a news portal with a strong pro-government bias, founded and registered at the beginning of 2021. None of the 24sedam articles within our sample contained any of the narratives that are critical of the government, but contained several pro-government narratives, including positive reporting on Rio Tinto, which raises suspicion that the media was created primarily to serve government’s interests. *Webtribune*⁶³ is an unregistered⁶⁴ news portal that is several years old. It has a significant degree of conspiracy and clickbait content, a mild anti-government bias and a strong pro-Kremlin bias. *Sloboda online*⁶⁵ is also

55 “НАТО се спрема за велики рат са Русијом - Националист,” December 28, 2021, <https://nacionalist.rs/nato-se-sprema-za-veliki-rat-sa-rusijom/>

56 “Radoičić, Veselinović i sa njima povezani Srbi sa Kosova pod sankcijama SAD,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 09:56:22Z, sec. Vesti, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/radoicic-veselinovic-sad-sankcije/31600068.html>

57 “Fatić o sankcijama SAD: Cilj je da se Vučić povuče jer je izneverio obećanja data Bajdenu,” *Politički.rs* (blog), December 11, 2021, <https://politicki.rs/komentar/fatic-o-sankcijama-sad-cilj-je-da-se-vucic-povuce-je-je-izneverio-obećanja-data-bajdenu/>

58 “Pojačani pritisci na Banjaluku posle odluke da preuzme ‘dejtonske’ nadležnosti,” *Pobednik* (blog), December 14, 2021, <https://pobednik.rs/pojacani-pritisci-na-banjaluku-posle-odluke-da-preuzme-dejtonske-nadleznosti/>

59 Kosovo onlajn/24sedam, “Albanci podižu tenzije: Gervala optužuje Beograd i Moskvu da čine rat realnom opasnošću,” 24sedam, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/politika/vesti/92546/albanci-podizu-tenzije-gervala-optužuje-beograd-i-moskvu-da-cine-rat-realnom-opasnoscu/vest>

60 <https://www.pravda.rs/>

61 <https://standard.rs/>

62 <https://24sedam.rs/>

63 <https://webtribune.rs/>

64 Unregistered in the media registry of the Serbian Business Registers Agency (APR)

65 <https://slobodaonline.rs/>

an unregistered news portal with a strong anti-government bias. Its occasional pro-Kremlin stance appears to be connected to domestic politics during the war in Ukraine, and not representative of a long-term stance of the portal. The rest of the top sources were mostly unregistered portals: fiercely anti-government *Srbija Danas*⁶⁶ (.net), clickbait pro-Russian and pro-government *Srbija javlja*,⁶⁷ recently established and registered pro-government media outlet *Pobednik*⁶⁸ and *Politički*,⁶⁹ an anti-government and pro-Kremlin page with suspected ties to right-wing opposition. On the basis of the number of relevant articles and outreach of the media it can be argued that the pro-Kremlin category of grey zone media is the most influential, followed by hyper-partisan sources (both pro-government and anti-government) and clickbait media outlets.

The top social media sources tend to be official Facebook pages of political actors such as the right-wing opposition Kingdom of Serbia Renewal Movement (POKS) and Dveri, and Belgrade deputy mayor Goran Vesić. The most influential media were the pages of the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia, pro-government *Politika* daily newspapers and anti-government *Nova srpska politička misao (NSPM)* web portal, while the most influential independent pages were anti-government *Rio Tinto marš iz Srbije*⁷⁰ (Rio Tinto get out of Serbia), right-wing *Srbija evropska kraljevina*⁷¹ (Serbia, an European Kingdom) and pro-Russian *Vladimir Putin Fan Club Serbia*.⁷² The list of Facebook sources also shows a dominance of right-wing and pro-Russian pages and a balance between pro-government and anti-government sources.

Between 1 January and 28 February 2021 the electoral campaign in Serbia started to take shape and took centre stage, only to be overshadowed by the war in Ukraine on 24 February. By far the strongest source in this period was the pro-government portal 24sedam, followed by Pravda and Standard. The Facebook page of Sputnik Srbija also emerged as one of the main social media sources.

66 <https://www.srbijadanas.net/>

67 <https://www.srbijajavlja.rs/>

68 <https://pobednik.rs/>

69 <https://politicki.rs/>

70 <https://www.facebook.com/RioTintoMarslzSrbije>

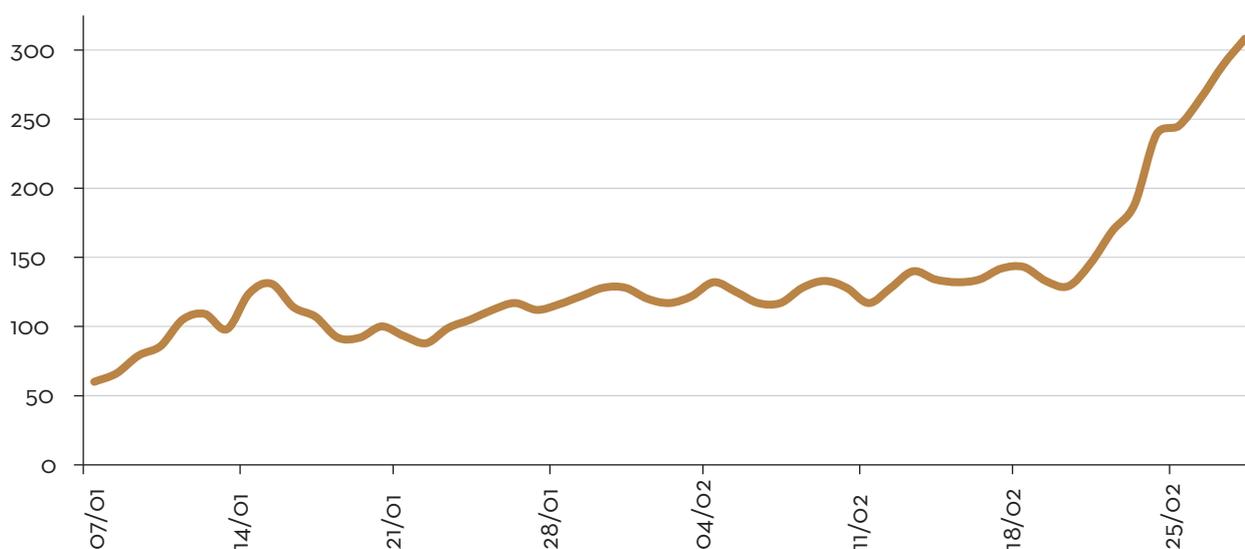
71 <https://www.facebook.com/SeKInfo/>

72 <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100044464748322>

SERBIAN NARRATIVES ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

We monitored campaign messages published in the grey zone media between January 1 and March 1, 2022 to detect the emergence and evolution of the Kremlin's war narratives based on a specific set of keywords.⁷³ The time-trend table below shows that our research results revealed if and how pro-Kremlin narratives were picked up, reiterated, or localized by the diverse set of hyper-partisan, conspiracy, clickbait, pro-Kremlin and anti-covid sources to formulate their geopolitical stance and

The weekly number of relevant media contents (social media posts/website articles) dealing with the war in the Serbian grey zone media between 1/1-28/2, 2022 (7 day rolling sum)



In regards to the analysed Serbian media within the grey zone, reporting on the Russia-Ukraine crisis peaked in the week between 21 and 28 February, clearly triggered by the Russian invasion on 24 February and the recognition of the DNR and LNR days earlier. It is notable, however, that the topic attracted significant attention even before the invasion, making the peak somewhat smaller than what might have been expected. The emerging crisis in Ukraine was an important topic among grey zone media for months before the war, including the observed period in November and December 2021. Many of these media echoed the Kremlin's interpretation of the crisis, mostly by focusing on the threat against Russia coming from NATO⁷⁴ and its actions in Ukraine⁷⁵ and Georgia.⁷⁶

73 In order to collect all relevant narratives, we used a wide set of keywords that scraped all messages that contained any of the following keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Kremlin or Zelensky.

74 "НАТО се спрема за велики рат са Русијом - Националист," December 28, 2021, <https://nacionalist.rs/nato-se-sprema-za-veliki-rat-sa-rusijom/>

75 "(УЖИВО ВИДЕО) Путин: Како Би Американци Реаговали Да На Границу Са Канадом Или Мексиком Поставимо Ракете? - Печат - Лист Слободне Србије," accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2021/12/putin-kako-bi-amerikanci-reagovali-da-na-granicu-sa-kanadom-ili-meksikom-postavimo-rakete/>

76 "ЈОШ ЈЕДАН РУСКИ УЛТИМАТУМ: Ударни системи НАТО у Грузији - Црвена линија за Москву - WebTribune," December 29, 2021, <https://webtribune.rs/jos-jedan-ruski-ultimatum-udarni-sistemi-nato-u-gruziji-crvena-linija-za-moskvu-politika/>

However, data on estimated outreach shows that grey zone media reports' reach had a major peak in the week of the invasion, demonstrating a significantly increased relevance of these media at the time of crisis which was a thesis suggested by the interviewed experts as well.

Among the top sources for this topic were pro-government 24sedam and several pro-Russian media outlets: *Novi Standard*, *Pečat*, *Pravda*, *Stanje stvari* and *Webtribune*. These are followed by another pro-government media outlet *Pobednik* and a few more pro-Russian pages, *Srbija javlja*, *Vostok* and *Nacionalist*. Unsurprisingly, pro-Russian sources dominate in reporting about this topic, both those with a pro-government and those with an anti-government bias.

The most influential social media pages within our analysis were the Facebook pages of Russian state-owned *Sputnik Srbija*, far-right *Živim za Srbiju* movement and Serbian nationalist historian Miloš Ković. This again shows the prevalence of right-wing and pro-Russian sources within the Serbian grey zone media which becomes especially relevant at the time of crisis when news about Russia and Ukraine took centre stage.

Mainstream pro-government tabloids had a strong pro-Russian bias in days preceding the invasion, which even attracted global attention due to shocking front pages such as "Ukraine attacked Russia!" just a couple of days before the invasion began.⁷⁷ Some changes in pro-government tabloid reporting were noticed in the following weeks, with some continuing with a pro-Russian bias and others trying to shift the focus on the suffering of Ukrainians and the impeding global catastrophe due to actions of great powers, both Russia and the West. This gradual shift of pro-government media reporting had to do with government's own interests at the time of increasing pressure to align with EU's declaration and sanctions directed against Russia in the middle of the election campaign. Even though the government announced it will not introduce sanctions on Russia it was nevertheless pressured to align with the EU on some occasions. These occasions included the voting in the UN General Assembly condemning Russian aggression on 3 March⁷⁸ and suspending Russia's membership in the UN Council for Human Rights on 7 April.⁷⁹ The second vote occurred after the 3 April elections, justifying the widely held opinion that the government will need to be harsher on Russia in order to prevent damage to its EU accession process. This shift in reporting has proven the government's control over tabloid pro-Russian narratives which can be switched on and off depending on political calculations.

77 "Ukraine Attacked Russia': How Serbian pro-Government Tabloids Reported on Yesterday's Events," *European Western Balkans* (blog), February 22, 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/02/22/ukraine-attacked-russia-how-serbian-pro-government-tabloids-reported-on-yesterdays-events/>

78 "Ujedinjene Nacije: Srbija glasala za Rezoluciju koja osuđuje Rusiju - Vesti - Nedeljnik Vreme," March 2, 2022, <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/ujedinjene-nacije-srbija-glasala-za-rezoluciju-koja-osudjuje-rusiju/>

79 "Srbija glasala za suspenziju Rusije iz Saveta za ljudska prava UN," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 17:01:19Z, sec. Vesti, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-un-suspenzija/31791551.html>

Practically all of the top sources among grey zone media showed a high degree of pro-Russian bias, including sources which were not previously regarded as pro-Kremlin. Perhaps surprisingly, the most balanced was *Novi standard*, which publishes different analytical texts by different authors. Pro-government portals *24sedam* and *Pobednik* and other pro-Russian sources basically spread Kremlin's messages and interpretations of the conflict.

Perhaps the most important narrative disseminated was that Ukrainians are fascists⁸⁰ killing Russian civilians in Donbass and that the Russian "special operation" is aimed at de-nazifying Ukraine without regard to the Ukrainian civilian casualties of the war. *24sedam* and *Pobednik* referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a "special operation"⁸¹ or a "liberation operation".⁸² *24sedam* headlines described the West as "fascist" and employing an economic-political war to destroy Russian identity.⁸³ Media reported extensively about the alleged Ukrainian war crimes and attacks on Russians and Russian-speakers in the years preceding the war, including cases of slaughter, rape, butchering by Ukrainian Nazis that the West was silent about.⁸⁴ Western media were also represented as an "empire of lies", staging the death of Ukrainian civilians which stand up as soon as the cameras are off.⁸⁵ *Pečat* linked Ukrainian fascism from the Second World War to the ongoing invasion by providing a retrospective of Ukrainian fascist movements until present day.⁸⁶

80 "Огласио се Кадиоров: ДОСТА СМО „МАЗИЛИ“ НАЦИСТЕ, ВРЕМЕ ЈЕ ЗА ВЕЛИКУ ОПЕРАЦИЈУ! - СРБИЈА ЈАВЉА," February 28, 2022, <https://www.srbijajavlja.rs/2022/02/oglasio-se-kadirov-dosta-smo-mazili-naciste-vreme-je-za-veliku-operaciju/>

81 "EU i dalje preti, Rusija otkrila šta traži," *Pobednik* (blog), February 28, 2022, <https://pobednik.rs/eu-i-dalje-preti-rusija-otkrila-sta-trazi/>

82 *24sedam*, "Sutra pregovori na granici sa Belorusijom: Kijev je opkoljen, u Donjecku poginulo 15 civila (FOTO/VIDEO)," *24sedam*, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115105/sutra-pregovori-na-granici-sa-belorusijom-kijev-je-opkoljen-u-donjecku-poginulo-15-civila-fotovideo/vest>

83 *24sedam*, "Pravo lice fašizma: Zapad započeo ekonomsko-politički rat sa ciljem potpunog uništenja ruskog identiteta," *24sedam*, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115719/pravo-lice-fasizma-zapad-zapocao-ekonomsko-politicki-rat-sa-ciljem-potpunog-unistenja-ruskog-identiteta/vest>

84 *24sedam*, "Ustaške metode ukrajinskih nacista: Klanje, silovanje, odsecanje delova tela i druga zlodela o kojima Zapad ćuti (FOTO/VIDEO)," *24sedam*, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115688/ustaske-metode-ukrajinskih-nacista-klanje-silovanje-odsecanje-delova-tela-i-druga-zlodela-o-kojima-zapad-cuti-fotovideo/vest>

85 *24Sedam*, "Imperija laži: Evo kako Zapad izveštava o ukrajinskoj krizi - mrtvi se bude kada se kamere ugase, foto-montaža novo oružje (VIDEO)," *24sedam*, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115596/imperija-lazi-evo-kako-zapad-izvestava-o-ukrajinskoj-krizi-mrtvi-se-bude-kada-se-kamere-ugase-foto-montaza-novo-oruzje-video/vest>

86 "АРХИВА 'ПЕЧАТА': Осам деценија фашизма у Украјини – од Бандере до 'Азова,'" *Печат - Лист слободне Србије* (blog), February 25, 2022, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/02/arhiva-pecata-osam-decenija-fasizma-u-ukrajini-od-bandere-do-azova/>

The story about Ukraine actually attacking Russia or planning to attack Donbass just before the Russian invasion was also present, such as Srbija javlja's reports about the Ukrainian intelligence officer captured by the Russians that admitted Ukraine was planning to attack Donbass.⁸⁷

Another important narrative was western guilt over the events in Ukraine. Here, however, we are not referring to discussions about possible mistakes of the West when it comes to Ukraine and Russia, but moral justification of the Russian invasion of Ukraine due to Western actions. According to this narrative, Russia simply had to act to prevent its own destruction due to a "knife at its throat"⁸⁸ and "Washington's dagger" above its head.⁸⁹ Therefore, even if suffering in the war, Ukraine is a victim of Western attempts to destroy Russia.⁹⁰ In the clickbait outlet Srbija javlja there was even a story on a monk's prophecy about Russia and Ukraine going to war due to Americans inciting Ukrainians to provoke Russia.⁹¹ Leaving aside the possibility of the monk being a geopolitical expert, stories such as these aim to show the war in Ukraine as something sacred and connected to a larger fight for the future of the world. This aspect is also present in other articles⁹² and includes statements of influential Russian nationalist figures such as Alexander Dugin, who praised Russian recognition of DNR and LNR as the second beginning of the "great Slavic reconquista"⁹³ His article was republished by web page Stanje stvari from Večernje novosti, pro-government pro-Russian newspapers, which published the article on 23 February and did not name the source.⁹⁴

87 "Свет у шоку! У ДОНБАСУ УХВАЋЕН УКРАЈИНСКИ ОБАВЕШТАЈАЦ: Открио планове за напад - СРБИЈА ЈАВЉА," February 20, 2022, <https://www.srbijajavlja.rs/2022/02/svet-u-soku-u-donbasu-uhvacen-ukrajinski-obavestajac-otkrio-planove-za-napad/>

88 "ПОКУШАЛИ СУ ДА НАМ СТАВЕ НОЖ ПОД ГРЛО! Ароганција НАТО коштаће Украјину „главе“?! Путин објаснио КО СТОЈИ ИЗА СВЕГА! - Националист," February 25, 2022, <https://nacionalist.rs/pokusali-su-da-nam-stave-noz-pod-grlo-arogancija-nato-kostace-ukrajinu-glave-putin-objasnio-ko-stoji-iza-svega/>

89 "НАРИШКИН О РАЗЛОЗИМА ИНТЕРВЕНЦИЈЕ: Русија не може да допусти да се Украјина претвори у бодез који Вашингтон држи изнад ње!," *Печат - Лист слободне Србије* (blog), February 25, 2022, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/02/nariskin-o-razlozima-intervencije-rusija-ne-moze-da-dopusti-da-se-ukrajina-pretvori-u-bodez-koji-vasington-drzi-iznad-nje/>

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Therefore, this analysis shows that Serbian grey zone media represent a major source of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Serbia, apparently immune to shifts in policy that led to most mainstream pro-government tabloids slightly changing their approach after the Russian invasion. The grey zone media depend much more on Russian sources and present quotes by Russian officials⁹⁵ and public figures⁹⁶ and only occasionally deal with the Serbian position on the war.

NETWORK ANALYSIS

Based on hyperlinks found in the texts of webpage articles or Facebook posts, we created a network database of interlinked domains to see how our “grey zone” sources linked to each-other or to third-party domains to produce campaign messages.⁹⁷ The network database allowed us to create a directed graph⁹⁸ using the Gephi software⁹⁹ to analyse which domains or groups of domains played a central role in the formulation of disinformation narratives, how the “grey zone” media ecosystem organised itself into clusters and reached out to other media, and how the pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing media tried to influence the campaign discourse in each of the countries under investigation.

CLUSTERS AND CENTRAL NODES

Using modularity class-ranking to group the nodes¹⁰⁰ we identified several subgroups or clusters of nodes which occupy a statistically similar network position in terms of their interconnectivity. Clusters or subgroups of nodes highlight how the graph is organised around specific nodes, what types of media serve as a “bridge” between different parts of the Serbian network, how the Serbian grey zone is situated in the Serbian media in particular, and the European or global media in general.

95 “НАРИШКИН О РАЗЛОЗИМА ИНТЕРВЕНЦИЈЕ: Русија не може да допусти да се Украјина претвори у бодез који Вашингтон држи изнад ње!,” *Печат - Лист слободне Србије* (blog), February 25, 2022, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/02/nariskin-o-razlozima-intervencije-rusija-ne-moze-da-dopusti-da-se-ukrajina-pretvori-u-bodez-koji-vasington-drzi-iznad-nje/>

96 “ANDREJ FURSOV: U narednih 5 godina Rusija će biti zona najveće bitke za budućnost sveta,” *WebTribune* (blog), accessed March 14, 2022, <https://webtribune.rs/andrej-fursov-u-narednih-5-godina-rusija-ce-bitu-zona-najvece-bitke-za-buducnost-sveta-politika/>

97 Since, we have expanded our initial list of grey zone media, our final databases contained political campaign-related messages that were either produced by our initial or by the extended list of grey zone media as source domains, whereas the target domains contain both grey zone media and third-party media that were referenced by media contents produced by our final grey zone list.

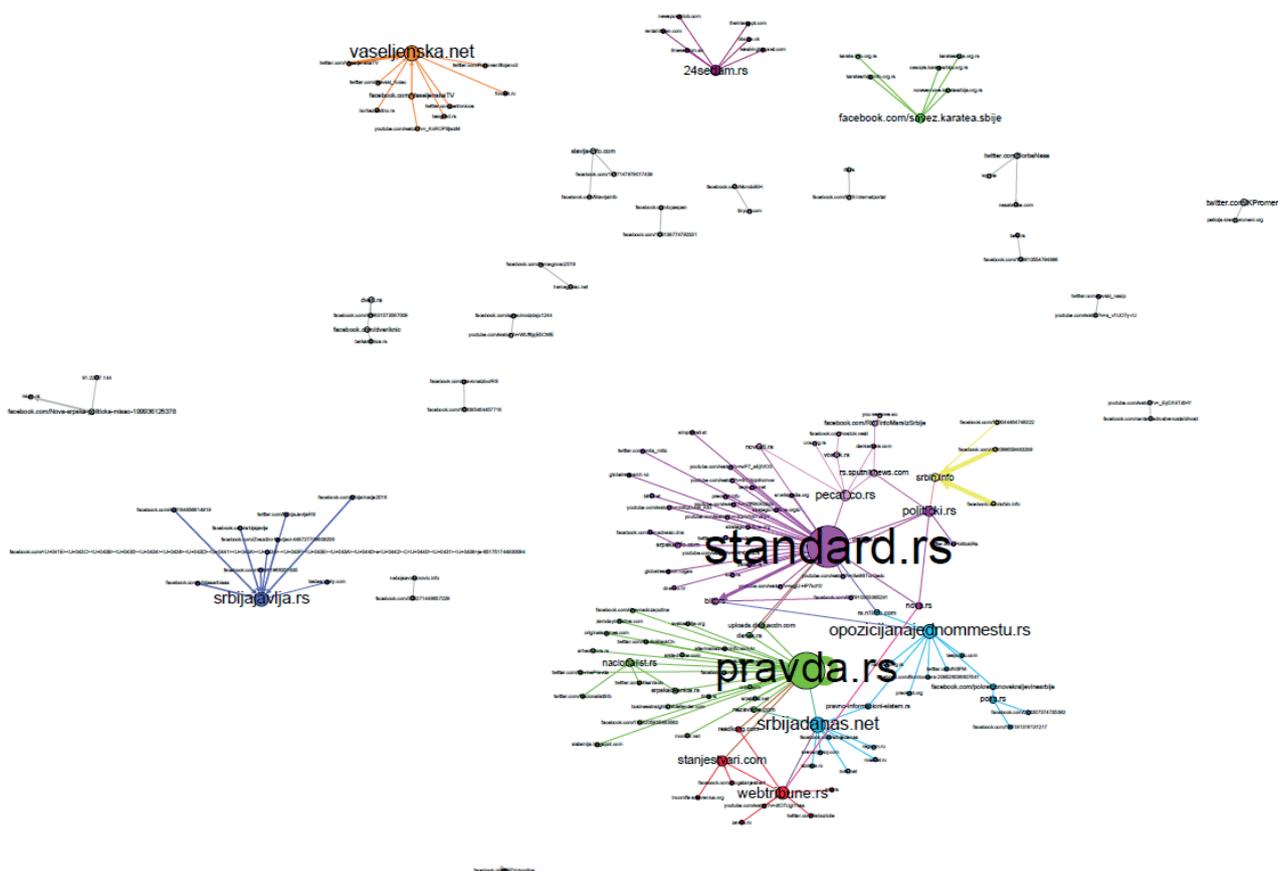
98 In mathematics, and more specifically in graph theory, a directed graph (or digraph) is a graph that is made up of a set of vertices connected by directed edges.

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100 Modularity (community detection) is a measure of network structure. It was designed to measure the strength of division of a network into modules. Networks with high modularity have dense connections between the nodes within modules but sparse connections between nodes in different modules.

There are 7 main relevant clusters in the Serbian sample, and several other less relevant ones, most of which are not interconnected, as seen on the full Serbian graph displayed on Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. The complete Serbian network diagram and its main clusters displayed in different colours (node size is proportional to the number of connections or edges)

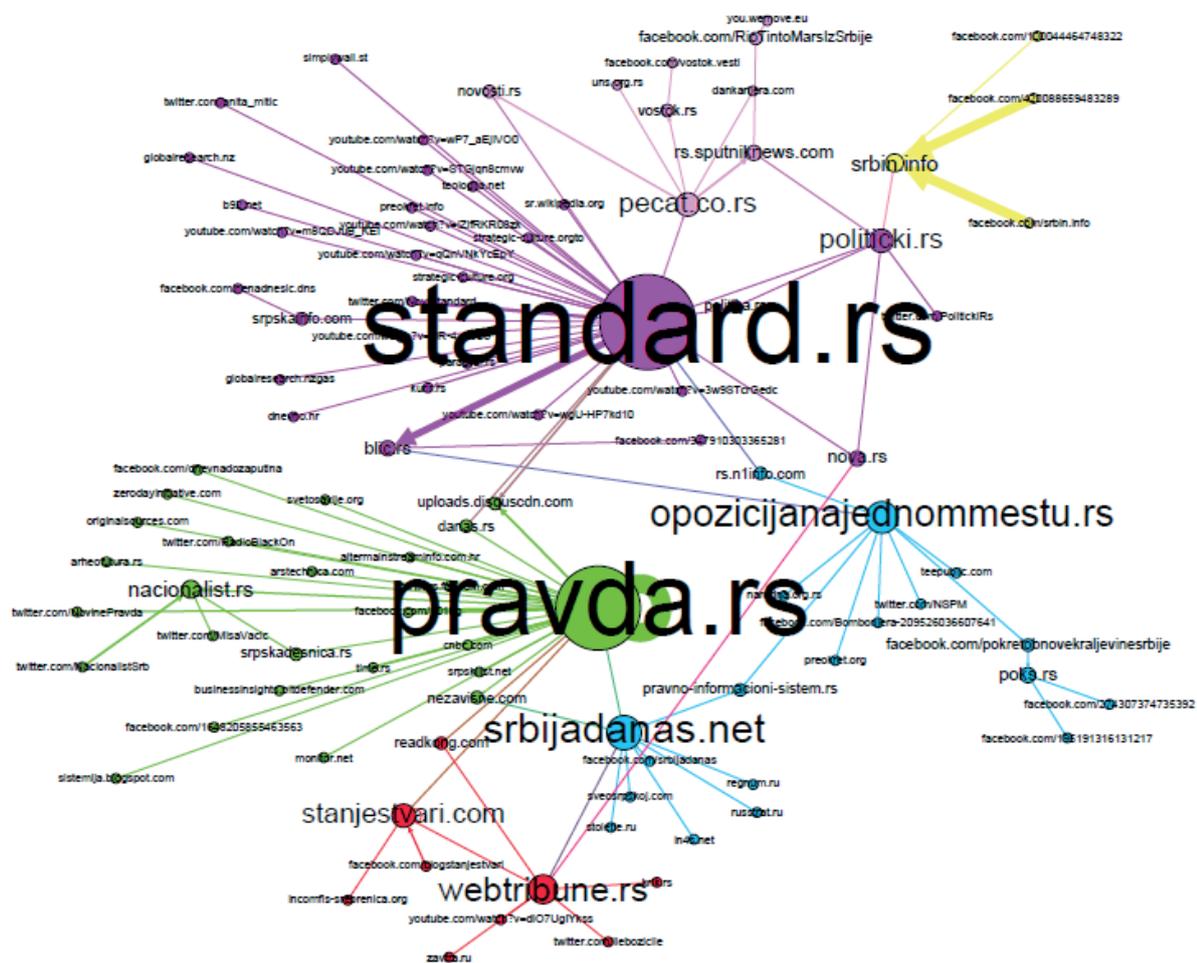


Source: Political Capital's and International Republican Institute's network analysis based on SentiOne data. Click [here](#) to download this image in high resolution.

There are a total of 168 nodes and 163 edges in the complete graph. This ultimately results in the creation of distinct “media bubbles” – at least based on our sample of editorial messages. It might be very well possible that the same media in our network are related through different platforms or Facebook groups that could not be taken into consideration in our current research. If we look at the full network, it becomes evident that the “centre” of the graph is organised by standard.rs (Novi Standard) and Pravda.rs (Pravda), both being pro-Russian media outlets with a mild anti-government bias and categorized as grey zone media within our research.

The main purple cluster in the Serbian sample with 18,45% of all nodes contains Novi Standard (standard.rs) as its primary node, a right-wing pro-Russian web portal with analytical content – displayed on Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Central clusters of the Serbian network in different colours (node size is proportional to the number of connections or edges)



Source: Political Capital's and International Republican Institute's network analysis based on SentiOne data. Click [here](#) to download this image in high resolution.

For the most part, Novi Standard is not a source of information for other pages within this cluster but uses various media and pages as sources. This is in line with Novi Standard's nature of being an analytical portal which publishes different kinds of content, referencing other sources but also republishing content that is first published elsewhere. The media Novi Standard references includes pro-government media such as *Kurir*, *B92* and *Novosti*, but also pro-Western critical media such as *Nova.rs*. This cluster also includes grey zone media such as *Pečat*, *Politički* and *Vostok*, as well as *Sputnik Srbija*. Another page within this cluster, *Politički.rs*, references *Novi Standard* but also *Sputnik Srbija*, *Nova.rs* and media from other clusters.

The second largest cluster with 15,48% of all nodes is centred around *Pravda* (*Pravda.rs*), a pro-Russian and anti-government page which also falls under the category of grey zone media within this research. Similar to the first cluster, *Pravda* is rarely a source of information for other pages within this cluster, but instead references them. Pages that *Pravda* references are different pro-

Russian and far-right pages, but also mainstream pro-Western media, foreign media and right-wing political party pages. The second-largest node within this cluster is the far-right page *Nacionalist* which is clearly linked with the pages of far-right political party Srpska Desnica (Serbian Right) and its leader Miša Vacić.

The third largest cluster with 11,31% of all nodes is the one with two main nodes, the strongly anti-government and right-wing clickbait page *Srbija Danas* (srbijadanas.net)¹⁰¹ and the also strongly antigovernment anonymous page *Opozicija na jednom mestu*¹⁰² (opozicijanajednommestu.rs). *Srbija Danas* references various pages, including several Russian media, while *Opozicija na jednom mestu* references pages of mainstream pro-EU media and pages of opposition political parties. The only political party Facebook page that references this page is the Kingdom of Serbia Renewal Movement (POKS), a monarchist right-wing party.

The fourth largest cluster with 5,95% of total nodes is the cluster around *Srbija javlja* (srbijajavlja.rs), a clickbait page with a mild-pro government bias and a high degree of pro-Kremlin and conspiracy attributes. Unlike previously mentioned clusters, *Srbija javlja* is the source for other pages in this cluster including pro-Russian and football fan Facebook pages.

The fifth largest cluster, also with 5,95% of nodes, is centred around *Vaseljenska* (vaseljenska.net), a right-wing pro-Russian page. Similar to the previously mentioned cluster around *Srbija javlja*, the cluster around *Vaseljenska* is heavily referencing *Vaseljenska* itself with the pages referencing just a few other right wing and Russian pages.

The sixth largest cluster with 5,36% of total nodes is the cluster around *24sedam* (24sedam.rs), a recently established pro-government portal with a strong pro-government bias. *24sedam* is not a source for any pages in this cluster, but rather references other pages including mostly international media including the *Washington Post* and *BBC*.

The seventh cluster with 5,36% of nodes is centred around the two pages *Webtribune* (webtribune.rs) and *Stanje stvari* (stanjestvari.rs). Both pages have a mild anti-government and pro-Russian bias, but with a high degree of conspiracy content, especially when it comes to *Webtribune*. While *Webtribune* is an aggregator and references other pages within this cluster, *Stanje stvari* is a page which publishes opinion pieces and is referenced by other media. Both *Webtribune* itself and even *Pravda* are a key node within the second-largest cluster.

The eighth cluster with 2,38% of nodes is centred around *Srbin.info*, a right-wing, pro-Russian and anti-government media outlet. *Srbin.info* is referenced by all other nodes within this cluster, which includes *Srbin.info*'s Facebook page and the Facebook page *Vladimir Putin Fan Club Serbia*.

101 Not to be confused with srbijadanas.com, which is a pro-government media outlet.

102 Translated as „Opposition in one place“.

Given the pro-Russian position of all the media mentioned, there is no single cluster or central node that would project the Kremlin's viewpoints in or among the clusters. Rather, the whole Serbian network is a tool for the dissemination of pro-Russian messages.

NETWORKED CONTENT PRODUCTION

Bridge-nodes connect different subgroups or clusters in order to produce content and/or direct audiences to similar media contents or outlets, reinforcing their messaging and political position.

As previously mentioned, clusters are generally not interconnected and are without any bridge nodes or links between biggest nodes in the clusters. There are, however, some exceptions. The *Novi Standard* cluster had one bridge node with the *Srbin.info* node, one with the *Pravda* node, one with the *Opozicija na jednom mestu / Srbija Danas* cluster, and one with the *Webtribune / Stanje stvari* cluster. The *Pravda* cluster's biggest node, *Pravda*, had direct links with *Srbija Danas* and *Stanje stvari* (clusters 3 and 7). It is notable that the linked clusters are dominated by pro-Russian grey zone media, demonstrating that they indeed represent a specific ecosystem within the Serbian media space. Pro-government media such as *24sedam* and *Srbija Javlja* dominate their clusters but stay isolated from others.

Interestingly, even though practically all aforementioned interconnected clusters consist mostly of right-wing pages, bridge nodes between them tend to be mainstream pro-Western media such as the portal *Nova.rs*, the webpage of the *N1 Serbian television* (*rs.n1info.com*), the webpage of *Danas daily newspapers* (*danas.rs*), and webpage of the German-owned *Blic daily tabloid* (*blic.rs*). In all these cases the bridge nodes were sources for other pages and were not distributing their own content at all. The same could be said for the webpage *Nezavisne* (*Nezavisne.com*), the online version of the daily newspapers from Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The opposite example is *Politički* (*politicki.rs*) which connects *Novi Standard* with *Srbin.info* clusters but is not used as a source, but rather uses sources from both clusters. **Therefore, none of the bridge nodes represent a means of transmitting messages from one cluster to another.**

The only means of transmission, therefore, were the connections between the biggest nodes in the clusters: *Pravda* with *Srbija Danas* (cluster 3) and *Stanje stvari* (cluster 7); and *Srbija Danas* (cluster 3) with *Webtribune* (cluster 7).

ANNEX 1

DEFINITION OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA

We considered websites or social media pages “grey zone” media if they either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote the governmental parties’ or the opposition parties’ political messages through the aggressive use of new or social media – even though they are not official platforms of parties, and cannot be considered mainstream media outlets. We regarded official think tanks, GONGOs or other organisations financed by parties as part of the “grey zone” strategy of a party if they are engaged in the dissemination of party propaganda or propaganda campaigns that met our selection criteria for media detailed below. We did not, however, consider governmental, organisational, or individual webpages, blogs, YouTube channels etc. media of interest, since these are communications or public relations channels of certain individuals or organisations without the need or expectation to report on any other matter than their individual activities or interests.

We have defined two compulsory and several additional criteria that are used to define and identify “grey zone” media. These media need to meet two of the compulsory and at least one of the additional/other criteria defined below.

Compulsory criteria

1. **Hyper-partisanship:** a site that has been created, either explicitly or implicitly, to support a political party or ideological side, and/or produces specific types of messages almost exclusively to reinforce the narrative of that side/party through the posts it shares.
2. **Manipulated content(s):** the media manipulates its contents through hyperboles, re-contextualisation, the use of dis- or misinformation etc. to reinforce a party line or campaign message either directly or indirectly. Manipulation in itself does not necessarily mean that the site is spreading disinformation, but it does prove that the messages or narratives are presented in a way to follow or reformulate party lines of communication.

Additional criteria

1. **Time of establishment:** media accounts and pages were set up in 2020 and 2021 to influence specific and current public debates during the election campaigns in the three countries.
2. **Reproduction of content:** sharing content that is similar to video or photo content shared on any party’s official or social media pages.
3. **Hyper-partisan memes:** the use of innovative memes mocking or mimicking the political enemies of a party without a sarcastic intention.
4. **Editorial or financial opacity:** the site does not have a proper editorial board or financial information displayed; items are either not signed or signed under pseudonyms.

5. **(Partial) funding coming from parties/government/governmental figures:** media is financed by parties through intermediary channels, organisations, shell-companies etc. to produce manipulated content
6. **Ads targeting specific electoral or audience segments:** a media outlet which targets specific audiences or political target groups to promote a particular hyper-partisan narrative, using social media ad services based on audiences' geolocation, age, gender, profession etc.

The seven basic categories of “grey zone media”

To adequately measure fringe media and their networks that employ a “grey zone” media strategy, we have defined seven categories of media to be measured that meet our initial set of criteria and are engaged in a specific type of media production:

1. **Anonymous hyper-partisan sites** specifically set up to convey a specific agenda often in line with certain political parties and attempting to play a role and influence audiences during election campaigns in 2020 or 2021.
2. **The top 10 conspiracy sites/country** that also dealt with campaign issues or messages during the campaign. The ranking of these sites is based on a) ratio of conspiratorial content, c) Alexa page ranking, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
3. **The top 10 clickbait sites/country** that also dealt with campaign issues or messages during the campaign. Clickbait media is any site that links with a headline that encourages people to click to see more, without telling them much information about what they will see or over-promising or otherwise misrepresenting – in a headline, on social media, in an image, or some combination – what they are going to find when they read a story on the web.^{viii}
4. **The top 10 GONGOs sites/country** that are established by the government, any party, oligarch, or public figures to push and/or finance hyper-partisan messages during the campaign and whose content or finances are not easily/directly retraceable to the original political/party actors. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
5. **The top 10 pro-Kremlin sites/country** that have been established by foreign entities, such as governments, parties, media, NGOs, local pro-Kremlin political actors or unknown actors to represent and spread the Kremlin's geopolitical narratives or political stances in a one-sided, biased way. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
6. **The top 10 pro-Beijing sites/country** that have been established by foreign entities, such as governments, parties, media, NGOs, local pro-China political actors or unknown actors to represent and spread China's geopolitical narratives or political stances in a one-sided, biased way. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
7. **Other webpages or social media pages** that have met our initial set of criteria, however, they cannot be categorised as previously mentioned types of media.

ANNEX 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodology to monitor and collect historical media data present on Hungarian “grey zone” webpages and Facebook pages, Twitter or YouTube accounts. We have monitored the pre-election period between September 1 and October 31 in the Czech Republic, and the November 1 – December 31 period for Serbia and Hungary. **Given the unexpected invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, we also monitored narratives about the war between January 1 and March 1, 2022, in all three countries under investigation.** The quantitative dataset used in the analysis was generated using the social media listening platform SentiOne, which allowed us to access the data of websites and public Facebook pages and groups to conduct trend, sampling, statistical and network analyses of media content production.

Steps of methodology

First, we collected data between September 1 and October 31 for the Czech Republic, and between November 1 and December 1, 2021 for Serbia and Hungary, to create the final list of “grey zone” media in each country that met our initial set of criteria. These media were coded as part of one of the 7 categories mentioned above in separate databases following the same structure (for example, name, webpage URL, social media accounts, organisation type, political content, political leaning etc.). The different periods had been selected to reflect on the Czech elections and the second round of the opposition primary in Hungary.

Second, we collected campaign-related media data for the same periods, namely webpage articles and Facebook posts produced by the media on our lists, to generate the final databases used for narrative sampling, campaign analysis and network analysis:

- a. We filtered only political campaign-related messages (webpage articles or Facebook posts) based on a similar set of keywords in each country using the syntax of the SentiOne platform. The keyword-combination included in part the same words, such as “election,” “campaign” and “candidate” for the sake of comparability or keywords for local political actors or scandals.
- b. Filtered content was used to (a) generate representative message samples for each country for the identification and analysis of narratives in each sample; (b) analyse the main trend and sources’ data for the messages disseminated in each country in each period under investigation; (c) generate network graphs based on the hyperlinks found in in the campaign-related messages for the periods under investigation. Network analysis was carried out using the Gephi software and Microsoft’s data visualisation tool Power BI provided by the International Republican Institute’s Beacon Project.^{IX}

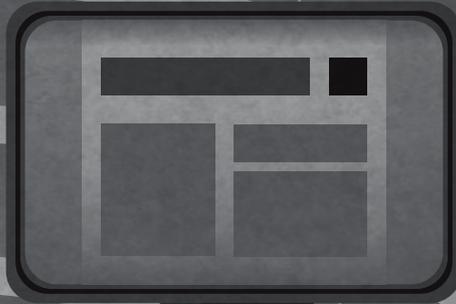
- c. We conducted additional collection of data on war-related messages in our SentiOne project for each country for the period of January 1 – March 1, 2022. Data produced by the grey zone media on our list was then used for the analysis of trends and sources to identify the main narratives disseminated by the leading sources in the grey zone media ecosystems of each country.

Third, local partners in cooperation with local investigative journalists conducted online and offline investigative research into the organisational, financial or editorial background of the “grey zone” media. Researchers used desktop research and investigations of private or state registries, and conducted in-person interviews with the owners, editors or authors of the media to obtain a deeper understanding of the modus operandi of the grey zone media in each country.

ANNEX 3.

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