

# Handbook for Reporting on EU accession: Czech Lessons for Serbia

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## Introduction

Despite the Western Balkan countries proclaiming the EU accession as their strategic goal and the importance of this process for overall regional political dynamics, reporting on this matter and communicating with the general public remain a problem. Both media and civil society organizations who aim to analyse and explain the process face different obstacles, from the complexity of the subject matter to the political environment in which the EU accession process is shaped through a specific narrative.

In Serbia, EU integration has been a central political issue for more than two decades and has influenced the rise and fall of many governments. However, Serbian citizens are by far the most Eurosceptic in the region, and strong anti-EU narratives dominate the country's media landscape. Combined with the complexity of the EU accession process, the result is a failure of communication on EU integration, which is often mentioned as a problem by both the civil society and EU institutions.

However, similar problems can be found in EU member states. The Czech Republic joined the EU within the “big bang” enlargement of 2004; however, the country's position inside the Union has been affected by the strong Euroscepticism going hand in hand with little knowledge of the EU present in the society. Despite being a member of the EU for almost two decades, the Czech public is divided in their view of the Union

and its impact on the Czech Republic. The EU and “the evil Brussels” in particular serve as a scapegoat for populists, but even many traditional politicians anytime an unpopular decision is adopted. This ambivalent approach of Czechia to the EU contributes to the country's inconsistent European policy and lack of proactivity and ambition in regard to EU initiatives.

This handbook is designed for those reporting on the EU accession process of Serbia, either as representatives of the media or civil society. It aims to analyse the problems and obstacles standing in the way of objective quality reporting about the EU and the accession process of the country, but also to build upon the lessons and experiences of Czechia and Czech journalists to provide some recommendations for media and civil society organizations dealing with the problem. It is also helpful as a contribution to the debate on strategic communication on EU accession and can be thus also useful for policymakers.

## Czechia: Where EU membership is taken for granted

### Context and sources of Czech Euroscepticism

The Czech Republic belongs among the countries with the most negative views of the EU

among the member states<sup>1</sup>, at the same time being among the countries most sceptical about their membership in the Union.<sup>2</sup> The public is generally divided in their level of trust in the EU<sup>3</sup> or tends to mistrust the Union.<sup>4</sup> There are several explanations for this traditionally poor image of the EU among Czechs. These mainly combine the disillusionment with the EU membership and the extent and speed of the change it brings to citizens' everyday lives and the Eurosceptic narratives that some influential Czech politicians spread in the past two decades.

While in the 1990s, there was a prevailing euphoria about the fall of the Iron Curtain and the proclaimed "return to Europe" in Central and Eastern Europe, there was also very little knowledge about what the process of integration into Euro-Atlantic structures (mainly the EU and NATO) entailed. The first confrontation of the highly set expectations and the political reality was the strict application of EU's conditionality on the countries aspiring for EU membership, requiring some tough reforms. Among other conditions, the Czech Republic was required to

settle its bilateral issues with neighbouring countries, namely Germany and Austria.

With Germany, the mutual relations were burdened by the legacy of the World War II and the forced displacement of German nationals from the border regions of Czechoslovakia after the war. Dealing with the past thus required significant political will on both sides and strong determination from the Czech political elites in order to gain domestic support for such a sensitive issue. There was also a long-standing dispute between the Czech Republic and Austria over the Temelín nuclear power plant in southern Bohemia, with Austria demanding its shutdown. One of the government coalition parties in Austria even threatened to block the Czech Republic in its EU accession if it did not meet its demands. A final agreement between the two countries, facilitated by the European Commission, was reached, providing that the Czech side would ensure increased safety measures at the Temelín plant. Already in the 1990s and early 2000s, both these examples offered fertile ground for nationalist and anti-EU

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 95, Spring 2021: Public opinion in the European Union," p. 13-14, available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/>, Pew Research Center, "European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism," p. 52-53, complete report available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/10/Pew-Research-Center-Value-of-Europe-report-FINAL-UPDATED.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Behavio Labs, STEM Institute, EUROPEUM, "Czechs and the EU Brand: How do Czechs feel about the EU and what could change their mind?," p. 4, available at

<http://www.europeum.org/data/articles/znacka-eu-summary-report-final-december-2019.pdf>. According to the study, only 33% of Czechs view the country's membership in the EU as a "good thing," and only 47% would vote to stay in the EU if given a chance now.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 95," p. 10-11, available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/>.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, "Eurobarometer 90, Autumn 2018: Public opinion in the European Union," p. 98-99, available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/>.

sentiments, blaming the EU for meddling in Czech domestic affairs. However, these voices were still relatively marginal, and at this time, the desire to join the club still dominated the political mainstream.

The Eurosceptic stream was traditionally represented by former Prime Minister (1993-1998) and then President (2003-2013) Václav Klaus. With a part of the Czech political elite, Klaus prioritized economic integration into the EU over its political dimension, fearing a significant loss of the state's sovereignty. Although Václav Klaus submitted the Czech Republic's application for the EU membership, the application was accompanied by a unilateral memorandum, which was an unprecedented step. In the memorandum, the government explained its reasons for applying for EU membership, mentioning it would be at the cost of losing part of its sovereignty.

This tension between national sovereignty and membership in the EU is still present in the public discussion about the EU in the Czech Republic. However, research by various agencies shows that the anti-EU sentiments correlate with little knowledge about what the EU does and how it functions. As such, there is little rational ground for Czech Euroscepticism. In the Czech context, the negative views of the EU are associated with

dissatisfaction with the general direction the country and world are heading. The critics of the EU are usually those who perceive themselves as "losers" in globalization, are afraid of migration, and have little cultural and human capital.<sup>5</sup> An interesting factor in Czech Euroscepticism is the dissociation between the EU and Europe. While research shows that Czechs have positive feelings about Europe, they are rather negative about the EU. Czechs also feel much more attached to "Europe" (with 61 % feeling "totally attached," just mildly below the EU average) than to the "EU" (only 35 % feeling "totally attached," the second worst result in the whole EU, preceded only by Greece).<sup>6</sup>

### Experience of Czech journalists with reporting on the EU

The Eurosceptic mood in society, little knowledge of the EU among Czechs, and plenty of disinformation in the public space create an uneasy environment for journalists reporting about the EU.

### Development of Czech public's attitudes towards the EU as viewed by journalists

The Czech discourse about the EU is burdened by the Eurosceptic and populist narratives promoted by Václav Klaus, which have been taken over by other political parties and gradually became mainstream in the Czech Republic. These

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<sup>5</sup> Research projekt "Moje Evropa" ("My Europe") conducted by Daniel Prokop and Median agency in the Czech Republic. Main takeaways from the project can be found in Czech at <https://data.irozhlas.cz/eu-kviz-median/>.

<sup>6</sup> Eurobarometer 87, available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/>.

narratives still dominate the public arena today, even though Václav Klaus is not active in politics anymore. At the point of Czechia's accession to the EU in 2004, the public perceived the EU as something good without understanding what it is and how it functions.

Since Czechia's accession to the European Union, the populist narratives have become more widespread and shaped the discussion about the EU and the country's membership in it. Czech political elites did not need to advocate for the Union anymore nor explain it to the citizens. The EU and the Czech position in it thus almost disappeared from the political discussion (with an exception around the Czech EU Presidency in 2009), leaving this topic to the populists and extremists to interpret it to the public. These forces supported by some mainstream media and politicians from other parties currently create the picture of the EU being dysfunctional and practically falling apart. The series of crises the EU had to deal with – the financial crisis, migration crisis, and recently the Covid health crisis - further worsened the perception of the EU. The migration crisis also ignited more populism in the public space and distorted the political discussion about the EU in the Czech Republic away from an objective and practical debate.

#### Czechs' interest in news on the EU – mainly on Czech aspects and with a negative attitude

The Czech public is more interested in articles on the EU than usually assumed, primarily when there is some Czech aspect to it. However, this

interest comes from a distorted perspective of the Czech Republic being “bullied” or harmed by the EU. These “negative” news from the EU usually get more responses and meet with interest even among the general public. In contrast, the positive news, i.e., about the investments, development projects, joint procurement, or distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, are taken for granted and largely ignored. Furthermore, the question of EU funds coming to Czechia is problematic because while some Czechs are aware of this fact, they also associate it with negative phenomena such as corruption, overpriced procurements, etc.

Czechs are generally interested in specifically Czech issues in the EU, such as the conflict of interests of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš or successes and failures of the Czech Republic in negotiations in Brussels. A typical and well-received example is the double standards in food quality. The Czech Republic and several other Central and Eastern European states raised the issue that products sold under the same label had different compositions in different EU countries, leading to the EU adopting rules to ban this practice. However, the most interesting topics for the Czech public are polarizing topics such as migration, which still raises many emotions in the Czech Republic.

The Czech public also approaches the reporting about the EU from a position of lack of even basic knowledge, usually not realizing even that Czechia is a member of the EU and participates in its decision making. When looking at the

causes of this lack of knowledge and information about the EU among the public, the national political elites are frequently mentioned. Politicians are generally uninterested and uninformed about the EU and, consequently, communicate poorly towards the public. In the end, there is a deeply rooted feeling in the Czech society that the Czech Republic does not have much influence in the EU decision-making. In this context, informing the public about the EU issues is supposed to be done by the media instead of the government. However, even many mainstream media do a poor job in this regard, resorting to oversimplifications and catchy headlines critical of the EU instead of objective reporting, which requires more research, fact-checking, and explaining.

Among the mainstream media, there is not much interest in the topic of the rule of law and democracy, and if there is, it is mostly focused on the Czech Prime Minister's conflict with the EU, where the issue is generally perceived as the European Commission unjustifiably "bullying" him. The topic of the rule of law concerning Hungary, Poland, and Prime Minister Babiš, is covered well especially by the public service media, which are obliged to report on any important issues regardless of the level of interest among the readers/listeners. According to the journalists, a greater interest in these topics is present only among a small group of Czech public who are generally more interested and better informed about the EU. As described above, the Czechs are interested in reporting on

the rule of law and democracy among EU member states mostly from the point of conflict between sovereign nation-states and the "bad" EU meddling into their affairs.

### Obstacles and challenges in reporting on the EU towards the public with anti-EU attitudes

In the Czech context, information about the EU can be easily misinterpreted, or the meaning can be changed. This leads to the journalists having to be very careful and thoughtful regarding the formulations and wording they use when reporting about the EU to prevent any possibility of misinterpretation. This is extremely important, especially regarding some potentially problematic topics for the Czech audience, such as migration, mitigation of climate change, or measures for arms control.

Due to this environment and generally low knowledge about the EU among the audience, journalists have to spend much of the reporting on explaining the EU functioning and its basic principles. It then leaves little space for discussion about the actual content they report on, such as the introduced measures' positives and negatives.

However, the journalists who produce objective and quality reporting also suffer the consequences of some of the Czech media doing a worse job, oversimplifying, or misinterpreting some EU issues. There are then two differing interpretations of the issue at hand in the Czech public space, which sometimes reflects badly on

the journalists who report objectively. This public scrutiny and criticism then put serious media under pressure to be extremely careful in avoiding any potential mistakes which can be used against them.

The Czech journalists also report some extent of self-censorship present when reporting on the EU. Since the entire public discourse is tilted towards Eurosceptic narratives and criticism towards the EU prevails, some journalists perceive pressure not to be seen as too Euro-enthusiastic and accused of being naïve and not objective in their reporting about the EU affairs. This distorted environment thus sometimes leads to EU criticism being valued higher and more dominant than objective and balanced reporting. Furthermore, it also shows how polarizing the topic of the EU is in the Czech context.

#### Proven strategies and tips on reporting about the EU towards an ill-informed and Eurosceptic audience

It is possible to engage the Czech public by including the Czech imprint in the decision-making inside the EU and by reporting on specific Czech topics. It is also necessary to simplify the explanations about the functioning of the EU as much as possible while still maintaining quality and clarity. The EU still proves to be very difficult to understand, even for more educated and interested readers/listeners. It is also crucial to avoid the narrative of "us against them" (the Czech Republic versus the EU). It is advised to avoid writing about the EU as a single

separate actor and instead mention the European Commission, Members of the European Parliament, the EU Member States including Czechia, etc., as different actors. Simultaneously, it is necessary to avoid oversimplifications, such as referring to the European Commission as the "government of the EU," which leads to unrealistic ideas and expectations from the EU.

It is a must to repeat again and again that Czechia participates in every decision made inside the EU and what mandate the European Commission has been given by the EU Member States (to counter the picture of the EC as an independent, ruling body). It is also necessary for journalists and politicians to explain to the citizens how exactly the decisions adopted at the EU level impact their lives in specific areas. It should always be demonstrated how the adopted EU legislation will impact policies at the domestic level, specifically in the Czech context.

It is also advised to put the impacts into a larger context by comparisons with the other Member States – how the issues discussed in the Czech Republic are dealt with in other countries. This helps to show that the issue at hand is not something "imposed" from Brussels only on Czechia but rather it is an important topic across the EU.

The public broadcaster's role in informing about the EU is a specific and crucial one. In the Czech case, the public broadcasters the Czech Television and the Czech Radio are obliged to

report any issues affecting the citizens. Oftentimes, they are in the end the only media reporting on important EU topics as their coverage is not influenced by the demand from the public as is the case in most mainstream media.

## Serbia: Where the EU is blamed for everything

### Euroscepticism in Serbia

Despite Serbia being a candidate country negotiating its accession to the EU, support for EU membership is relatively low. According to various available public opinion polls, the support for the accession has been around 50% for the past several years, while opposition to membership fluctuated from 22% to as high as 39%.

This is significantly lower support than the regional average in the Western Balkans, where the second-lowest support, according to the BiEPAG poll released in November 2021, was 79% in North Macedonia. The current figures are not even the lowest ones for Serbia. According to the Ministry of European integration database, the support went below 50% regularly from 2011 to 2016. The late 2000s were the last period of

decisive support for EU accession of Serbia, particularly driven by the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement and granting of a visa-free regime by the EU.

However, as the BiEPAG poll shows, there are other worrying trends in each of the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, with the scepticism over the accession timeline on the rise. According to this poll, 44% of Serbian citizens do not believe their country will ever become an EU Member State. According to the BiEPAG experts, citizens of Serbia (and the region) might recognize the benefits of EU accession, especially materialistic and transactional ones, and support it in principle, but they are not planning their future with a view on EU membership happening anytime soon.

The sources of Euroscepticism in Serbia are multifold. First, there is what can be described as deeply rooted opposition to the EU due to the fact that recognition of Kosovo is still widely seen as the main precondition for EU membership. Lack of progress in this area is seen as the primary reason why Serbia has not become a member of the EU yet.<sup>7</sup> Almost 70% of citizens believe that Kosovo is the biggest problem Serbia will have

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<sup>7</sup> Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. *Kratka istorija stavova građana o dijalogu Beograda i Prištine. Šta se (nije) promenilo?*, page 8, [https://bezbednost.org/wp-](https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Kratka-istorija-stavova-gradjana-o-dijalogu-Beograda-i-Pristine-Sta-se-nije-promenilo.pdf)

[content/uploads/2021/03/Kratka-istorija-stavova-gradjana-o-dijalogu-Beograda-i-Pristine-Sta-se-nije-promenilo.pdf](https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Kratka-istorija-stavova-gradjana-o-dijalogu-Beograda-i-Pristine-Sta-se-nije-promenilo.pdf).

to resolve in order to join the EU. Also, a decisive majority of the citizens, almost 70%, said they would not “trade” the recognition of Kosovo’s independence for EU membership<sup>8</sup>, which multiple polls have found over the years. The presence of this framing in the Serbian public may partially explain the lower level of support for EU membership than the rest of the region, even though the accession processes of other countries have been equally prolonged.

In addition to this, however, the more direct way the opinion of the citizens towards the EU is shaped is how media report on daily issues related to Serbia-EU relations. Domestic researchers claim that the pro-government media are the most crucial source of disinformation, frequently directed against the European Union.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that the influence of the pro-government media in Serbia is disproportionately large due to the mechanisms of media capture. The largest media outlets in the country, including all four private television channels with national coverage and almost all daily newspapers, are owned by individuals close to the ruling party and hold a strong pro-

government position. Media capture in Serbia influenced the drop of the country's ranking on the international indexes of democracy and media freedom. The fact that the media providing an alternative point of view cannot act as an effective counterbalance was also noted by the OSCE Mission to Serbia in the wake of the 2020 parliamentary elections.

In this context, research conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Politics on the reporting of the Serbian media on the EU in 2020 clearly shows that President Aleksandar Vučić is the main source of information and creator of narratives about the EU, which have become more negative in recent years. Pro-government media provided the space for government officials to push through a narrative according to which the EU treats Serbia unfairly and condemns it because of its alleged successes. One example was the 2020 European Commission report, which was more critical of Serbia in the area of the rule of law, media freedom, and democratic institutions than the previous ones. Regarding the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, pro-government media reported how Serbia is facing pressure and blackmail from the EU.

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<sup>8</sup> Centre for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives poll, August 2021, <https://normalizacija.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CDDRI-RESEARCH-KOSOVO-AUG-2021.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Centar Savremene Politike, Serbian media: Threat to democracy, opportunity for anti-EU narratives, April 2021, [https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/Policy-Brief\\_Centre-for-Contemporary-Politics.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/Policy-Brief_Centre-for-Contemporary-Politics.pdf).

Pro-government media are also the main source of very positive reporting on the EU's rivals in the region, Russia and China. This can be explained by the much higher level of popularity these two global powers have in Serbia than Western countries, primarily caused by their role in the 1990s conflicts and their positions on the independence of Kosovo. However, it is also explained by the ruling party's attempt to use the popularity of Russia and China in the Serbian public as a bargaining chip when it comes to the potential criticism and political pressures coming from the EU regarding the normalization of relations with Kosovo and the rule of law.

In 2021, this trend of media reporting continued, with CeSID's analysis of nearly 10,000 articles on global actors on Serbian online media portals showing that, while 50% of the articles were neutral, the articles with negative sentiments focused only on the EU, US and NATO, while articles on Russia and China contained no negative sentiments at all.

### Challenges for journalists reporting on the EU

In this context, journalists in Serbia who aim to report professionally on the EU face multiple challenges, which can roughly be divided into three types: emotional anti-EU narratives

promoted by the majority of the mainstream media, which are creating an anti-EU bias among the readers; lack of interest and understanding of the EU and the integration process as such; and the rising disappointment in the EU among the readers critical towards the government because of the apparent support the authorities receive from the EU.

The **emotional anti-EU narratives** pushed by the **mainstream media** are probably the biggest challenge for the journalists, making it harder to attract citizens to the stories on more positive aspects of EU-Serbia cooperation. An illustrative example is how anti-EU and pro-China reporting on the assistance during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the public perception for months and years to come.

In March and April 2020, China was quicker to send pandemic assistance to Serbia than the EU, resulting in an extremely lopsided reporting favoring Beijing. According to the research conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Politics, during the first few months of the pandemic, pro-government tabloids heaped praise on China and published emotionally charged content when reporting on Chinese aid, evidenced by the headlines such as: "Serbia, do not cry, China is with you," "Serbia must not forget this: Chinese sent messages of solidarity

with Serbia which are tightening up the throat." On the other hand, pro-government media openly criticized the EU for the lack of support in the pandemic and its own management of the crisis, writing how Brussels left the Western Balkans "in the lurch," how the "Brussels bureaucratic imaginary was exposed" and how "The EU is fatally wounded! It would let the Serbs die!", as well as that "the corona destroyed the European dream."

The effect of such reporting was noticeable in the public opinion polls in 2020, which showed the support for EU membership of Serbia descending below 50% for the first time in years<sup>10</sup> and the negative attitudes towards the Union gaining significant momentum. A poll released by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in December 2020 showed that 75% of the citizens believed China helped Serbia the most in the pandemic, while only 3% said it was the EU. Journalists reporting on the EU assistance in the months after the pandemic breakout have therefore been faced by already embedded perception of the readers that China helped Serbia when it mattered, while the EU was the one who

left it "stranded," impacting how their reports were received.

Pandemic assistance, nevertheless, is only the latest element of anti-EU narratives, which are usually brought up by the pro-government media. For years, the 1999 NATO bombing and the support for the independence of Kosovo have been the primary media tropes aimed at triggering anti-EU sentiments of the citizens. These issues are often used as a universal reaction to any attempt to highlight any positive aspect of EU-Serbia cooperation. The intention of bringing them up is to make EU donations, assistance, or cooperation much smaller than the "harm" the EU has done Serbia by "taking away" a part of its territory.

Like in many EU Member States, anti-EU narratives in Serbia target the issues connected with the national, religious, and other identities, making them more likely to leave a more profound impression on the readers than stories on various aspects of EU-Serbia cooperation. The narratives are adapted to the local context, mostly revolving around the issue of Kosovo, while the main difference is that they can be found in the mainstream media and are often encouraged and even initiated by the ruling parties.

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of European Integration of Serbia poll, August 2021,

[https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/avgust\\_21\\_sajt.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/avgust_21_sajt.pdf).

These negative narratives aimed at provoking an emotional reaction are often based on misinterpreted or outright false facts. The latest example, from December 2021, featured some mainstream media outlets reporting on “Christmas being banned in the EU” and that “Serbia will have to give up on Christmas in order to join.” The stories were based on the draft communication guidelines for the staff of the European Commission, which were later withdrawn, recommending staff members to avoid the use of the word “Christmas holidays” not to offend the members of other religious groups. Another example was the news from May 2020 that Serbia will have to acknowledge that Nikola Tesla is a Croat if it wants to enter the EU. This narrative originated from a presentation on an educational EU website where the page about Croatia contained the description of Tesla as a “Croatian scientist.”

**Lack of interest and understanding** of the functioning of the EU and its policies is the second major challenge to the journalists in Serbia. This is also a problem facing other countries, including the EU Member States. However, the additional “layer” of this problem in Serbia is that the country is currently going through the accession process, with additional

procedures, conditions, and political dynamics that need to be explained to the citizens.

However, the accession process is often simplified and boiled down to the recognition of Kosovo as the only real condition. The Ministry of European Integration poll released in August 2021 showed that, when asked what is slowing down Serbia’s EU path the most, a large majority (52%, which is 40% more than any other answer) believes that it is “the politics of constant conditioning and blackmails EU is implementing towards our country” (which in and of itself is a controversial way to phrase this question).

Benefits of reforms Serbia needs to implement and conditions it needs to meet to become an EU Member State are hard to communicate in this context. Once again, journalists are faced with the already existing biases in the population, solely focusing on what the EU should or should not do in Serbia's accession process. At the same time, Serbia's own responsibilities are either insufficiently represented or simply ignored. This is not helped by government officials who present Serbia's slow progress in the EU accession process almost exclusively as the fault of the Union.

Furthermore, to make an informed decision about Serbia’s EU accession process, citizens would have to be properly informed about the

functioning and the main issues in the EU as a whole, not just viewed through the prism of EU-Serbia relations. These aspects are almost completely absent from the mainstream media in Serbia, as evidenced by the 2019 research released by Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI). The publication showed that the EU "on its own," i. e. independently from Serbia, received only 3% of airtime devoted to global actors on the national television channels.

BIRODI's research also confirmed that President Aleksandar Vučić is by far the most dominant actor in the media reports on Serbia's foreign relations, making him the most influential creator of narratives on all global actors. Behind Vučić, by the number of appearances in media reports, were actors from Russia, the United States, the Government of Serbia, and only then the European Union.

Finally, the **disappointment of the readers of the independent media in the EU** due to its apparent support of the ruling party is another factor with which professional journalists struggle. This is especially important since these readers are supposed to be the audience easier to attract by professional stories on the EU.

One of the most widely covered political topics in the independent media in 2021 was the

positioning of the EU institutions, specifically the European Parliament, towards the crisis of democracy in Serbia and its mediation of the dialogue on electoral conditions between ruling and opposition parties. This was the reflection of the expectation of the most pro-EU citizens that the Union would help with the re-consolidating democracy in Serbia. The results of the process were almost unanimously assessed as disappointing.

Polarization in the Serbian society between supporters and opponents of the government is significant. The EU institutions and the Member States, which maintain good diplomatic relations with the authorities, receive an increasingly negative image among government opponents, many of whom would be interested in the professional articles on the EU if it were not for the disappointment in the EU for the "support" it gives to Aleksandar Vučić.

This problem is usually exacerbated by the fact that the EU is viewed as a monolithic bloc among the majority of the Serbian public. Even though the European Parliament, trans-European Parties, European Commission, and Council of the EU, and each Member State can have differing views on Serbia, there is no sufficient effort to distinguish in the media reporting on this issue. The result is that aspects of EU policy that have

nothing to do with the state of democracy in Serbia or the Serbia-Kosovo normalization process are viewed positively or negatively depending on the positioning of the "EU as a whole" on these specific political issues.

## Recommendations

Based on the analysis of political discourse and media narratives about EU accession in Serbia and the example of Czechia, interviews with Czech journalists, and statistical analysis in Czechia, the following recommendations can be made. They are designed for journalists and civil society representatives who aim to report about the EU accession process and present it to the general public and policymakers who make decisions on strategic communication. They should be helpful both to those that aim to provide quality objective reporting and those advocating for EU accession. While the recommendations are tailored for Serbia, they mostly apply to other Western Balkans countries as well and can be used across the region.

### 1. Strengthen the “big picture” narratives about peace and prosperity

EU accession is a strategic political objective of Serbia, yet the motives for this strategic direction have mostly been forgotten over the years. Instead of being presented as a source of funds or sterile bureaucratic machinery, the EU should be presented as a tool of peace and prosperity for the continent as a whole, and EU accession as a road towards belonging to such an organization, with standards that should be adopted for the good of

Serbia’s own citizens. The Czech example shows that promoting small benefits paradoxically risks reinforcing a negative view.

### 2. Patriotism and EU membership can go together

There is a prevalent narrative in Serbia that patriotism and pro-EU position are mutually exclusive. This narrative is particularly strong in Serbia due to conflicts of the 90s and Western support for Kosovo’s independence but is also reinforced by different disinformation campaigns by both local and external actors. Similar narratives can be found in Czechia as well. However, research indicates that these two feelings and needs – to belong to a successful country and to a strong Europe – can work together. Also, being a part of the EU means having a say in all matters of importance for Europe and being a subject rather than an object of the EU's foreign policy.

### 3. Facts are not enough

While facts are essential for proper communication about the EU and EU accession, they are not enough to combat emotionally charged narratives. In the Serbian case, it is evident that facts about the aid provided during the pandemic barely had any influence on public opinion, which was rather shaped by

government's and pro-government media's narratives. Creating different narratives requires speakers that can “connect” with their audience and work around those biases.

#### 4. Focus on issues that matter to the majority of citizens

Research in Czechia shows that the often-mentioned benefits of EU membership – such as more accessible travel, working or studying abroad – are not important enough for the majority of Czech society. The critical parts of the public are most concerned about general safety and safety of their income and health. While in the Serbian case, these benefits are highly appreciated among young people, they also do not directly benefit the majority of the population. For this reason, properly communicating the benefits of EU membership means finding the topics that resonate better with the people and their major concerns.

#### 5. Debunking myths and “fake news” does not have the desired effects

Czech research shows that debunking myths around EU membership and showing how disinformation works may be necessary, but merely repeating myths and “fake news” means they become even more widely remembered. Also, debunking myths without offering a more

memorable story has little effect in the long term. There are several long-standing myths about EU integration in the Serbian case - perhaps the most famous one being that Serbs won't be allowed to make homemade rakija once they join the EU – but much more important is the barrage of fake news and disinformation directed against EU membership. Serbian experience also shows that these narratives are very hard to fight, especially if they are promoted by government officials or influential media.

#### 6. Avoid complex terminology

While reporting about the EU accession process without complex terminology is virtually impossible, having in mind the complexity of both the negotiations and the EU and government structures involved in this process, media should avoid overburdening their readers with technicalities that most of them do not understand. "Chapters," "clusters," or "negotiating positions" can sometimes hide the simple fact that EU accession is a process of alignment with EU's standards, regulations, and policies, mainly to the substantial benefit of the citizens. Improving the work of the judiciary and fight against corruption means more to the readers than "commitments within negotiating chapter 23".

7. Avoid presenting the EU as a monolithic actor

The EU is not a monolithic actor but a complex entity where institutions such as the European Commission might pursue a particular agenda and send certain messages, but the Member States might have different positions. This is complicated even further by the plurality of positions held by different groups inside the European Parliament. Media tend to write that the "EU gave a green light" or "EU condemned" without taking into account these nuances. While explaining the institutional set-up of the EU directly contradicts the previous recommendation, it is necessary to find the right balance between complexity and simplification to present political dynamics and make the processes understandable properly.

8. Public broadcasters have an essential role in reporting on EU accession

In the Czech case, most mainstream media did a poor job in reporting on EU issues due to a lack of interest and existing biases of the population. However, the Czech public broadcasters Czech Television and Czech Radio had a vital role to play in this regard, as they were not driven solely by commercial concerns but had an obligation to report in the public interest. Similar role could be played by public broadcasters in Serbia, RTS and RTV. While the two television stations are among the few media with reporters from Brussels, they are not producing a lot of analytical content or debate shows covering EU integration issues. Devoting more attention to these issues could significantly improve the public debate around EU accession.



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