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MEDIA REPORTING IN SERBIA ABOUT THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

Abstract: When reporting about the war, media play a key role as a source of public information, including the control of public opinions, whereas the political factor is a very important component. War rhetoric, often with sensationalist inputs, has almost become integral part of media reporting in Serbia, while the practice of factual reporting is rather rare. The subject of this paper is the writing about Russian-Ukrainian war in online editions of dailies *Politika* (politika.rs), *Danas* (danas.rs) and *Kurir* (kurir.rs). The aim of this paper is to use the qualitative-quantitative content analysis in order to determine whether online media in Serbia, with regard to the war between Russia and Ukraine, appear in one-sided manner, i.e. whether they observe the principle of objectivity and professionality in reporting, or whether they are committed to support one side in the war. The paper starts from the presumption that the Russian-Ukrainian war takes the key place in the above-mentioned Internet portals as a sensationalist or emotionally involved event, which substantially reduces the informative effect and increases the persuasive function.

Keywords: war, Russia and Ukraine, Internet portals, Serbia, sensationalism.

RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR – BACKGROUND

Protests in the Ukrainian capital Kiev against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to reject the economic integration agreement with the European Union (EU), better known as the "Euromaidan Revolution", triggered the annexation of Crimea and were violently attacked by state security forces. Russia interpreted this event as an unacceptable conspiracy by the West to pull Ukraine into the Western sphere of

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influence and immediately retaliated. On the other hand, Ukraine sought to build a national identity and political power involving many actors who exerted influence on the Ukrainian people through national ideologies. Thus, it viewed the European Union and its political influence as promising, while Russia did not fit in because of its "nostalgic view" of the Soviet Union (Mankoff, 2022). This was only the immediate cause of the conflict, while the background of "intolerance" between the West and Russia regarding Ukraine has existed since the 1980s, when Gorbachev began to think about the limited independence of the Soviet republics. During a quarter of the century separating the Euromaidan from Gorbachev's plan for independence of the republics, it was noted that Russia did not want to submit to Western globalization. Putin stated that Russia could be defended against Western aggression through friendly coaxing, but that the West had to be pushed back not only in Crimea, but also in Ukraine and a number of other disputed territories (Rosefielde, 2017). A month later, in March 2014, Russian troops took control of Ukraine's Crimea region after Crimean residents had voted in a local referendum to join the Russian Federation. Although the annexation of Crimea was made official through a referendum, the other side believed that the referendum was mainly used for propaganda to demonize Ukrainian power and its leadership (Bebler, 2015).

The conflict has its roots in a significant division within Ukraine, similar to the situation of many countries during the Cold War in the relations between the Soviet and the Western blocs. The polarization within Ukraine is a result of the strong presence of Russian culture and political influence that lasted for many years during one of the most sensitive and delicate periods in history, but twenty years of U.S. politics and intentions to extend its control further and further into eastern Europe also played a large part in creating this fateful U.S.-Russian confrontation. The influential columnist Charles Krauthammer admitted: "It is about Russia first and democracy second [...] The West wants to finish the job begun with the fall of the Berlin Wall and continue Europe's march eastward.... The big prize is Ukraine" (Cohen, 2019: 37).

As Brzezinski states in his book *The Great Chessboard*, "Washington decided in 1996 to make NATO enlargement a central goal of U.S. policy to create a larger and more secure Euro-Atlantic community" (Brzezinski, 1998: 103). Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that the rights of Russian citizens and those who speak the Russian language in Crimea and southeast Ukraine must be protected.

In April 2014, mass unrest broke out in several Ukrainian cities, during which Ukrainian state symbols were torn down and Russian national flags were hoisted, while numerous official buildings were broken into and occupied. "People's republics" were declared in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Lugansk and Odesa. While this (dis)sentiment is expressed by residents of the afore-mentioned cities who identify themselves as Russians rather than Ukrainians, the other side (Ukraine and the West) believes that many Crimean Russians, Chechens, and other volunteers living outside the territory of Ukraine actually participated in these events and made up more than one-third of the rebel forces (Bebler, 2015). Beginning with the Clinton administration and with the support of all

subsequent Republican and Democratic presidents and the Congress, the West, led by the United States, inexorably moved its military, political, and economic power ever closer to Russia. Led by NATO's eastward expansion, already stockpiled in the former Soviet Baltic republics bordering Russia and supplemented by defensive missile installations in neighbouring countries, this led to even greater tensions (Cohen, 2019). The President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, was anxious to put an end to the establishment of an anti-Russian regime by the West in Kiev and, on the other hand, to prevent the geopolitical and strategic setback that such a regime in Kiev would represent, leading to the revival of Ukraine's EU accession agreement and eventual membership in the EU and NATO. Russia did not allow this to happen because in that case it would lose its Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol and the anti-Russian regime would cover Russia's entire western border through NATO countries (Hahn, 2014). According to numerous independent surveys conducted by various Ukrainian and foreign organizations between 2002 and 2013, Ukraine's support for NATO membership was low (Hahn, 2014). The crisis exacerbated ethnic divisions, and two months later (May 2014), pro-Russian forces in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of eastern Ukraine held a referendum to declare independence from Ukraine. Soon after, the armed conflict broke out between Russian-backed forces and the Ukrainian army. Moscow denied military involvement, although both Ukraine and NATO reported a build-up of Russian troops and military equipment near Donetsk, as well as Russian cross-border shelling shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea. The conflict continued with regular shelling and skirmishes along the front line separating the Russian- and Ukrainian-controlled border regions in the east. In October 2021, Russia began moving troops and military equipment near the Ukrainian border, raising renewed concerns about a possible conflict. As of December, more than one hundred thousand Russian troops were stationed near the border between Russia and Ukraine. In mid-December 2021, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a series of demands calling on the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to halt all military activity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, prevent further NATO expansion toward Russia, and prevent Ukraine from joining NATO in the future (Donahue, Krasnolutska, 2022). On February 24, 2022, President Putin announced the beginning of a full-scale land, sea, and air invasion of Ukraine, targeting Ukrainian military installations and cities throughout the country.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The central question of our research is how the media in Serbia report on the war in Ukraine, i.e., whether the standards of journalistic ethics are observed and whether journalists adhere to the principles of objectivity and professionalism in their reporting or are dedicated to sensationalism and active support of one side in the war. The subject of the research analysis are articles in the online editions of the daily newspapers *Politika* (politika.rs), *Danas* (danas.rs) and *Kurir* (kurir.rs). The analysis includes all texts about

the Russian-Ukrainian war. The text is treated as a complete whole related to the war between Russia and Ukraine, whether it is a very short journalistic form - news, a slightly longer one – reportage, or a more extensive one - editorial, interview, commentary. In addition to the texts that undoubtedly relate to the Russian-Ukrainian war, the sample also included texts that indirectly deal with it - such as the consequences of the war one affecting other countries as well, statements by representatives of countries not involved in the war, etc. The main goal of this research is to determine, with the help of a qualitative-quantitative content analysis, whether online media in Serbia, when it comes to the Russian-Ukrainian war, act unilaterally (pro-Russian/pro-Ukrainian) or adopt a neutral tone, i.e., whether they adhere to the principle of objective reporting or spread war propaganda when it comes to the war in Ukraine. We assume that online media in Serbia cover the Russian-Ukrainian war in a sensationalist manner, i.e., the majority is pro-Russian/pro-Ukrainian, and that the informative genre dominates in the coverage of the studied media. The sample included a total of 1,640 texts published on the Internet portals of the daily newspapers *Politika, Danas* and *Kurir*, regardless of whether they were factual forms such as news and reports or analytical forms such as articles, editorials and commentaries. The sample is intentional when it comes to the choice of media. Namely, we have been guided by the reputation, circulation and influence of daily newspapers in Serbia that cover a wide range of target audiences. We have covered all the articles published in the period between the beginning of the conflict on 24 February 2022 and 1 April 2022.

RESULTS OF QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The statistical method and the application of descriptive statistics show that in the observed period a total of 1640 texts were published on the Internet portals of the daily newspapers *Politika, Danas* and *Kurir*, of which politika.rs (26.6%), danas.rs (38.8%) and kurir.rs (36.6%). The publishing frequency is normally distributed for danas.rs and kurir.rs portals, while politika.rs published fewer texts, which is probably a matter of the editorial policy, taking into account that both *Kurir* and *Danas* had special supplements, i.e., pages dedicated to the conflict in Ukraine, since the beginning of the crisis.

To adequately measure publication intensity, we divided time coverage into two intervals. More texts were published in the period from 13 March 13 to 31 March (56.9%) than in the first period (43.9%). It can be said that this intensity is common in the coverage of crisis situations. After a large amount of information in the first days of the conflict to alert the public to the cause of the event and a great interest in how the situation will develop, there is often a slight stagnation due to information saturation, followed by a new wave of information. In this case, there was a new wave of information due to the intensification of events in Ukraine and the news of the first civilian casualties, which made the situation even more "serious". The percentage of 72.3% of the texts written in the form of reports underlines the fact that the analyzed online media in Serbia are not

committed to a deeper analysis of important issues such as the war, but only strive to provide information. There are far fewer texts in the form of news compared to reports, only 11.3%. On the observed portals of the Serbian press, there are far fewer commentaries (0.4%) and editorials (0.8%) on the topic of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In a slightly higher percentage, the mentioned topic was discussed through an analytical genre in the form of articles (15.1%). The length of the text ranges from 1 to 2077 words, with the average length of the text being 258 words (AA=258.47, SD=234.70).

In the research, we wanted to examine which expressions the observed portals used most often to characterize the situation in Ukraine. The results showed that the most frequently used expressions were invasion (25.4%), war (8.9%), special military operation (5.4%) and attack (2.9%), while in most cases editors avoided some of the mentioned expressions when describing the situation (52.2%). This information could indicate that the media were on alert, waiting for the official political position of the Serbian government to emerge. Also, due to Serbia's political and economic goals, which are focused on the EU, and pressure on Serbia to condemn events in Ukraine on the one hand, and its historical proximity to Russia on the other, there was no official narrative in Serbia that explicitly supported one side or the other in the war. This was also reflected in similar media coverage of this conflict. The official qualification of the situation in Ukraine offered by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, is a "special military operation" and this term is used by the media, which mainly refer to Russian sources. In addition, the expressions "military intervention", "military offensive" etc. are also used. The West and the countries that have sided with Ukraine, on the other hand, use the terms "aggression", "invasion" and the like.

The term "invasion" is most frequently used on *Danas* (49.5%) and *Kurir* (42.8%) portals, while the term "special military operation" is most frequently used on *Politika* (71.4%). The use of the term "attack" is most frequent on *Danas* portal (72.3%), while *Politika* does not use this term at all. *Kurir* has the fewest texts avoiding the use of some of the mentioned expressions (25.9%), while the opposite is the case on the portal *Danas* (41.3%).

From the processed data, we can conclude that the text is partially equipped, since in most cases it lacks two elements - a supertitle and a subtitle. "A fully equipped text was considered an article with a supertitle, a title, a subtitle and a photo (illustration) functionally connected to the text" (Petrović, 2012).

In the observed media, it is noticeable that the use of supertitles and subtitles is poorly represented, but it is possible that this is a consequence of the presentation of shorter journalistic forms, in our case reports, since shorter texts in practice usually remain without supertitles and subtitles. Moreover, we conclude that the measure of text communicability is low, as "series of common structural-content features that are formal and organizational..." determine the meaning of the text, interaction with the audience and their better understanding of the content (Jevtović, 2014).

RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The qualitative analysis included longer contributions such as articles, commentaries and editorials, which are suitable for analyzing the level of commitment, professionalism and respect for the rules of journalistic ethics. Looking at the units of analysis of the portals included in the sample, we found a lack of investigative journalism, a tendency to sensationalism and routinization of writing texts on all three portals.

As for the *Politika*, it can be said that the articles about Russia, China and Belarus mostly struck a positive tone. *Politika* mainly took information from Beta, Tanjug and Sputnik, while the practice of investigative journalism was low on this portal. More active journalism in *Politika* is reflected in phone calls from Ukrainian residents and their statements. An example of the first is the text "Kyiv Lavra a place of refuge from acts of war" (27 February), in which Deacon Nikolai Sapsai, a doctoral student at the Kyiv Spiritual Academy, talks about the impossibility of returning to Ukraine due to the war events. Another example is a conversation with the residents of Ivano-Frankivsk, a city in Ukraine hit by Russian shells, in which the interviewee vividly describes the situation from the moment she heard the first bombs, through the overall situation in the city, to her plans to leave the country.

Routinization in writing is the next thing we noticed while reading the texts; it is reflected in the downloading of ready-made information from the mentioned sources, sometimes even in downloading entire texts. There is a practice of publishing the same text in intervals of 2-5 days, or possibly changing the title, while the text remains the same, which we assume is due to the need to fill the space caused by the lack of information about current events and the journalists not being interested in giving their critical judgment or considering the issue from multiple perspectives.

On the *Politika* portal there are numerous texts about the Russian military strategy and the attacks on Ukraine. The texts are dominated by the theme of sanctions imposed on Russia by the West to prevent further development of its army. The texts often emphasize the superiority of Russia and Russian soldiers over the West and Ukraine. The pro-Russian view and "mocking" tone are expressed in the texts in which the editors try to describe the speed and easiness with which the Russian armed forces are destroying Ukraine. One of them is entitled: *"Putin's move - the EU and the U.S. are checkmated"* (28 February), where it is stated:

> "What kind of player the current president of the largest country Vladimir Putin is, the whole world could see for itself these days. With the lightning-fast action of Russian forces in Ukraine, he has virtually checkmated both Europe and the United States. He has not cornered them, but he has narrowed their room for manoeuvre as much as possible. He has effectively given them the opportunity to speak out - whether they have the courage and guts to go into a new, common world war, or whether their individual interests take precedence. The lightning-fast incursion of Russian forces into

Ukrainian territory last week could be described in chess terms as a queen's gambit - quick, sharp, attacking. And from a technical point of view, it all boiled down to the successful actions of the Russian air force and precisely fired artillery platoons. And all this through military installations and associated facilities. As in practice. Yet enough to leave the whole world scratching its head in confusion."

The Russian narrative is also expressed in the coverage of the negotiations between the two warring parties, prompting *Politika* to publish headlines such as "Today's negotiations between Russia and Ukraine –our conditions are minimal" (3 March), "Head of Russian delegation: negotiations with Ukraine are difficult", "Russia advocates peace as soon as possible" (16 March) etc.

Most texts on the negotiations depict Ukraine as an obstacle that does not meet the optimal criteria for achieving peace. *Politika* reaches similar conclusions when it comes to the evacuation of civilians through humanitarian corridors, where it suggests that Ukrainians themselves are preventing civilians from leaving the most dangerous cities. In the text "Who is preventing the evacuation of civilians from Ukraine", *Politika* reports that Ukraine is violating humanitarian law and that Russia is taking all necessary measures to save the lives of civilians prevented from doing so by nationalist battalions, or "Ukrainian army prevents evacuation of civilians from Volnovaya" (5 March), with a statement by the Russian ministry that evacuation routes for civilians have been agreed with Ukraine, but the Ukrainian army is preventing them from evacuating.

In the analyzed texts, international law is always mentioned in connection with NATO aggression in 1999. The editors try to deprive NATO of any legitimacy to condemn Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity by pointing out that NATO did the same thing in 1999 in the bombing campaign against Serbia. *Politika* ensured balanced coverage on the opposite side by publishing a number of critical texts, mostly penned by experts. A number of texts were published in which the journalists' expertise on the topic at hand was clearly evident, as was the consideration of issues from different perspectives. A good example of this is the part of the downloaded article claiming that Russian soldiers will suffer when a cold wave arrives from the Arctic, which will stop the army's advance and completely demoralize them. The journalist comments on this, claiming the authors of the text to be ignorant, and cites a number of historical facts about winter as an ally of the Russian army in previous wars, as well as examples of military strategies suitable for this time of year, demonstrating excellent knowledge of history and information on the subject.

When it comes to the goals of the war through the prism of this portal, most of the discussion is about humanitarian goals, i.e., that the operation is aimed at protecting people who have been tortured for eight years; the war is a forced response to the provocations of Ukraine and NATO; the goal is to protect Russia from the military threat of the West and the like. It has also been noted that there is more discussion about the economic consequences of the sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and the US than about the

victims of the war. Politicians implicitly conveyed their narrative by most frequently using President Vladimir Putin's official categorization of the war as a "special military operation", which was also noted in the quantitative analysis, while another example of this may be the title *The entire Lugansk Republic is liberated* (7 March). Indeed, by using the term "liberated", *Politika* adhered to Putin's official narrative that the main goal of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine was to denazify the population and that Russia was not occupying or invading the territories, but liberating them from the Nazis. In most cases, the articles focused on reporting the military progress of the Russian army, emphasizing its competence and training, which can be illustrated by the following:

> "The commander of Russian troops on the southern front, if the parts of Ukraine south of Crimea can be called that, will certainly become a favourite of the General Staff in Moscow. Unlike the Russian troops advancing toward Kharkiv and Kiev, the units in Crimea have achieved success in all three directions of advance .... The troops in Kherson are able to stop the advance because their mere presence on the right bank of the Dnieper has forced the Ukrainian troops in the area of Mykolaiv and Odesa to retreat to the north ... If the Ukrainians had come out of the trenches and dugouts, the images of the Iraqi army's retreat from Kuwait in 1991, when American fighter planes destroyed Saddam Hussein's best units, would probably have been repeated" (3 March).

How a text is interpreted also depends on its graphic representation and the context of the story that is usually accompanied with photography. Photography has the power to frame the content of a text and manipulate our feelings and perception of a particular event. It is closely related to propaganda, so photo manipulation is usually found where a particular personality or event is intended to be portrayed in a specific way. The manipulation of photography is evident in *Politika's* attempts to put an emotional "stamp" on information and shape the meaning and context in which it is found. The photograph can be used to frame the content in a specific way, so that the actors who are being favoured are shown as concerned and calm, while the opposing side is shown as angry and threatening.

Picture 1. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson

In the photo titled "We will not fight Russian forces in Ukraine" (March 1), British Prime Minister Boris Johnson can be perceived as a frightened man with his hands raised in surrender. This can be interpreted as an intention to portray Russia as a powerful force that should not be opposed.

Picture 2. US President Joseph Biden

A photo of angry President Biden with his fist raised in a display of resistance, accompanying the headline "Putin Will Pay, Freedom Will Defeat Tyranny" (3 February) reaffirms America's stated determination to put an end to Russian "tyranny".

Picture 3. Elon Musk, the owner of the company SpaceX

A photo of smiling Elon Musk with the text explaining the West's mandate to block Russian news and media with its Starlink broadband satellite system, and his response of "Sorry, we are absolute champions of free speech" as an explanation of why they will not block it, gives the impression that he is making fun of the West's demands on Musk.

Like *Politika*, *Danas* tends to fill its pages with the same articles every few days, sometimes with different titles or a slightly different structure of the text, sometimes even without that. Reviewing the texts on this portal, it is noticeable that personal meaning is given to the war by linking it to NATO aggression in Kosovo and Metohija, for example, through the texts "Cries of newborns" (15 March), "Similarities and differences between NATO bombings and the war in Ukraine" (24 March), "Does the Ukrainian scenario

threaten the Balkans?" (20 March) and it is interpreted that "the current conflict over Ukraine is practically a continuation of the 1999 NATO bombing", and a conspiratorial view of the situation is given, warning that Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, considering their close relations with President Putin, may use the situation in Ukraine to try to achieve war aims from the 1990s that President Slobodan Milošević was unable to achieve. Moreover, it is predicted that the war will drag on and that this will force Russia to turn to diplomacy, but this diplomatic process will have a great impact on us and on the future of Serbia.... "An interesting diplomatic initiative has emerged that includes a package of solutions to the Kosovo issue" (27 February).

In the texts presented by *Danas*, Russia's losses are usually overemphasized and highlighted in order to portray the Russian army as incompetent and weak, the best example of which is: "According to American estimates, Russia lost more soldiers in 20 days of the invasion than the American army lost in 20 years in Iraq and Afghanistan" (18 March) or

"The Pentagon announced that 50 percent of Russia's combat power is in Ukraine. At the height of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we were at about 29 percent ... Russia has neither the manpower nor the firepower to encircle the Ukrainian capital, let alone invade it... The death toll is in the thousands (American sources say 5,000 to 6,000) and the number of the wounded is much higher" (15 March) and:

"While the total death toll among Russian troops remains a matter of heated debate, most informed estimates point to losses of more than 10,000 in a single month. No major power has suffered such losses since World War II" (29 March).

In the articles that we have found on this portal, the personality of President Putin is dehumanized by portraying him as a "Kremlin murderer", "bloodthirsty" and fascist, making analogies with Hitler, and we have also come across texts openly calling for his liquidation with the words "You would do a great favour to your country, but also to the world" (4 March). Putin and Russia are portrayed as a threat to the West and the whole world, so we see a sharp polarization into "us" and "them". The category "us" includes the whole world united against the common enemy –Russia. Not infrequently, entire texts of the Western media are adopted, in which members of the Russian leadership are dehumanized in order to paint the sharpest possible picture of the Russians as aggressors and criminals.

As for *Danas*, the most frequent sources of information were Foreign Policy, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and N1. The focus of the coverage was on civilian casualties, especially children, and the statement that Russia primarily attacks civilian objects. We assume that such a portrayal serves to arouse emotions in the audience and to highlight rights violations, including international human rights law.

Danas used anonymous sources "(...) an official who spoke under the condition that his name would not be published", "a Russian military commentator who asked to remain

anonymous", usually for the texts talking about the number of missiles fired at Ukraine, the number of dead soldiers and casualties, as well as destroyed artillery. However, it is important to note that a week after the war began, there was a note at the end of each text stating that the information provided had been verified by several different sources, but if any of the readers had sufficient evidence to claim that information was incorrect, they could contact them by email to correct it.

As positive actors in texts brought by *Danas* were presented the sympathizers of the Ukrainian side, as well as the leadership of Ukraine and its army. The portals were overwhelmed with the news about the Russian journalist Marina Ovsyanikova, who interrupted the live news broadcast and displayed a banner with an anti-war message in the studio, to which the court in Moscow reacted harshly and sentenced Ovsyanikova to a fine of 30,000 rubles after she had spent several days in detention. *Danas*, however, published an article calling the journalist "courageous" for speaking up against the war in this way. This label is also attributed to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who "bravely perseveres" in difficult times. Special emphasis was placed on the successes of the Ukrainian army, which, despite Russia's best efforts, put up excellent resistance. The superiority of the Ukrainian army is reflected in the fact that despite Russia's various artillery, ballistic, and bombing missions, "there is still resistance in Ukraine" (4 March), described as "fierce", which has "slowed the invasion and thwarted Moscow's hopes of a lightning victory, and the Ukrainians are working to strengthen the defence of cities throughout the country" (7 March).

The main culprits of the war in Ukraine, about which *Danas* writes, clash with those found responsible in *Politika*. In *Danas*, the situation is mostly characterized as "senseless bloodshed", "unprovoked invasion", but also "innocent Ukrainians". In condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine's territorial integrity, Serbia was praised for making the right decision to get on the right side of history.

A mocking tone was also audible in *Danas*, which ironically characterized President Vladimir Putin as a "unifier" who "naively" went to war with a destructive goal, among others, for the EU, when in fact there has never been greater unity in Europe and among Western partners. sought since World War II, so Putin gave the world a new historical opportunity – "Putin unified the West and made himself persona non grata" (11 March). This undertone can be illustrated as follows: "Instead of additional ammunition and rations, Russian soldiers apparently brought ceremonial uniforms for the parade on the occasion of the victory in Kiev" (14 March), accordingly, the following is also stated: "In principle, the plan was good and should have functioned, but suddenly the Ukrainians started shooting" (10 March).

Danas took a moderate attitude by publishing articles in favour of the Russian side, so it conveys a text from a conversation with history professors that a large number of high school students have already formed an opinion on this issue and that most of them support Russia, then it conveys the text "Ukraine - a country on the border" (3 January), in which the necessary level of knowledge of the facts is shown and it is stated that "the

media of the world nowadays contribute to the confusion and focus on pathos, which is normal, since the media are, knowingly or unknowingly, part of the propaganda machine", and the method of Putin's political behaviour is explained in an argumentative way and it is stated that Putin is not "crazy", as the Western media describe him, but on the contrary – rational, and that this step is rational in its logic.

This portal's texts about the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine were also striking. The context is diametrically opposed to *Politika,* which means that in this case the Russians are the main culprits regarding the failure of negotiations. Ukraine is presented as the side that wants to try negotiating with Russia, but does not believe in being successful. In this case, willingness is characteristic of Ukraine, while Russia is the whose agreement is awaited.

As far as the content of the *Kurir* daily newspaper's portal is concerned, it can be said that it is saturated with typical, sensationalist and bombastic headlines. However, given the fact that this newspaper is a tabloid, this observation is not surprising. Some of the most memorable headlines are as follows: "Scary! Putin: Whoever intervenes from the side must expect Russia's immediate response!" (24 February), "Disaster! Chaos in Mariupol, the residents are terrified: we have no water, the bombs keep falling!" (3 April), "Alarming! Because of the war in Ukraine, the world is in danger of starvation!" (22 March), "The horror of war! Russians: Ukrainians torture and kill our prisoners! Kiev: Russian soldiers rape our women!" (29 March), "Fear! If the Russian-Ukrainian crisis is not resolved soon, the world will face a major economic crisis! The shortages have already begun!" (16 March). Then there are the so-called "clickbait" headlines, which are characterized by omitting part of the information, sometimes even all of it, from the headline so that the reader needs to click to get to it – "Shocking BBC commentary! First Afghanistan, now Ukraine! America is learning to be obedient! Here's why it's good for the rest of the world!" (21 March). Punctuation marks are used to increase the emotional charge of the audience and spread panic and fear, and the manipulative use of the question mark is most often used when the author is unsure of the accuracy of the information he/she is disseminating, e.g.: "Disturbing images are coming from bombed Donetsk!", "The mayor claims Ukraine attacked the city, corpses on the street?!" (14 March). Sensationalism is usually maintained in the title, so we assume that such formulated titles are a consequence of the need for the greatest number of viewers and the biggest profit possible. In addition to the inappropriate titles, there is also inappropriate language, e.g., colloquial language without literary quality, where Americans are referred to as "Yankees" and money as "cash" several times, as well as tendentious phrases, such as "The EU - be worse than one's word!". This only reinforces the journalistic tone and underscores the journalists' unprofessionalism, and at the same time ascribes values to the actors, which clearly puts the journalists on one side or the other.

It is surprising that *Kurir* has gone a step further in investigative journalism compared to the other two portals, visiting the border between Romania and Ukraine several

times and reporting on the ground about the columns of refugees coming into that country and the atmosphere there. The scenes are described as harrowing and they mainly show the procedure of crossing the Ukrainian border and what awaits Ukrainians when they enter Romania (food stalls, diapers, first aid, etc.). On the other hand, *Kurir* has often published information from social networks, which shows that in most cases this daily newspaper has not bothered to get the information on its own, and more importantly and dangerously, it has taken information from sources that are unreliable and often trivial.

We note that *Kurir* sides with Russia and portrays it as a positive actor. Russia is in the role of protector of Ukrainian refugees and strongly condemns the actions of Ukrainian authorities in not allowing the evacuation of civilians. Therefore, it is taking matters into its own hands by creating conditions for the safe evacuation of "more than 142,000 people, including nearly 40,000 children, as well as 588 foreigners from France, Italy, the United States and other countries". Moreover, 15,246 cars crossed the Russian state border, including 738 in one day" (3 March). Thus, Russia presents itself as a place of refuge that warmly welcomes its people. In favour of the Russian side, *Kurir* also highlights the number of Russians who support the special military operation and express great confidence in their country and the army, whose success they predict. President Putin also portrays himself as the "head of the Kremlin", which underscores his satisfaction with his leadership, and he is also perceived as the "master of the empire" who has the credibility to expand that empire. The superiority of the Russian army over the Ukrainian army is also emphasized, with the Russian army on the border with Ukraine being assessed as larger than the entire Ukrainian army.

The texts offered by *Kurir* are full of photos and videos of those killed and wounded in the war, showing the wounded soldiers and dead bodies on the streets without any censorship. By doing so, the journalists violated the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, disregarded the dignity of victims and alarmed the public. This way of revealing the victims' identity may be a consequence of the journalist's desire to provide readers with as much information as possible and to illustrate an event to them, but the fact is that it is still a violation of the right to privacy. The *Kurir's* reporting focused on predictions about the course and end of the war and on the weapons the Russians had at their disposal, admiring the power of weapons while at the same time frightening the public. Thus, there are numerous texts in which various experts analyze the situation in Ukraine and its ultimate outcome, including headlines such as "When and how will the conflict in Ukraine end?", "Putin's invasion has triggered a major war in Europe after several decades" (3 May), "Five scenarios of how the conflict between Ukraine and Russia could end: from a short war to Putin's fall" (3 April), "War in Ukraine won't end soon - U.S. portal analysis speaks about Putin's chances of victory and similarities to Syria and Chechnya" (12 March), "New World! Expert analysis: Russia is weakening politically, the rivalry between China and America remains, the EU gets a chance!" (17 March), and the assessments are balanced, depending on the source of information.

By reporting on the types of weapons the Russians have in their arsenal, the editors portray Russia as a power that no reasonable person should oppose. Russia has one of the most advanced thermobaric bombs in the world, about which *Kurir* writes as follows: "The world fears of the most powerful Russian weapons! Putin's fearsome ace in the hole: "FATHER" destroys like a nuclear bomb!" (26 February), "Sucks the air out of the lungs and deforms the body: these are thermobaric bombs, a terrible weapon Russia has at its disposal!" (2 March), or when it comes to the operational Iskander tactical system, *Kurir* writes*:* "Iskander does not forgive: the Russian army published a video of the destruction of the Ukrainian Buk air defence system!" (26 March).

In unpredictable situations such as the war development in Ukraine, the way is paved for numerous conspiratorial explanations of events, i.e., the creation of conspiracy theories that usually point to a secret plan made by the political powers in secret. *Kurir* resorts to such conspiratorial stories about the "real goal" of the war in Ukraine. One of them says that the ultimate goal is the creation of the Soviet Union, only under a slightly different idea, and Ukraine is just a way to this main goal. The second theory is neo-Eurasian. Russia's "task" is to be big and to expand constantly, and that is where the idea that it should unite the peoples of Eurasia and dominate them comes from. This newspaper also had its part in stirring up panic and spreading fear by publishing articles about the shortages caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war. If this does not end soon, "the world will face an economic catastrophe and an unprecedented crisis, even greater than that of the 1930s", which will be reflected in rising prices and insufficient supplies of necessary products. Panic buying, as during the Corona virus pandemic, began in Italy "for fear of a new war and, therefore, of logistic problems, acquiring supplies and facing shortages" and the United Nations warned of a "hurricane of hunger" that "is already being felt".

CONCLUSION

The media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war is largely embedded in the perspective of the pro-war idea of the media in Serbia. The Serbian press typically tends to sensationalize the war, focusing on war conquests and the superiority of weapons and the army. This confirms our basic hypothesis that the online media in Serbia report one-sidedly about the Russian-Ukrainian war and do not observe the rules of journalistic ethics. The results of the analyzed texts show that the texts on all three observed portals are routinely written and that the articles are less and less independently devised and written, but are increasingly influenced by PR services, in some cases even by social networks. This phenomenon is closely related to the routinization of journalism, which is increasingly present in all communication processes and their stages, from information collecting to event selection and message shaping (Erjavec, Poler Kovačić, 2004). Because foreign political authorities have a strong influence on international news reporting, none of the news organizations has much autonomy in reporting about international news.

The results of the quantitative analysis show that the approximate number of texts was published by *Danas* and *Kurir*, while *Politika* published a slightly smaller number of texts, which can be seen as a result of the editorial policy, but also special supplements about the Russian-Ukrainian war on *Danas* and *Kurir* portals. From the processed data we can conclude that the text is partially equipped, as in most cases two elements are missing – a supertitle and a subtitle.

Politika and *Kurir* were found to report less on the anti-war aspects, as only a small portion of their coverage was devoted to portraying the Russians as the main culprits in the conflict. The results suggest that *Danas*, unlike *Politika* and *Kurir*, predominantly holds an anti-war stance and is less inclined to present opposing views. It is important to note that the analyzed media nevertheless attempted to provide balanced coverage of the issue by including opposing viewpoints and discussions on the topic by experts from both sides. The balance of coverage may be a result of a desire for greater visibility and increased visits to the portal through the hyperproduction of news, the retention of an audience accustomed to credible information, while it may also be caused by economic motives. *Kurir* took a neutral position on the Russian-Ukrainian crisis on several occasions, but was mostly pro-war and used a defensive reporting framework, i.e., it tended to portray Russia as a country defending its people against the Nazis and taking reactive actions. In Addition, *Kurir* tended to report on the successful defeat of the Ukrainian army and the powerful Russian arsenal and to use "sharp language" when talking about Western actors. However, *Danas* was widely opposed and presented Western statements against the war, negative public opinion, critical American attitudes towards the attack on Ukraine and the like. It included articles highlighting negative public opinion, public protests in Serbia and Russia with anti-war messages, and opposition statements by political and religious figures from all over the world. Thus, *Danas* was found to use an "anti-war" and "humanitarian" framework in its reporting. *Politika* successfully balanced coverage, with a preponderance of Sputnik-dominated sources and frames that focused on Russian conquests and made little reference to Ukrainian casualties, although they did not absolutely justify Russia's attack on Ukraine. *Politika* pointed to the negative connotation of the West, polls and comments in favour of Russia and the support by the Russian people, as well as the inability of Ukraine's allied forces to control the situation. U.S. policies and statements by the EU and U.S. leaders were mostly portrayed negatively by *Politika*, while at the same time *Politika* and *Kurir* had a humanitarian framework that mostly balanced the coverage, and by that we mean the issues of the shortages of food, medicines and basic necessities of which the Ukrainian people are deprived.

All three analyzed portals resorted to easy downloading of prefabricated information, thus achieving interdependence between journalists and the source from which the information is most often downloaded, which nowadays is mostly PR services, politicians and social networks, with the result that everything is moving further away from analytical journalism and a critical approach to the content, moving towards a gradual tabloidization of journalism. The assumption that shorter information and the informative genre prevail in the observed media was confirmed in the quantitative analysis,

which shows that 72.3% of the texts were written in the form of reports, indicating that the observed newspapers were not devoted to a deeper, critical analysis of the war in Ukraine, but only to the interpretation of short information. Today's journalism is increasingly dominated by informative genres, as busy modern society does not have enough time for reading articles and commentaries, but needs quick and concise information. This division "seems more logical in today's news-saturated society than the earlier tripartite division, as fictional elements increasingly give way to dry factography in modern journalism" (Todorović, 2002: 63).

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