



# Serbian Media Reporting on the European Union 2020

**LOVE FROM CHINA AND SLAPS FROM BRUSSELS**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Serbian media have mostly reported on the European Union in connection with the events in which high government officials took part, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. President Aleksandar Vučić is recognized as the most important source of information and the creator of narratives about the European Union, from the meetings he attended to the question of EU aid within the pandemic, and there is also a great difference between pro-government and critical media when it comes to reporting on this topic. An emotional pro-Chinese and anti-European narrative was also visible when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the beginning of the crisis. These are the main conclusions of the research on Serbian media portals' reporting on the European Union in 2020, implemented by the Centre for Contemporary Politics.

This research examines which topics dominate in the reporting of Serbian media on the European Union, as well as its content and dominant narratives. Media with the largest readership, as well as those important for public discourse, were included in the research, with a view to include a wide spectre of approaches to this topic.

Analysing media reporting on the European Union is very important having mind that joining the EU is one of the most important declared strategic goals of Serbia in previous decades, and that the lack of support for this project and scepticism about its success have reached worrying levels. According to the 2020 Balkan Barometer of the Regional Cooperation Council, in Serbia there is the lowest percentage of people who believe that joining the EU would be good for their country, 26% against a regional average of 59%. In the next most Euro-sceptic country, Montenegro, the belief that EU membership would be good for their country is held by more than double of that percentage of citizens, 54%.<sup>1</sup>

Even though these results do not suggest that the role of media is crucial in forming the citizens' opinions on the European Union, analysing media reporting and the created discourses on the European Union may help

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<sup>1</sup> Balkan Barometer 2020, Regional Cooperation Council, 2020, available at <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/95/balkan-barometer-2020-public-opinion-survey>

understand the sentiments of the citizens about specific political issues. In the light of the present focus on public diplomacy and research on disinformation campaigns, this kind of research about the reporting of Serbian media may contribute to understanding dominant discourses about the European Union, as well as possible disinformation and its sources. It may also help analysing media pluralism in Serbia or its absence, as well as an increased polarization when it comes to the media scene.

In this research, webpages of 18 media were analysed, mostly based on their readership, but with inclusion of certain media whose presence in the research was considered to be able to provide valuable insight in pluralism in reporting. The research included webpages of the following media: *Blic*, *Kurir*, *Informer*, *Republika* (webpage of *Srpski telegraf*), *Telegraf*, *Alo*, *Espresso*, *Srbija danas*, *Mondo*, *B92*, *Večernje novosti*, *Politika*, *Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS)*, *N1*, *Danas*, *Sputnik Serbia*, *Objektiv* and *Pink*. The analysis was carried out for the period between 1 January and 31 October. Social listening software was used for the research, using keywords “Serbia” and “EU” in different cases and forms in order to focus on the issues of importance for relations between Serbia and the European Union.

In the first part, peaks will be presented, representing the days in which Serbian media reported the most on the European Union, which may help provide insight into which topics contribute the most to reporting on the European Union. Then the most important topics within the observed period will be analysed, as well as how the media report on them and what narratives they created. Finally, conclusions of the research and most important observations will be presented.

# EVENTS WHICH ATTRACTED MEDIA ATTENTION IN 2020

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This chapter highlights the most important peaks, the days in which the largest number of media articles about Serbia and the EU was published on the analysed media portals during the observed period.

The events that attracted the most media attention, as well as the most important narratives about them, will be briefly presented. The peaks are presented starting from the largest.

## 6 May 2020:

### Zagreb Summit of the European Union and Western Balkans

The largest number of articles related to the relationship between Serbia and the European Union in the observed period was published on the day of the online Zagreb summit of the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans. Attention was also given to separate events of the European People's Party and the Group of Socialist and Democrats in the European Parliament, which were held on the same day.

Most media focused on the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and his statements after the Summit. It is noticeable that the role of interpreting the event and its influence is left to the President of Serbia, either through his statements or through announcement from the Presidency of Serbia. There was a noticeable attempt of the *Alo* portal to present the Summit of the EU and the Western Balkans, as well as the meeting of the EPP group, primarily from the prism of the importance of the people with which President Vučić will speak.

The exception was *Danas*, and to a certain extent *B92*, which, in addition to the news about Vučić's statements, paid special attention to the statements of Ursula von der Leyen and other topics. The daily *Danas* also reported on

its portal about the participation of the president of the Party of Freedom and Justice, Dragan Đilas, in the event organized by the Socialists and Democrats.<sup>2</sup>

**16 July 2020:**

## Continuation of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina

The second biggest peak in the observed period concerned the continuation of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina on the normalization of relations in Brussels after 20 months. On that occasion, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, met with the highest European officials, as well as with the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Avdullah Hoti.

The main characteristic of this narrative was the struggle of President Vučić for Serbian interests in Brussels. According to pro-government media, the President is “fighting like a lion” for Serbia’s interests, the negotiations are “very difficult” and the side of Pristina is “unreasonable”, while President Vučić is “cold, sharp and pragmatic” in defending Serbia’s interests. The President is also highly respected in his close relations with top EU officials, as seen in a photo of the President and the Enlargement Commissioner sitting at a table where *gibanica* and *proja* (Serbian traditional dishes) were served. This narrative also suggests the Albanians are not happy at all because of Vučić’s closeness to EU officials, as well as because the EU is on the “Serbian side”.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the portal of the daily *Danas* was focused on the statements of European, international and regional officials regarding the dialogue (Charles Michel, Josep Borrell, David McAllister, Maria Zakharova, Avdullah Hoti), but also the then head of the Serbian Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Đurić and President Vučić. *Danas* also reports on a letter from the Alliance for Serbia asking the EU to send two expert groups

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<sup>2</sup> Danas: Dragan Đilas na samitu lidera EU i lidera Zapadnog Balkana, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/dragan-djilas-na-samitu-zemalja-eu-i-lidera-zapadnog-balkana/>

<sup>3</sup> Varheji objavio sliku sa Vučićem, Albanci poludeli zbog jednog detalja, available: <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/varheji-objavio-sliku-sa-vucicem-tviter-poludeo-zbog-jednog-detolja-foto-2020-07-16>

to Serbia to assess the state of democracy and the rule of law and the state of the media in Serbia in separate reports.<sup>4</sup>

## 1 July 2020:

### Opening of EU borders for Serbian citizens

The Council of the European Union has recommended that member states open borders to Serbian citizens and citizens of 14 more countries. Unilateral decision made by member states regarding by opening the borders for our citizens make up the majority of articles (*Kurir, Srbija danas, Alo, B92, Mondo, Danas*). Most of media reported in a neutral tone, with a couple of striking headlines. Thus, *Alo* announced that “the Germans do not want Serbs”, talking about Berlin not following the recommendation of the EU, while *Srbija danas* wrote about the “ramp for Serbia” and the “lowered shutter”, talking about the possibility of entry of Serbian citizens into Switzerland and Germany.

## 26 June 2020:

### Visit of President Vučić to Brussels

After the meeting between the representatives of Serbia and Kosovo which was supposed to be held in Washington was cancelled, President Vučić met in Brussels with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade – Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák, European Commissioner for Enlargement Oliver Várhelyi and President of the European Council Charles Michel.

Pro-government media reported President Vučić’s statement after meetings with EU officials that by the end of the mandate of the new government in 2024, all negotiation chapters will be closed and by 2026, Serbia will become a member of the EU, which are his expectations as someone who is “pragmatic, realistic, even pessimistic, but very rarely optimistic”. Speaking about IPA

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4 Opozicija pisala EU: Vučić zarobio institucije i medije u Srbiji, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/opozicija-trazi-da-ekspertske-grupe-eu-ocene-stanje-demokratije-i-vladavine-prava/>

funds, the President stressed that talks with Pristina are crucial so that Serbia can get money from the EU.

*Danas* reported the statements of Várhelyi, Michel and Von der Leyen that the dialogue with Kosovo is crucial for Serbia's European path. It also published an analysis of Grenell's initiative for Vučić and Taçi to meet in Washington and on the gap between the Belgrade and Pristina dialogue facilitated by the EU and the one lead by the United States. *Kurir* and *Danas* reported the statement of EU Ambassador to Serbia Sam Fabrizi in which he is said that Vučić's visit to Brussels was a positive signal that there was a need to talk to Serbia, and to continue the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.

**8 May 2020:**

## European Union's "condition" that Tesla is a Croat

The main topic was the controversy over the designation of Tesla as a "Croatian scientist" on an interactive page of the European Union intended for children to learn about the Member States. The previous day, *RTS* published an article "The EU teaches children that Nikola Tesla is a Croat", which was later reported by other media. *Informer* and *Republika* had similar titles, while *B92* published an article entitled "Croats are again appropriating Tesla and the EU is helping them in that".

After that, on May 8, *Sputnik Serbia* published an article entitled "New condition of the European Union: Serbia to accept that Tesla is a Croat!", in which Tesla's identity was discussed and the reaction of the Serbian Minister of Culture was stated, but no "EU condition" was mentioned. *Sputnik's* article was also republished by the portal of the highest-circulation daily *Informer* with the title: "New condition: Serbia to accept that Tesla is a Croat! The scandal from Brussels is becoming a first-class state issue".

Another important topic on that day was the opinion piece by President Aleksandar Vučić published in "US News and World Report", in which he stated that Serbia is not giving up on European integration despite the significant help it received from China during the coronavirus pandemic. *Blic*, *Danas* and *Večernje novosti* had similar articles and titles on this topic.

**8 October 2020:**

## Visit of Commissioner Várhelyi after the European Commission report

Two days after the publication of the European Commission report on Serbia, the Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Várhelyi visited Belgrade and met with the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. The findings of the annual report of the European Commission on Serbia and Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans were presented during the visit.

When it comes to pro-government media, the most impressive is the article that explains the President of Serbia took on himself the entire criticism of the European Commission in the report, openly and decisively “said everything to the face” of Várhelyi, but that he remained grateful to the EU on investment and committed to EU integration.<sup>5</sup> A large part of the reporting is dedicated to billions of euros coming to Serbia, while the question of rule of law was there as much as President Vučić spoke about it himself.

The portal of the daily *Danas* is focused on the statements of Commissioner Várhelyi, Serbian officials, but also representatives of the opposition who demand the continuation of the inter-party dialogue and draw attention to the situation in the rule of law and electoral conditions<sup>6</sup>. *Danas* also published parts of the European Commission report critical of the rule of law. Compared to pro-government media, a small part of the reporting is dedicated to the statements of President Vučić himself.

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5        RTS: Sve im sasuo u lice! Vučić oštro reagovao na kritike EU Ne govorim uvek ono što bi oni hteli, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3545459/vucic-ostro-reagovao-na-kritike-eu-ne-govorim-uvek-ono-sto-bi-oni-hteli-spreman-da-snosim-svaku-vrstu-posledica?ref=fbkurir>

6        Danas: Serbia Report, available at : <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/redakcijski-komentar/serbia-report/>

**16 September 2020:**

## **Non-opening of EU borders for Serbian citizens**

A large part of articles referred to travel to the European Union and the opening of borders to citizens of Serbia as well as the problem that arose when Greece decided to close its border on the Evzones crossing. The media reported on this topic equally, with a greater presence of the term “ramp” in the tabloid media. Other articles referred to Richard Grenell’s statement on the Mini-Schengen initiative. *Srbija danas* wrote that “Vučić is fighting hard for the Serbian people”, while *Alo* wrote how “Vučić fought like a lion for his people”,<sup>7</sup> both quoting the then Special Envoy of the US President.

*Danas* wrote about several topics related to the European Union, from the statements of the EP rapporteur Vladimir Bilčík and EU Special Envoy for Belgrade – Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčak until civil society comments. According to Sputnik, “United States of America has made a time bomb in Serbia”, alluding to Kosovo.

**2 September 2020:**

## **Extension of the travel ban, departure of Vučić to Washington**

The two topics of the day were that Serbia is still on the list of countries whose citizens are not allowed entry into the EU due to the unfavourable epidemiological situation in the country and the departure of President Vučić to Washington before the beginning of the talks in the White House.

Most media reported that Serbia remains outside the list of countries whose citizens can enter the EU. Vučić was in Washington, where he participated in talks on economic cooperation between Belgrade and Pristina, and on that occasion said that he expects a “surprise” in the form of a request for mutual recognition of Serbia and Kosovo. *Kurir*, *RTS* and *Danas* announced that the

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<sup>7</sup> Alo: Vučić progovorio o nepoznatim detaljima sastanka u Vašingtonu, available at: <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/grenel-progovorio-o-dosad-nepoznatim-deteljima-sa-sastanka-u-beloj-ku-ci-vucic-se-lavovski-borio-za-svoj-narod/341528/vest>

continuation of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina with the mediation of the EU is scheduled for 7 September in Brussels.

*Srbija danas* wrote about the big farewell that the people of Belgrade sent to Vučić before leaving for the “difficult talks that await him in the coming days”, with shouts “Aca the Serb” and “Support to Vučić”. Vučić said that he was going to Washington to “fight, that he would not agree to extortion”, and told the citizens to believe in their Serbia.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Informer: Aco Srbije, narod je uz tebe!, available at: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/545913/foto-aco-srbine-narod-tebe-gradjani-dali-podrsku-vucicu-pred-teske-razgovore-pred-sednik-izasao-zahvalio-okupljenima>

# THE MOST IMPORTANT TOPICS DURING 2020

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In the observed period, four topics were singled out as important for further analysis. These are media coverage of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, European Commission's Serbia 2020 Report, the European Union's role in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Zagreb Summit of the European Union and the Western Balkans, held online in May 2020.

## BELGRADE - PRISTINA DIALOGUE

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“

*Vučić outwitted Hoti*

”

One of the most important topics related to the relationship between Serbia and the European Union for media is the EU-mediated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. In 2020, the dialogue was one of the topics that initiated frequent media reporting on the EU. This finding does not come as a surprise, considering the fact that this topic attracts the attention of all the media in Serbia, and is often presented as the key issue for Serbia's EU accession in the public discourse. According to a recent study conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, almost 70% of Serbian citizens think that resolving the Kosovo issue is the most important precondition for joining the EU, which makes media reporting on this process particularly important.<sup>9</sup>

It is noticeable that the topics of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and the European Union were mostly reported on in the days when important meetings related to the dialogue took place. The media reported on this topic the most on 16 July, when the meeting of the delegations of Serbia, Kosovo, and the EU took place, and on 7 September, when another meeting was held in Brussels, three days after the Washington Agreement was signed.

The resumption of the EU-mediated Belgrade–Pristina dialogue on 16 July, after the break of more than a year and a half, was perhaps the most important

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<sup>9</sup> Research conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy and Sprint Insight Agency in late September and early October 2020

event of 2020 related to this process. The dialogue was interrupted in November 2018, when the Government of Kosovo introduced customs duties of 100% on goods imported from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Government in Kosovo changed twice in 2020, after which the customs were finally lifted, and the two sides returned to the negotiating table.

The media reported on the events that happened on 16 July mainly in a neutral tone, largely relying on the news published by the news agencies such as *Tanjug*, *Beta*, and *Fonet*. The meeting between Serbian President Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Hoti, along with various speculations and comments about the dialogue were the things that sparked the most attention. The media approached this round of negotiations by analysing the content of the conversation and expectations regarding the continuation of the dialogue, but also its international aspects, including Russia's reaction. The meeting between President Vučić and the European Commissioner for Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, as well as negative reactions in Kosovo caused by a book that said "Kosovo and Metohija" in the photo from the meeting also sparked a lot of public attention.

The media that published the most articles on the topic of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue was *Danas*, who, along with the news regarding the meeting, also published many reactions to the dialogue given by European officials, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and various stakeholders in Kosovo. *RTS*, *N1*, and *Telegraf* created and published their own analytical content.

Some media, however, had different headlines than others, placing President Vučić in the foreground and presenting him as the person leading the *battle* for Serbia. For example, *Alo* published an article entitled "Sharp reaction and interruption followed: Vučić could not keep quiet about this", while *Informer* published an article with the title "We talked about three things, I asked for the conversation on the Community of Serb municipalities to continue! Vučić revealed the latest information on the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina from Brussels!". *Informer* also published news about the key role of Russia, which was taken over by *Sputnik Serbia* entitled "Americans and Brussels accepted defeat, no solution for Kosovo without Russia! Moscow showed once again how much Serbia means to it - invaluable!".

“

***Croats and Albanians (derogatory term 'Šiptari') will cringe!  
Serbia gets billions and has not recognized Kosovo!***

”

The second most important event in the observed period related to the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was the high-level meeting held on 7 September. On that occasion, President Vučić and Prime Minister Hoti met Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union and the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák. The day before, separate meetings were held with Lajčák and the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Special Representative of the State Department for the Western Balkans Matthew Palmer, as well as a round of expert-level dialogue led by Marko Đurić and Skender Hyseni. President Vučić also had a meeting with the European Commissioner for Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi.

This round of dialogue took place only three days after the Washington Agreement was signed on 4 September by President Vučić and Prime Minister Hoti in the White House. This is why the media and public attention was still drawn towards the events in Washington, as well as the consequences of the Washington Agreement on the future of the EU-mediated Belgrade–Pristina dialogue.

Much like the previous round of dialogue, the media mainly reported in a neutral tone, relying mostly on the content published by the news agencies *Tanjug*, *Beta*, and *Fonet*, while *RTS* and *N1* reported on the dialogue more thoroughly. The media emphasized topics related to the framework of the dialogue, as well as the consequences of the Washington Agreement. However, it is evident that most news published on the round of dialogue consisted of President Vučić's statements, who was portrayed as the central figure of these events.

As in the case of the previously analysed round, the pages of some media had different headlines than others, clearly praising President Vučić and presenting the meetings in Brussels and Washington as victories. *Informer* wrote that “[Vučić outwitted Hoti](#)”, and that the talk on property issues was proof that Kosovo is Serbia (“[Kosovo is Serbia, it is clear to everyone! Serbia, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Serbs own more than half of the territory of Kosovo and Metohija!](#)”). *Repulika* writes about the success that the Washington Agreement represents for Serbia, with the title “[Croats and Albanians \(derogatory term ‘Šiptari’\) will cringe! Serbia gets billions and has not recognized Kosovo!](#)” while *Alo* writes that “Vučić gave a lecture on diplomacy in Washington”, and that the big victory of Serbia in Washington led to a chaotic situation in Pristina (“[Not a great atmosphere in Pristina; These three points are the best sign that Serbia won in Washington!; Tension in Pristina: Albanians in panic, confusion after the meeting in Washington](#)”).

What is noticeable in the media coverage of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is the idea that Serbia is facing pressure and blackmail from the European Union. This narrative comes mainly from the Serbian President himself, who is portrayed by the pro-government media as the one who successfully resists these pressures and wins rounds of dialogue as a kind of a battle. That is how Vučić *outwits* Kosovo's Prime Minister Hoti, how Serbia *wins* in Washington, and everything that happens there is proof of the strength of Serbia and its President, as its representative in this fight. When he was leaving for Washington, President Vučić said goodbye using strong combat and militant rhetoric, claiming that he would not tolerate any blackmail. Thus, the reporting of the pro-government media on the dialogue is in sharp contrast to the claims of President Vučić himself that a compromise is necessary, which implies giving in to certain demands of Pristina in order to normalize their relations.

## EUROPEAN COMMISSION REPORT 2020 REPORT ON SERBIA

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“

*EU criticized Vučić, he responded sharply!*

”

European Commission adopts the Enlargement Package once a year – a series of documents which justify the direction of the Enlargement Policy of the European Union and assess the state of reforms in the candidate and potential candidate countries. For every candidate and potential candidate European Commission releases a detailed report which contains the degree of alignment with European legislature in 35 negotiating chapters and the degree of development of political and economic institutions based on the Copenhagen criteria.

An objective communication of this Report and a critical commentary should contribute to familiarising the public with this process, contribute to a higher level of information on the state of reforms and trigger an open debate of all relevant social and political actor on reforms so that the entire process of European integration can be used for the creation of democratic institutions and the functioning of market economy.

European Commission adopted the latest Report on Serbia on 6 October 2020, together with an Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans,

which represents a plan of investment in the region worth 9 billion Euros in the next seven years.

## Democracy overshadowed by billions from the European Union

“

*2.5 billions of Euros of investment plan earmarked for Serbia? Here is how the EU will help Serbia*

”

Report of the European Commission was in the focus of the media not on the day of its release, but two days later, when European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi visited Serbia. During this visit, Commissioner Várhelyi presented the Report of the European Commission and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, held bilateral meetings with the state officials in Serbia, met with several representatives OF the opposition and spoke in front of the National Convention on European Union, which gathers the organisations of the civil society.

The main event at which the narrative on this year's "progress report" in the pro-government media was the joint press conference of Commissioner Várhelyi and President Vučić.

In his address, President Vučić accepted responsibility for European Commission's criticism of Serbia, primarily for the negative assessments of his participation in the campaign for parliamentary elections, disproportionate use of police force during the July protests and the purchase of the weaponry and close relations with Russia and China.<sup>10</sup> Putting the criticism of cooperation with Russia and China front and centre is a particularly sensitive issue, given

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<sup>10</sup> Kurir: *Sve im sasuo u licu! Vučić oštro reagovao na kritike EU! Ne govorim uvek ono što bi oni hteli!*, available at:<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3545459/vucic-ostro-reagovao-na-kritike-eu-ne-govorim-uvek-ono-sto-bi-oni-hteli-spreman-da-snosim-svaku-vrstu-posledica>

the fact that the citizens of Serbia traditionally regard these countries as friends of Serbia.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative that was created suggests to the citizens that the President of Serbia was personally and unjustifiably criticised for efforts he undertakes in the interest of Serbia and that the European Commission does not have the right to assess his behaviour, with only the people in elections being entitled to a judgment. President took over the complete “burden” of criticism and expressed his intention not to step away from the direction in which he was leading the country, completely confident in his own righteousness.

One gets the impression from the narrative that the European Commission is the one that criticises the positive results for Serbia, which are the purchase of weaponry and good relations with China and Russia, as well as that there is a gap between the interests of the European Union and the citizens of Serbia, and that the President presents himself as the protector of the people from EU criticism. He is not in any way subservient to the European officials, this narrative further suggests, but an equal interlocutor who has the truth on his side and is not afraid to announce it. European Union is subjective and inconsistent in its positions, which the President pointed out with the fact that it had not criticised police brutality in 2008, when one protester died, which took place during the rule of the Democratic Party, while it did criticise police reaction in July 2020. The headlines supporting the described narrative that have left the strongest impression are “Vučić conquers with the truth”, “EU criticised Vučić, he responded sharply”, “We’re about to receive a lot of money”.

Prime Minister was less visible than the President of Serbia when it comes to the Report. Her role was to respond to the remarks on electoral reforms, during which she put emphasis on updating the Electoral Roll as a proof of implementation of electoral reforms. She described some assessments of the European Commission as partial and not based on adequate proofs.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Russia is perceived as a political protector, and China as an economic saviour and a big donor during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both countries are strongly tied with keeping Kosovo as a part of Serbia, which the majority of citizens regard to be the foreign policy priority of Serbia. According to the research by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 40% see Russia as the biggest friend of Serbia, while 16% see China in the same role. More: <https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/mnoga-lica-srpske-spoljne-politike-javno-mnjenje-i-geopoliticko-balansiranje/>

12 Večernje Novosti: *Neke ocene EK su paušalne: Ana Brnabić kaže da ćemo i dalje raditi na izbornom procesu*, available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/924178/neke-ocene-pausalne-ana-brnabic-kaze-cemo-dalje-raditi-izbornom-procesu>

A characteristic of the narratives in pro-government media was the absence of the reporting on direct findings, conclusions, but also independent interpretations of the original text of the European Commission Report, as well as the emphasis of the favourable elements of the Report in the part with economic criteria for membership. Pro-government media took the role of disseminators of the interpretation of state officials, most often the President of Serbia, which made him the main source and interpreter of the information in the Report itself.

What was also characteristic of this year's Report was a narrative that puts emphasis on investments from the European Union as a consequence of Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, without significant contextualization of the rule of law and development of democratic institutions. Commissioner Várhelyi has significantly contributed to the development of the narrative that puts focus on the investments, presenting himself as a "bearer of good news", while he welcomed the nomination of Ana Brnabić for the Prime Minister as an opportunity for starting with a serious work on key reforms.

EU sees Serbia as a country that quickly implements economic reforms and will invest billions of grants, for which Serbia is thankful, given the fact that the largest part of the resources earmarked for the region will be invested in Serbia. The narrative on announced investments left the impression that Serbia was rewarded, as well as that there were no consequences for assessments of the Report which refer to the work of the institutions and rule of law, which was pointed out by the critical media, opposition and the civil society. This narrative suggest that the European Union is a "piggy bank" – political entity whose investments are more than welcome, but with does not have the right to criticise neither the work of the institutions nor the foreign policy direction of Serbia.

This way of reporting leads to a situation in which the citizens do not have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with different interpretations of the Report, with the politicians being their only source of information and the most popular media are only a channel for dissemination of political messages. Putting the Economic and Investment Plan front and centre in the context of the arrival of the Report largely put the analysis of the electoral conditions, work of parliament and rule of law in the background. A narrative created in such way on the most visited portals does not contribute to the increase of credibility of the findings of the European Commission among the citizens of

Serbia and does not leave an impression that the process of solving these problems will be approached in good faith.

## Serbia one step away from the suspension of negotiations

“

*Serbia at risk of suspension of negotiations, needs to return on the European path*

”

On the other hand, the critical media reported on the assessments of the Report by the civil society organisations and mainly pro-European opposition politicians, and to a lesser extent on the statements of government officials. In this group of media, the emphasis is not on reporting on the Economic and Investment Plan, but more on conveying direct quotations from the European Commission's Report, including the parts concerning political criteria, judiciary, rule of law, fight against corruption and other key areas. When it comes to the Economic and Investment Plan itself, its conditionality with reforms in the area of the rule of law was emphasised, as well as the calls of certain opposition politicians for the EU to more strongly condition the use of funds with reforms.

This narrative states that Serbia has not achieved satisfactory results in key areas, that the insufficient fight against corruption is a significant obstacle on the European path and that the Report is a “national disgrace”<sup>13</sup>, which is why Serbia is potentially threatened with suspension of membership negotiations. Doubts are also expressed with regards to Serbia's commitment to European integration, which the European Commission notes. These media also state that the European Commission should engage in a dialogue between the government and the opposition, which must lead to resolving the political crisis and improving the media scene and electoral legislation.

This narrative emphasized the assessments of the European Commission in the area of political criteria and those areas in which Serbia received worse

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13 Danas: *Izveštaj Evropske komisije o Srbiji “nacionalna sramota”*, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/albahari-izvestaj-evropske-komisije-o-srbiji-nacionalna-sramota/>

evaluations, and it mainly quoted civil society organizations<sup>14</sup>, opposition parties and politicians. The Report of the European Commission continued to be a topic in the critical media in the days after the visit of Commissioner Várhelyi.<sup>15</sup>

This type of reporting is an indicator of the polarization of narratives on the Serbian media scene and the lack of debate between government, opposition, civil society and citizens on the European Commission's Report as one of the key topics in the negotiation process.

## Serbia moderately progresses towards membership in the European Union

“

*Brussels made an assessment –  
which areas Serbia should improve”*

”

It can be assessed that *RTS* has taken the middle position between the two described narratives, but the interpretation of the European Commission's Report is more inclined towards a positive and neutral tone, rather than in a negative one, without sensationalist headlines resorted to mainly by pro-government media. On several occasions, this portal quoted the findings from the Report of the European Commission, written in a diplomatic language.

Significant reporting on the reactions of opposition politicians was missing, except for the news about the meeting that some opposition politicians held with Várhelyi.<sup>16</sup> Representatives of civil society organizations, in particular the National Convention on the European Union, had an opportunity to comment,

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14 Danas: *TS: Važne poruke za borbu protiv korupcije u izveštaju EK*, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/ts-vazne-poruke-za-borbu-protiv-korupcije-u-izvestaju-evropske-komisije/>

15 Danas: *Međak: Srbija nije napravila značajan napredak ni u jednom pregovaračkom poglavlju sa EU*, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/ts-vazne-poruke-za-borbu-protiv-korupcije-u-izvestaju-evropske-komisije/>

16 *RTS: Komesar za proširenje EU sa predstavnicima dela opozicije*, available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/4105659/varhelji-eu-srbija-opozicija.html>

including on topics related to electoral legislation as well as environmental protection.<sup>17</sup>

Serbia has made moderate progress on the path to EU membership, as understood from the *RTS* narrative, and has made limited progress in key areas such as justice, freedom and security, the fight against corruption and judicial reform, while being positively assessed in the area of economic criteria for membership. This narrative suggests that there are certain shortcomings in Serbia when it comes to electoral legislation, and the European Commission's Report should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat, in order to achieve a stronger momentum for reforms.

## Letters of Members of the European Parliament

“

*Serbian leadership endangers democracy*

”

In the context of the relations between Serbia and the European Union, in addition to the report of the European Commission, the positions of the Members of the European Parliament played an important role. Some parliamentary groups and MEPs from the ranks of liberals and centre-left parties in the European Parliament warned the European Commission and the European public of certain political tendencies in Serbia, which they considered unfavourable for the development of democracy. If we take into account the letters with the most serious allegations sent during the state of emergency (16 April 2020), before the elections (26 May and 8 June 2020), after the elections (22 June 2020), and in support of the opposition for drafting a rule of law report (17 July 2020), we can see that much of the pro-government media either ignored the letters of MEPs or reported on them exclusively in the context of counter criticism and denial.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the media critical of the government reported on the letters, including direct

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17 *RTS: Postizanje ciljeva iz Poglavlja 27 jedinstvena je prilika da zaštitimo životnu sredinu*, available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/magazine/sr/story/2953/priroda/4104649/poglavlje-27-koalici-ja-27-izvestaj-zivotna-sredina.html>

18 *Kurir: Milička očitala Briselu samo tako!*, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3501461/brisel-uzdrman-ostrim-pismom-jelene-milic-direktorke-ceas-ne-sluzite-kao-korisni-idioti-nije-birala-reci>

quotes.<sup>19</sup> The example of the letters from the MEPs is another indicator of a polarized media scene where each group of media deals with its own topics from opposite angles.

## THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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“

*EU corona fascism! Scandalous policy by Brussels, they do not like the fact that we are the best!*

”

The analysis of media articles in this period showed that the media were mostly focused on opening and closing border crossings, especially during the holidays.

Initial articles from the beginning of the pandemic were related to border closures, when some EU countries, as well as Serbia, began to introduce restrictive measures at border crossings. What marked this period were the dramatic narratives that were created when tourists were prevented from crossing the borders due to the lack of flights. The headlines that depicted the media front pages at the time referred to “rescuing captured Serbs”, “evacuating the population” from other countries, “hermetic closure of the borders” and “total blockades”, often accompanied by photographs of the army armed with weapons.

At the end of April, after overcoming the initial crisis, the focus of the media was on the topics of summer vacations and the questions of which countries will open their borders and where the citizens of Serbia will be spending summer holidays. May was characterized by a large number of neutral articles on the openings of the borders and which destinations citizens will be able to go to without a test or quarantine.

However, this image changed at the beginning of June, when headlines about open borders were replaced by headlines about “barriers” and “ramps” that were lowered only “for Serbs” and lists of countries where Serbs were

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19 N1: *Evroposlanici iz redova socijaldemokrata: Srpski lideri ugrožavaju demokratiju*, available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a607761-evroposlanici-iz-redova-socijaldemokrata-srpski-lideri-ugrozavaju-demokratiju/>

“undesirable guests”. That discourse changed at the end of June when it was announced that the EU would “finally raise the barriers” and that citizens would be able to use their summer vacations outside Serbia.

That was, however, changed again when, in mid-July, “the EU slammed their borders for us!”. Some of the examples of titles in this period were: “Germans do not want Serbs! EU gave the green light, Berlin closed the borders!”, “New Corona ramps for Serbs”, “Croats are returning people from the borders like crazy!”. After a roller coaster with the opening and closing of borders before the end of the summer, most media headlines were reflecting the attitudes of the citizens who were disappointed with the impossibility of crossing the border and travelling to other countries. One of the titles that represent this period is “EU corona fascism! Scandalous policy by Brussels, they do not like the fact that we are the best!”.

It can be noticed that the titles have a certain suggestive character and are emotionally charged. Although the articles behind these titles are mostly moderate and informative, the sentiment created by the titles themselves towards the EU is mostly negative. This type of reporting can potentially endanger the trust of Serbian citizens in the countries of the European Union, as well as in its institutions, and as an outcome could have an impact on the decline in support for EU membership, because the EU “does not want Serbs”.

## Assistance in the COVID-19 pandemic

“

*Serbia, do not cry, China is with you*

”

The analysis of the narratives in the observed period shows that since the beginning of the pandemic, the media have closely followed all the announcements and events related to sending aid to Serbia. The beginning of the analysed period was marked by a narrative about the passive behaviour of the EU in terms of aid that was expected to be sent to Serbia, whose place was readily taken by China. The front pages of the media were marked by articles about the “death of European solidarity”, which is a “fairy-tale only on paper”. The authorities in Serbia used this occasion to present the “steel friendship that will last for centuries” and “fraternal relations” between Serbia and China.

The leading source of this narrative about the “friendship made of steel” and the “Serbian–Chinese brotherhood” was the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, who repeatedly pointed out that Serbia “seeks Chinese love” and that Serbia is “infinitely grateful for everything”. Also, the Minister of Defence at the time, Aleksandar Vulin, often pointed out that China decided to “help a very small, beloved Serbia”.

It is also noticeable that the pro-government media had emotionally charged content when reporting on Chinese aid, which could have been seen in the headlines: “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”, as well as accentuating the “unbreakable ties between Belgrade and Beijing”.

Additionally, pro-government media reported negatively on the European Union, emphasizing how official 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”. Headlines like “The Corona tears up the EU: What is the point of an alliance when the aid is coming from the enemy?” were also appearing later.

The statements of the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić, that “European solidarity is more of a delusion than reality” also contributed to that.

A modest number of media outlets, such as *Danas* and *N1*, reported that the EU made available at the time – €15 million for emergency aid, €21 million for short-term assistance, and €50 million for long-term assistance, and that in the past two decades it had provided or lent Serbia €250 million for the health sector and financed Serbia’s cargo flights to deliver equipment from China.

While the statements of Vučić and at that time Minister of Defence Vulin were the reason for the media to write about the aid that was donated by China, it was noticeable that such statements were absent when it came to the aid that was sent by the European Union. The articles on the assistance of the member states were published in the form of announcements and statements made by the EU Ambassador to Serbia Sem Fabrizi, as well as by the Minister for European Integration Jadranka Joksimović, who were the central creators of the narratives on EU assistance. In that case, the articles were more neutral, without emotional connotations, in which key information about donations was presented.

Also, it was observed that the reception of aid by President Aleksandar Vučić was less frequent when it came to aid coming from the EU, as opposed to aid coming from China.

After Brussels' reactions to the negative narrative created about the Union and the aid it sent, as well as praises about China's aid, the approach of the authorities and the pro-government media was softened. From that moment on, the headlines were mostly directed at emphasising Serbia's commitment to the EU path and expressing gratitude for all the help. After that, it was noticed that President Vučić began to receive donations from the EU at the airport, in person, and that he praised the help with more enthusiasm – “[We are infinitely grateful for 70 million euros!](#)”.

The pro-government media used this as an occasion to show how, because of the “sharp reaction of Vučić” due to the lack of help, the EU was “forced to donate funds” to Serbia. By the end of the analysed period, there has been a decline in articles on “brotherly ties with China” and “friendship made of steel”, as well as an increase in the number of articles on EU investments in Serbia and the Western Balkans.

The narrative of the “passive role of the EU” and China arriving at the right time “to save beloved Serbia” probably affected the perception of Serbian citizens about international assistance, as evidenced by a public opinion poll conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. It was pointed out that 69.4% of the surveyed citizens of Serbia believe that China has provided Serbia with the biggest financial and humanitarian assistance in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, while 9.6% of the surveyed citizens consider that to be European Union. Due to emotionally charged media headlines, the aid donated by China was significantly elevated in the eyes of the citizens of Serbia, while it had the opposite effect on donations coming from the EU.

## EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT IN ZAGREB —

“

*President Vučić in the company of some of the most powerful people in Europe*

”

The summit of leaders of the European Union and the Western Balkans, which was supposed to be held in Zagreb at the beginning of May 2020, was held in the form of a video conference due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the Summit, the Zagreb Declaration was adopted, which reads that “the EU once again reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans”. EU leaders agreed on the Declaration, and Western Balkan leaders also aligned themselves with it. As a response to the crisis caused by the global pandemic, the Declaration contains a number of points in which it calls on solidarity in the fight against the pandemic, and lists measures taken by the EU to help the Western Balkans in their efforts to combat the pandemic and its impacts on societies and economies.

In the way the media reported on the Zagreb Summit it is evident that the presence of President Vučić at the Summit was the main topic of most of the articles and news. On one side, certain media outlets such as *Kurir*, *Alo*, and *Srbija danas* reported on the Summit as the event where “Vučić was in the company of some of the most powerful people in Europe”. Reporting this way, these media presented Vučić as the central figure of this event, i.e. the person who addressed other leaders and sent important political messages. Accordingly, these media published only segments of the speech Vučić gave during the Summit or his statements given during the Summit, as well as his conversation with the President of the European Council Charles Michel. Bringing him to the foreground of the entire Summit, Vučić was presented as the person who, not only creates the narrative about the Summit but also explains and interprets the sequence of events, and EU leaders’ statements. This can be seen in the fact that in most articles published by pro-government media on the Zagreb Summit, the entire stories were built around the information that the Serbian President *participated* in the EU-Western Balkans Summit, or that he sent an important message to other participants of the Summit. However, almost no articles offer an overview or an explanation of the importance of the Summit for the entire process of EU integration of Serbia,

present other leaders' statements given during the Summit, or important conclusions of the event.

One example of such reporting on the Zagreb Summit is the article published by *Alo*, which points at the very beginning that President Vučić took part in the Summit “as one of the first speakers” thus implying that he is in a position of authority and influence among European leaders. The article goes on to say that Vučić informed other participants of the Summit about the situation in Serbia with regards to the coronavirus pandemic and demanded that trade barriers with the EU be removed and that he “called on members of the European People’s Party for solidarity with one another”. This form of wording used by the pro-government media in Serbia creates a narrative about the President as the person of authority and power, and as a person who is in a position to demand something from the EU and to set conditions.

On the other hand, certain media outlets such as *Danas*, *B92*, *Sputnik*, and *RTS* published details on the Zagreb Declaration, and the content of the document, as well as statements of certain European leaders regarding the EU integration of the Western Balkans, while only *Danas* wrote that the text of the Declaration does not include the word “enlargement”, and does not say anything specific about the EU integration of the Western Balkans.<sup>20</sup> Also, *Danas* was the only media that published an analytical article about the Zagreb Summit, where the authors explained the importance of this event for the Western Balkans but also reminded their readers of the aid and assistance that the EU has provided to support the Western Balkan countries to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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20 *Danas*: EU u Zagrebačkoj deklaraciji obećava pomoć regionu, ali ne pominje članstvo [*Danas*: The EU promises to provide aid to the region in the Zagreb Declaration, but does not mention membership] available online at: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/eu-u-zagrebackoj-deklaraciji-obecava-pomoc-regionu-ali-ne-pominje-clanstvo/>

# ANALYSIS

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It is noticeable that the media reported the most on the European Union when it came to events that included high-ranking state officials of Serbia, and especially the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. It is also noticeable that the President himself was the main source of information and creator of discourse on these topics, from the rounds of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and the Zagreb Summit, all the way to the European Commission Report, where the President’s interpretation of the Report attracted more attention than the document itself. The COVID-19 pandemic was certainly another topic in connection with which the media reported a lot about the European Union, but there is also a strong influence of government representatives and the narratives they promote. The presence of an emotional pro-Chinese and anti-European narrative related to the coronavirus pandemic is also evident. However, as the research showed, there are differences among the media when it comes to reporting on these topics, as well as the presence of government representatives in their interpretation.

## President Vučić as the main source of news and creator of narratives about the EU

In this reporting period, the pro-government media did not search for information outside official institutions, so the main source of information was the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. In addition to him, information came less often from the Minister of European Integration of Serbia Jadranka Joksimović and from the Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia Sem Fabrizi.

The role of Aleksandar Vučić as the main source of information and as the creator of the narratives about the European Union was most noticeable when it came to the aid that arrived in Serbia, intended for the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. When it came to the headlines that marked the news about donations and aid from the European Union, they were moderate, and can be summed as giving general information – “[Aid from the European Union has arrived](#)”, “[EU donated funds to Serbia](#)”. The help provided by the EU was taken for granted, without any sentimental expressions of gratitude.

On the other hand, when help came from China, the sources, narratives, and even sentiments were completely different. Statements, as the main source of information, came mostly from President Vučić and somewhat less frequently from the then Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin. The narrative that was created was marked by praises and gratitude that Vučić then expressed to China. As he was the main source of information about Chinese aid, the media broadcast his statements in their entirety, with frequent headlines about “steel friendship” and “brotherly love” between China and Serbia.

When all this is taken into account, it can be concluded that the main cause of the differences between the narratives about EU aid and aid from China were the appearances and statements of President Vučić. Whether it was his presence during welcoming the aid at the airport, his statements that were the main source of information and the narrative he created, as well as the sentiments that ran through the headlines and articles about the aid, the difference was striking. Only when these differences became noticeable in official Brussels and when negative reactions followed, gratitude for the help that the EU provided to Serbia became more present in the media, so President Vučić gave more statements.

On the other hand, the media closely followed the statements of President Vučić on other topics related to the European Union. The headlines about the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit were dominated by statements and press releases of the President. The same could be noticed during bilateral meetings, such as the visit of the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi to Belgrade, who on that occasion openly and decisively “shoved everything in the face” of Olivér Várhelyi but remained grateful to the EU for investments and committed to EU integration. The situation was similar after the publication of the annual report of the European Commission on Serbia.

In conclusion, the statements and press releases of the President of Serbia were the main source of media headlines when it came to the events and relations between the European Union and Serbia in the reporting period, which made him the main creator of the narratives about the European Union.

## Different media coverage of the European Union

In general, the pro-government media, and especially the tabloids, are in favour of a type of reporting that criticizes the EU with a lot of emotions and glorifies its “rival” actors in Serbia, mainly using the allegations of state officials. Thus, the European Union is an entity that often conditions Serbia and asks it to give up key identity determinants (Tesla, Kosovo), as well as its traditional friends (China and Russia) for the sake of membership in that organization, inconsistently and unjustifiably criticizes it (for buying weapons from Russia and China) and leaves it stranded in crisis situations (COVID-19). The President of Serbia defends the Serbian people from the attacks of Brussels and manages, despite the enormous pressures to which he is exposed from often indeterminate (Western) centres of power, to independently make the best decisions in the interest of Serbia. Emphasis on victories is especially evident when it comes to the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, where the Serbian side, thanks to the efforts of the President, manages to achieve significant success, despite the very difficult position and the fact that the other side makes unreasonable demands. Despite the criticism, the European Union recognizes Serbia’s economic success, and its economic assistance is always welcome.

Observed media that are critical of the authorities have a much clearer pro-European stance and are more willing to report on initiatives coming from the European Union that have nothing to do with state officials, using statements from opposition politicians, civil society organizations and European officials. In this narrative, the European Union notices the deterioration of the state of democratic institutions, which is why Serbia is not making progress on the path to the European Union. Also, there is a certain kind of special role given to the EU as someone who is obliged to take care of democracy in Serbia, election conditions and punish the authorities for actions that violate the rule of law.

Although on the global level, a lot of attention is paid to the Russian media when it comes to spreading disinformation about the European Union and the West, in this research, *Sputnik Serbia* did not appear as a significant source of information on this topic. However, in the reporting of this media on the European Union, a clear narrative could be noticed according to which the European Union is weak and a creator of instability in the Western Balkans, while Serbia is the target of its conditions, from those grounded in reality (the necessity of normalization with Kosovo), to completely fabricated (recognition of Tesla as a Croat). The influence of *Sputnik Serbia*, it seems, mostly depends on the readiness of the mainstream media to spread this narrative



EU-RS THINK TANK

*The Centre for Contemporary Politics* is a civil society organisation from Belgrade, founded in 2012, whose activities are focused on democratization, European integration process and regional cooperation. The main goals of the organisation are development and promotion of democracy, the support for the EU integration process and the promotion of European values, as well as regional stability and cooperation. The vision of the organisation is democratic Serbia within united Europe.

The Centre for Contemporary Politics its program goals achieves through the publishing of research and other publications, organisation of events and through other media projects, as well as through youth education. The focus of the organisation is on the research part of its work and active involvement in Serbia's European integration process.

The Centre for Contemporary Politics is a founder of the portal European Western Balkans, a regional web portal in English language, on European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, through which it realises its media projects.

# EUROPEAN WESTERN BALKANS

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*European Western Balkans* is a regional web portal specialized in European integration process of the Western Balkan countries, founded in Belgrade in 2014.

Besides European integration, portal follows the topics related to a common European future of the Western Balkans, such as regional cooperation, political stability and the enactment of reforms in key areas.

European Western Balkans is entirely independent and it is established by the Centre for Contemporary Politics, think tank based in Belgrade.



EU-RS THINK TANK

