



MEDIA REPORTING ON SERBIA
AND KOSOVO RELATIONS:
CONFLICT OR COOPERATION

The following report aims to shed light on the media coverage in Serbia and Kosovo concerning the complex relationship between the two countries. In light of the tense historical background and recent escalation of tensions, it is crucial to examine how the media reports in times of crisis.

The report of the media coverage of online portals and televisions in Serbia and Kosovo was motivated by the recognition of the media's vital role in providing objective information, particularly during times of crisis. The relationship between Serbia and Kosovo has been characterized by decades of tension, which has only intensified in recent times. This conflict is also reflected in inter-ethnic tensions within Kosovo where Albanians and Serbs live. In light of these circumstances, it is imperative to assess how the media portrays and disseminates information related to this delicate relationship. The report sought to contribute to the broader understanding of the role media plays in shaping public perceptions, attitudes and narratives towards Serbia and Kosovo.

The methodological approach enabled us to uncover patterns and trends in media coverage, using a content analysis of 942 texts from seven different media sources. Research time frame included selected dates between September 2022 and February 2023. Content analysis method encompasses identification of sources, topics, tone, visual presentation and dominant strategies concerning the media presentation of the relationship between two countries. Analyzed texts were sourced from media outlets, selected based on their editorial standards and public influence. In Serbia, the analysis included 4 online media: Danas, Blic, Kurir and Novosti along with three televisions with national coverage: RTS1, N1 and Pink. In Kosovo, our sample included Gazeta Express, Gazeta Blic, Telegrafi, Kosovo Online and TV stations RTK 1 and Klan Kosova.

Polarization is a significant characteristic of media reporting on mutual relations. This divide is notably evident in both media landscapes. In Serbia, coverage of this topic often aligns with one of two distinct polarities: pro-government or anti-government. A similar situation can be observed in Kosovo, where media outlets often adhere to ethical lines. In Kosovo, the mainstream media reporting is more balanced compared to Serbia, but there are still problems in the reporting approach, especially in the mono-ethnic approach where journalists report only about/towards one ethnicity.

According to the results obtained through this research, we can see certain patterns, strategies and building of main narratives in media reporting, and some of the key findings include:

- The media reporting on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo is highly intensive – on a daily basis, the selected media publish an average of 50 news items. These are mostly short, fact based news.
- In our sample, the dates with the largest number of news items are December 29, 2022 and February 17, 2023. Occasions that sparked reporting are removal of the barricades and roadblocks in the north of Kosovo and Ohrid Agreement signing, thus putting de-escalation efforts in focus.
- Reporting is mostly focused on tensions, crisis situation on the ground and high level political debate, while the reports on economic, cultural relations or any cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia are sparse. Stories are mostly presented through the lances of high politics, while realities of everyday lives remain unseen.

- Public opinion in Serbia is formed based on a limited number of sources and without satisfactory plurality of voices in debate. The Serbian President is by far the most quoted source. Serbian media outlets almost never quote officials from Kosovo as a source of information, even in situations where there are joint meetings at the high international level or collaborative efforts. Kosovo officials are more likely to be featured in Serbian media when their statements are perceived as inflammatory or controversial.
- The public in Kosovo is informed in different manner, encompassing the stands and opinions of all parties. Media outlets in Kosovo report on statements by the government, the Serbian side, the opposition, and the EU and other international actors. The presentation of Government officials is more balanced and the Kosovo PM is often criticized as his actions were contrary to what he promised during the election campaign.
- Manners of reporting also vary between tabloid and professional media obeying standards, and this is particularly visible in a Serbian case. Contrary to pro-government tabloids, it is important to highlight the reporting of Danas and N1 which could be considered as an example of good practice.
- We found that there were not many harsh breaches of the journalists ethical code, the biggest issue is the context in which information is placed, and this context is mostly based on the media overall editorial policy and attitude towards ethical standards. Breaches of code are mostly derived from reporting on crisis situations, which leaves little room for fact checking as well as from the online environment which stimulates clickbait journalism and virality of content rather than professional reporting.
- Lack of perspectives of local communities in the reporting and is also visible in the visual presentation. Namely, in more than a half texts, media reporting is predominantly visually focused on politicians and state officials while lives of real people are missing.

Introduction: setting the scene

At the moment of release of this report (October 2023), the situation in Kosovo is calm after several months of tensions in northern Kosovo that saw protests and local Serbs clashing with Kosovo police and international armed forces KFOR, following local elections in four Kosovo north municipalities that Kosovo Serbs boycotted. The escalation of conflict was during the incident in Banjska monastery (occurred on September 28, 2023), and armed clashes of local Serbs with Kosovo police forces, which resulted in several casualties and potential for serious diplomatic sanctions.

These tensions are not recent, they have been long standing and complex, rooted in historical, ethnic, and territorial disputes. The region of Kosovo holds immense cultural and historical significance for both Serbs and Albanians. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Kosovo sought independence from Serbia and declared independence in 2008 and has since sought international recognition.

On the other hand, Serbia refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence, considering it an integral part of its territory. Position of Serb community in Northern Kosovo has also been a point of tension, as integration processes showed only limited progress in recent years.

For the past seven months researchers from BIRN Serbia and Internews Kosova gathered under the joint project *“Fostering a media inter-cultural exchange as a milestone towards*

a reconciliation process between Kosovo and Serbia” have been monitoring the media reporting on mutual relations, as media constitute an important societal pillar, which should help citizens to be better informed about the issues that matter.

Understanding complex realities and political and social context, such as the one between two countries, is one of the (many) roles media play in society. They not only provide information to the public, but also help in conflict resolution. This urges the media to put more emphasis on addressing the root causes of conflicts in a way that highlights opportunities for peace, rather than placing more value on violence, war, and negative events.

The main focus of this research is how the media in Serbia and Kosovo reported on relations between two countries, how the notion of the “other” is constructed, and how the events and incidents were framed.

The report also allows for comparison of the main differences and similarities in media reporting, depending on where it is reported from.

The report is a response to lack of this type of research both in Serbia and in Kosovo, and filling this gap could help data gathering and steering debate on media and journalistic standards in reporting on the issue.

There is a need for a change of the mainstream narrative and different approach in reporting, which would contribute to the lowering of tensions, emphasizing normalization of relations and inclusive narrative about shared priorities for the future.

The report is structured to have two distinctive chapters - one mapping general mainstream trends in reporting and an additional chapter presenting case study on media reporting on days when the incidents were the most tense (excluding recent events in Banjska, since the report was finished prior to the events). When crisis events are reported, the differences in the media become deeper and the narratives of the two propagandas collide, based on the results of the case study, and that is the most notable difference in comparison to the mainstream reporting.

Decline in democratic capacities and media freedoms

Although having many differences, both countries have one thing in common, as they have witnessed slow progress or decline towards democratization and media freedoms in recent years.

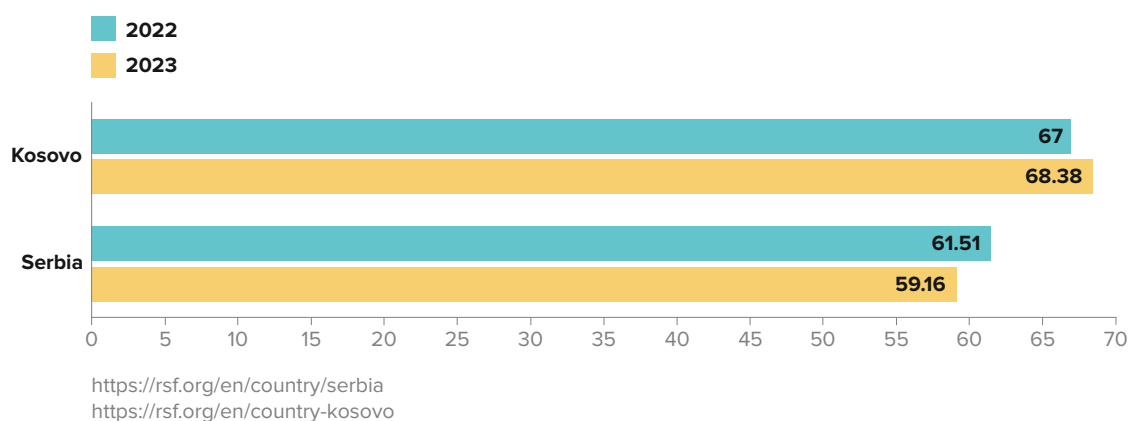
According to the report by the Freedom House, Serbia is a state with transitional or hybrid regime in 2023.

Over the last decade, Serbia has faced concerns over the erosion of democracy and a shrinking space for political opposition. Numerous international and domestic watchdog organizations have noted that the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by President Aleksandar Vučić, has consolidated power through an increasing control over state institutions and media. The current government has been accused of limiting freedom of the press, manipulating the judiciary, and stifling dissenting voices, which has raised alarm about the state of democracy in the country.

Unlike Serbia, Kosovo has experienced progress in establishing democratic structures, including holding regular elections and fostering a more pluralistic political environment, according to the Freedom House report. Nonetheless, concerns persist regarding the rule of law, corruption, and the overall functionality of institutions. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has highlighted ongoing issues with corruption within Kosovo's public sector.

Democratic culture affects the media sectors of both countries, and development of sustainable and independent media outlets tends to be hampered by authoritarian regimes.

In Kosovo, according to Reporters without borders media market is diverse, its development is limited by the small size and strict separation along the ethnic lines. Media independence is threatened by poor regulation and dependence on partisan distribution of public funds. Even if the media succeed in holding politicians accountable, journalists remain the target of political attacks.



Country	Overall	Information Quality	Multiple Channels: how information flows	Consumption & Engagement of public	Transformative Action: how information is used by public and other actors
Serbia	15	13	17	16	13
Kosovo	23	22	26	20	25

Source, IREX VIBE report 2022

Deep polarization (in Kosovo along the ethnic lines, and pro-government and anti-government in Serbia) is one of the key features of both media systems. This polarization is further deepened by mainstream media reporting on mutual relations, mainly burdened by propaganda or stereotypical reporting.

Our research

Media reporting on Serbia – Kosovo relations is intense, news and reports appear on a daily basis on various channels. Having in mind the intensity of reporting as well as media role in the formation of public opinion, with this research we were interested in dissecting main media narratives, primarily through mapping most influential sources, topics covered, and manner of their presentation.

We also focused on the way individual media with various editorial policies present the same events, how they put focus on certain topics, tone and manner of their representation, visual elements of the reporting and overall respect of ethical standards and spread of disinformation.

Our main assumption was that information on Serbia-Kosovo relations is presented mostly through news related to dialogue, high level political plans, and provides little or no insight into real life, genuine problems of both communities and potentials for mutual cooperation.

Content analysis is a quantitative and qualitative method we used in this research to prove the above assumption. This method entails that each text was coded according to the following categories: Topical focus, Occasion that sparked reporting, Source(s), Tone of the story, Genre, Visual presentation and Disinformation or breaches of ethical code. Once analyzed, each of the code allows for interpretation of key dimensions in media reporting. We mapped and analyzed (according to the code) in total 942 media reporting items.

Our research sample was constructed to include TV and online media, as these are the media with the widest audience and the biggest impact. We selected 7 media from Serbia and 6 media from Kosovo. In Serbia, the analysis included 4 online media: Danas, Blic, Kurir and Novosti along with three main televisions with a national coverage: RTS1 as the most viewed public media broadcaster channel, and commercial and privately owned N1 and Pink. In Kosovo, our sample included Gazeta Express, Gazeta Blic, Telegrafi - influential online media in Albanian language along with Kosovo Online, a portal serving the Serbian community in Kosovo and correspondent of many media in Serbia. It also included RTK1, the first channel of a public media broadcaster and Klan Kosova, a private TV station.

The selection criteria included not only the most influential media, but also their different editorial policies, so our sample allows for researching mainstream reporting trends.

In Serbia Blic, Kurir, Novosti and Pink have pro-government editorial policy with Kurir and Pink being highly tabloid in reporting. Blic is the most read portal in the country, and Novosti leans towards the right. On the other hand, N1 and Danas are critical toward the government and tend to be the most standard upholding media. RTS is the main public service broadcaster in Serbia and usually reports in a pro-government manner.

In Kosovo, most of the media outlets we selected carry out balanced reporting between the government and the opposition. The government is continuously held accountable and criticized for its approach to inter-ethnic problems, including the northern part. Most recently, the international community (including EU) and local media outlets reacted to attempts by Kosovo officials to revoke the license of Klan Kosova. The suspension process was eventually halted due to public pressure.

Our research couldn't grasp the entirety of Kosovo-Serbia media reporting, so we constructed a random sample of dates to be covered which included 15 different dates. The research included the following dates: September 2, 5 and 25, 2022; October 10, 21 and 28, 2022; December 17, 19 and 29, 2022; January 3, 5 and 8, 2023 and February 5, 17 and 18, 2023.

Same content analysis methodology was used to produce a case study report on reporting during incidents. The dates covered included May 29, June 28 and July 5, 2023.

Results

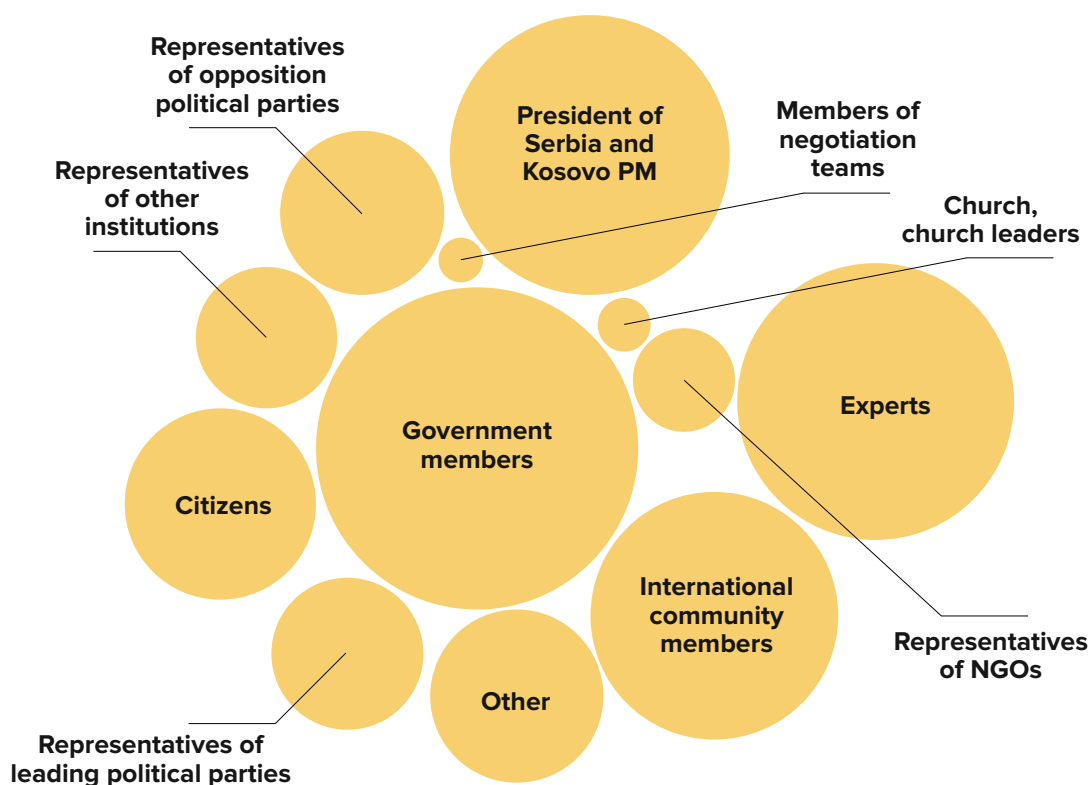
Sources and tone of the stories: the blame game

Sources are crucial for any media story as they can provide facts, background or/and context. They are also considered as main agenda drivers of the entirety of media reporting. High ranking politicians on both sides, along with the international community members dictate the agenda as they are the most quoted sources, our research discovered.

Critics and negative tones in mutual "blame game" mostly come from top officials, in the Serbian case that includes Vučić and members of the Government, while in Kosovo case they mostly come from top Government officials.

In the direct TV programming statements and direct messages of Kosovo representatives are rarely heard in Serbian media. Citizens appear mostly in the role of the victims or as the ones whose rights are being violated.

Distribution of Sources



More than 400 individual sources were identified as direct contributors to media stories in this research. Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić is individually the most quoted person in both Serbian and Kosovo media. He was quoted 134 times in 942 analyzed texts. In Serbian media, as majority of them are pro-government, he is presented as the “guardian” of Serbian position in the negotiations process and key person who guarantees the implementation of agreements. This position is usually rarely contested by the Serbian media, and can be heard only in the media with critical editorial policies, N1 and Danas, before all. In Kosovo media he is presented as a politician who tries to stay on good terms with all international parties, the US, the EU, Russia, and as a person who incites and controls criminal groups in north of Kosovo. Vučić is also mentioned in the context of his participation in the Yugoslavian civil war during the 1990s and as minister of information during Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević authoritarian regime.

In total number of quotations, Vučić is followed by Kosovo PM Albin Kurti and Serbian PM Ana Brnabić.

Other members of the diplomatic and negotiating teams as well as the international community members are presented through diplomatic missions and running umbrella negotiations (majority coming from EU and USA and military missions presented at Kosovo) and followed by the number of quotations.

Experts are also often used in reporting and interpretation of the events and they appear more than 100 times in reports. In Serbia, the position of independent experts is often abused by pro-government media, as they usually support the Government in the negotiations.

Representatives of the opposition parties are missing from the overall media agenda, in Serbia they are mostly quoted in media critical of Government moves. In Kosovo, the Serb opposition receives media attention. Politicians, political analysts and activists such as Aleksandar Jablanović, Aleksandar Arsenijević, Rada Trajković and Nenad Rakić have been given media attention where they expressed their opinions against the Serbian List-Belgrade backed Kosovo Serb political party.

Citizens are quoted directly only 13 times, usually in the role of victims of the incidents in Northern Kosovo. In TV reporting particularly, citizens of one country can rarely hear their counterparts directly talking - their quotes are usually retell by journalists.

Topical focus: how events shape the agenda

The media reported on various topics in this period, and the events that marked the six month period covered by our research include amongst the others: license plates and re-registration of Serbian vehicles in Kosovo, enhanced presence of the Kosovo army in the Serbian municipalities in the north, arrests of Serbian police officers, barricades and road blocks in the north of Kosovo, high level political negotiations, anniversary of Brussels Agreement and Ohrid peace talks between Serbia and Kosovo under EU mandate, the anniversary of the declaration of independence of Kosovo etc.

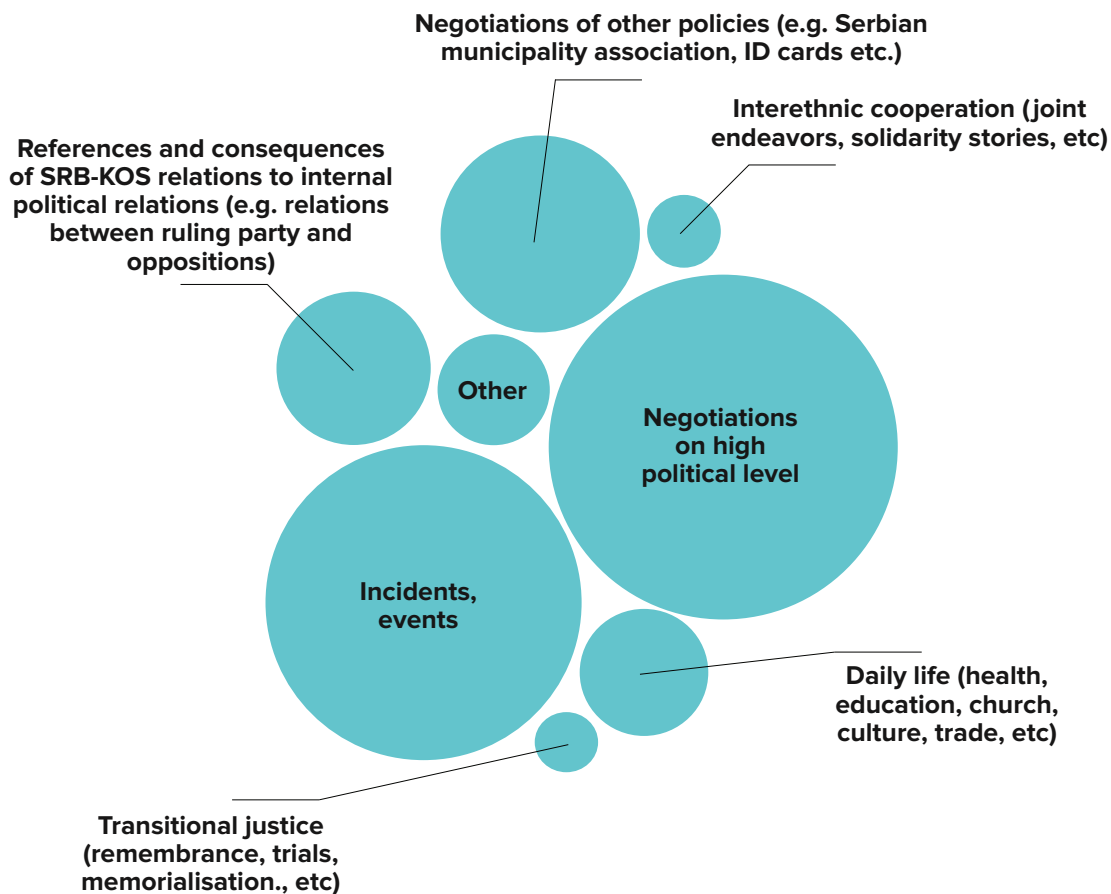
In the selected sample, the most intensive reporting was marked on December 29, 2022 on the occasion when roadblocks and barricades were removed by Serbs in Northern Kosovo as well as on February 17, 2023 on the occasion when both parties signed Ohrid Agreement, meaning that media put emphasis on de-escalation on tensions.

Depending on the day, the number of reports varied from 14 to 85, testifying to the intensity in reporting.

According to the results of our research, high level political talks as well as the incidents dominate the reporting topics. All TV media in our sample secured live broadcasting from the incidents in Northern Kosovo, while online media had their correspondents present. In our research, topics related to negotiation of policies that affect daily lives (e.g. license plates, ID cards, Serbian Municipality Agreement etc.), comes third.

In Serbia, the topic of Kosovo relations is also present as part of the internal dynamics of the ruling party and the opposition. Memorabilia and transitional justice is a topic exclusively reported by Kosovo media. Both testify to differences in local realities.

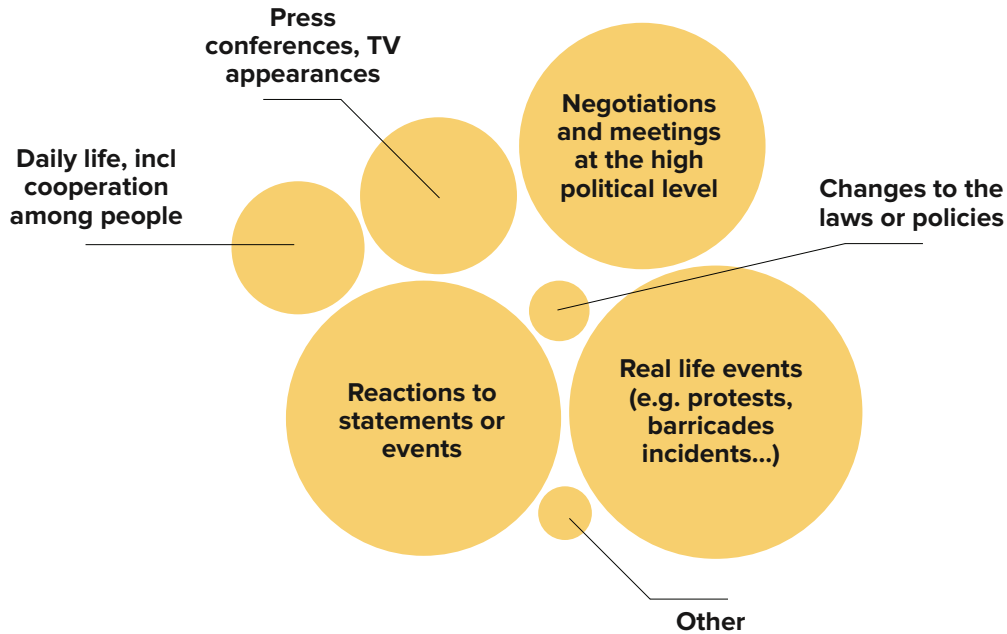
Reporting Topics



As expected, real life events sparked the reporting. Media usually strive to report on current events, and especially the ones that are conflict related. These topics increase traffic on websites and increase viewership of TV channels, so it's no wonder that the media paid special attention to these events. In our sample, almost one third of reports are dedicated to these reports.

Reports inspired by high level political talks come next in the number of reports. Reports that are based on various reactions come third, and this is the point where editorial politics are visible and the manner that media “construct” realities.

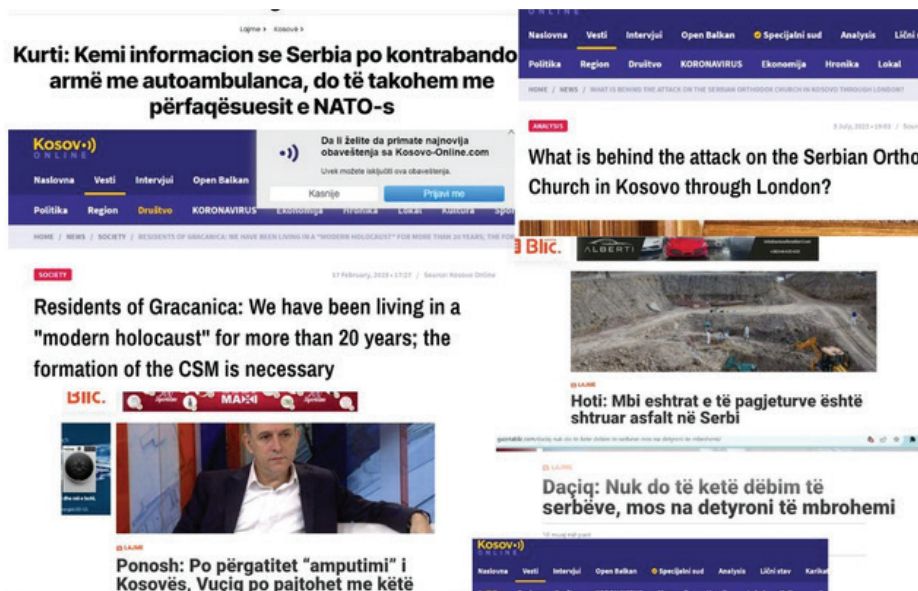
Reporting Topics



Stories based on different types of reactions to the events are particularly present in Serbian online media. By the rule, the media that produce the largest number of news actually base them on different reactions to the same events, thus increasing the “volume” of the production that suits the algorithmic environment.

One of the strategies used, especially visible in RTS1 and Pink reporting, is to publish a reaction but without any context, so viewers don't know to which statement or event the reaction is related to.

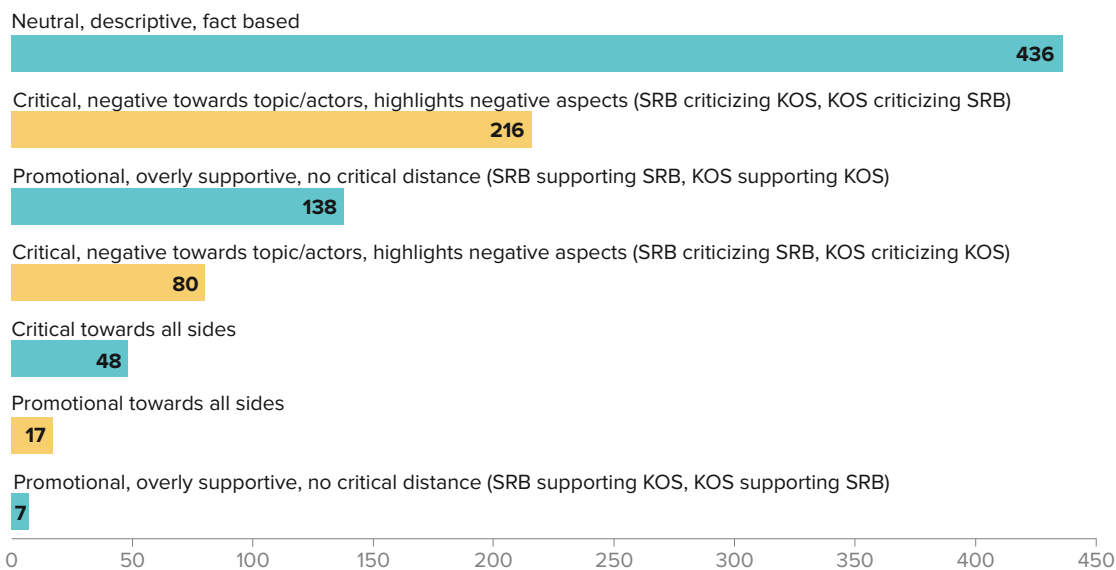
Tone is another dimension of the reporting we tested that depends on editorial policies, and we usually see that tabloid media exploit over critical or over positive reporting tones, causing emotional reactions. Moreover, algorithms of social media further enhance this type of information. This conclusion is applicable to this research as well, and this is the most visible through headlines.





Our report additionally shows that approximately a half of stories are contextualized in a neutral tone, and this conclusion comes from the fact that news and factual reporting dominate the sample.

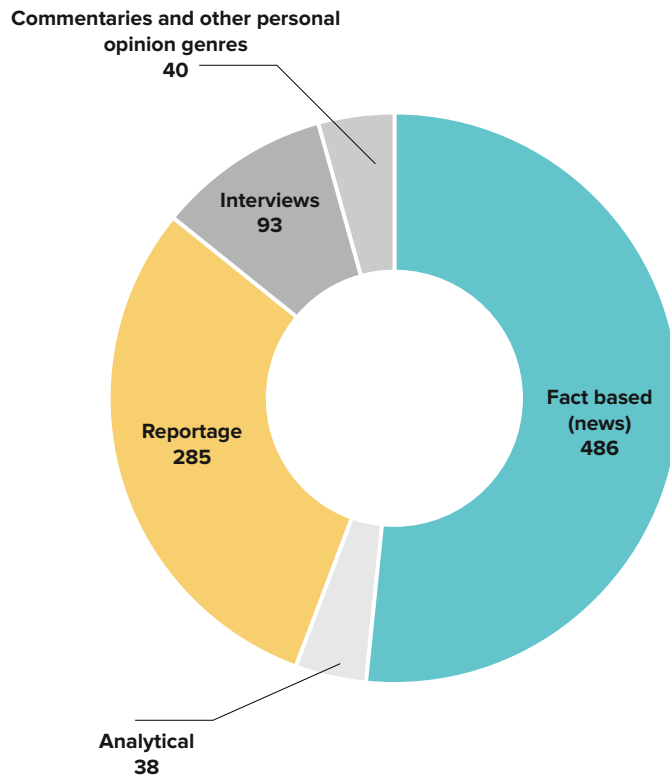
Type of Reporting



Upholding the professional standards

More than half of the texts in the selected period are fact-based news. This comes as a conclusion as the media often convey short statements or reactions of officials or other sources, giving the audience basic information, which are later followed by reports and analyses.

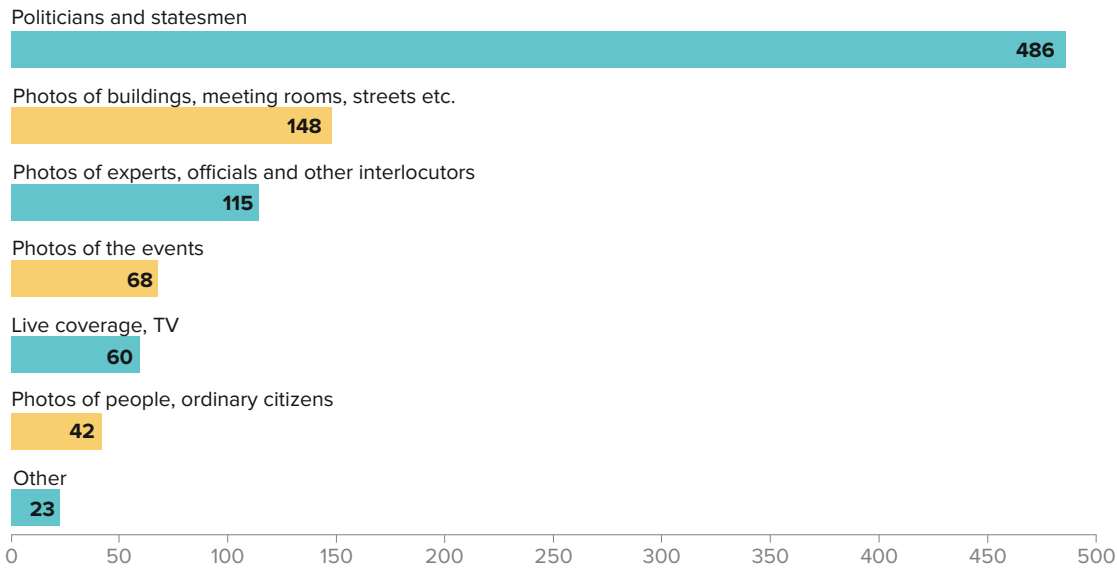
Having in mind that the majority of media outlets had reporters present on the ground, the genre of reports comes next in the observed period. Reports follow the news on main events, with additional comments and background explanations.



In terms of visual presentation, the majority of news and reports are equipped with photos of the politicians, statesmen or other officials. Images of politicians and statesmen are used in different contexts. They were either used when reporting on their reactions or comments to the events, or visits, high-level meetings etc.

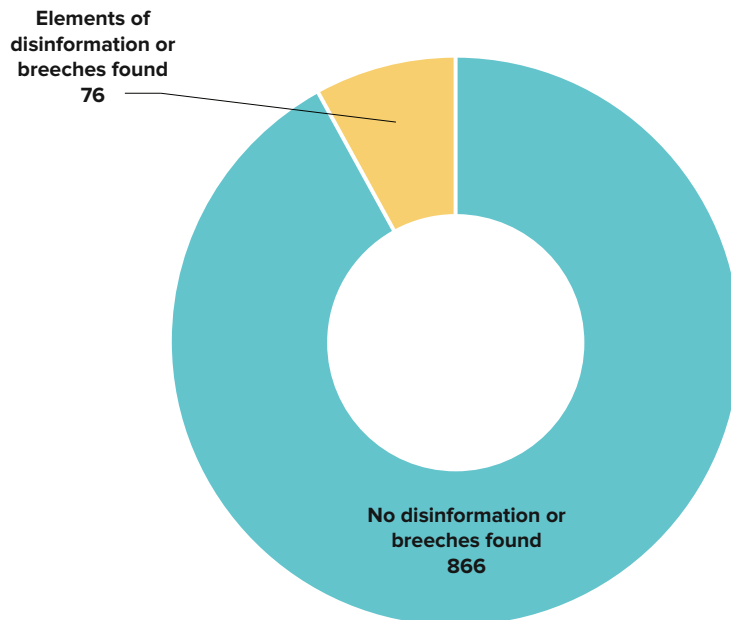
TV reporting, per its nature, relies on live coverage, quotations of the sources, background coverage photos including buildings, streets, squares, administrative crossing between Serbia and Kosovo, generic pictures of ordinary citizens etc.

Genres of Report



Visual presentations reveal an important dimension of editorial policies, in this case, they “hide” more than they uncover. Mostly because they are repetitive (same places, same people on repeat), fail to show the real state of affairs on the ground.

As previously mentioned, the majority of media report in short news and fact based manner, so our research did not notice drastic breach of ethical code or deliberate spread of disinformation.



The most drastic cases include use of harsh words, threats of war, conspiracy theories, provocations, and even instances of hate speech. Many of these cases are visible even in the headlines of the stories. Attention-grabbing techniques aim to sensationalize news stories that contribute to an environment of heightened tension and polarization. In some media articles that have been monitored, there are headlines that are not completely true or have a tendency to incite anti-Serbia spirit, fear among citizens but also propaganda.

Often, the media in Kosovo receive opinions from various figures in Serbia, such as professors or experts in political/legal issues. There are cases when media outlets put insults of an analyst as news headlines.

In Kosovo, it is worth noting that in many news headlines in the online media as well as TV ones, there is a growing tendency to present a kind of atmosphere as if the US prefers Serbia more than Kosovo.

On top of that, our research concluded that the media create various narratives and strategies in presentation of the information, putting them into different contexts, according to their editorial policies.

For example, Serbian pro-government media are highly biased in reporting, supporting Government policy positions without any call for accountability, they convey similar or same unified messages (there is no pluralism of voices), and often fail to give full picture or explain the full extent of the events and its consequences. On the other hand, it is worth noting that N1 and Danas are completely opposite and portray a completely different picture of professional media in Serbia.

Conclusion and recommendations

Serbia and Kosovo media only partially respond to peace journalism recommendations and standards. Approximately one third of stories is related to the incidents, while the others are dedicated to diplomatic negotiations and policy efforts. Mainstream media fails to let all sides be heard. Sources are limited, the majority of them are high level officials promoting their own agendas. Potentials for cooperation are also rarely visible through reporting. Direct quotes of Albanian in Serbian media and vice versa are rarely heard.

Perspectives and lives of ordinary people on the ground are rarely presented, not only in terms of dealing with everyday problems caused by unresolved political situations but also in terms of potentials for mutual cooperation.

Although not many breaches of journalistic ethics were mapped by this research, we could identify some narratives and strategies that derive from different editorial policies and hamper objectiveness of reporting.

Therefore, we give the following recommendations to journalists and media:

- expand the base of sources, give “others” chance to voice their opinions
- highlight topics that emphasize cooperation and peace building
- treat reporting on the incidents with special journalistic attention, avoiding further victimization and discrimination
- give voice to the citizens, their real life challenges and opportunities
- hold governments and decision makers accountable and question their policies, including the ones on mutual relations
- develop internal ethical standards and further expand existing journalists codes in order to ensure accuracy, truthfulness and responsibility
- invest in field work and stories and images from both communities, present real life and ensure accuracy in visual presentation

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