



**UNRAVELING MEDIA
NARRATIVES IN CRISIS
REPORTING - CASE STUDY**

This case study report is produced as an addendum to the original content analysis report aiming to shed additional light on media narratives in the times of crisis.

As the main report focuses on overall trends and mainstream reporting on Kosovo - Serbia relations, this case study puts focus on changes in media narratives in crisis situations, and manners in which these changes manifest.

In general, during times of crisis and intense (even armed) conflicts, the media plays a critical role in shaping public perception, influencing government policies, and even impacting the outcomes of these situations. However, it can also be burdened by bias and sensationalism, as well as spread of misinformation and propaganda. Holding up professional standards and ethical reporting is even more significant in the times of crisis.

Another important aspect is reflected in the safety and increased physical attacks on journalists reporting in the field, which was unfortunately the case we observed in our research sample. Several journalists were hurt by the protesters in north Kosovo. In general, there is a problem in the communication between journalists in Kosovo's media, due to language barrier, as most of the journalists do not know the Serbian/Albanian language.

We applied the same methodology as in the main research (see Chapter Our research of the main report for details), but the main question of this case study was whether the topics, sources and tonality change and what the media emphasize in crisis situations. Also, with additional research we checked whether the media are able to uphold professional reporting or not.

Accompanying the original research which included the selected dates in the period from September 2022 to until the end of February 2023, this case study incorporated an additional three dates – May 29, June 28, and July 5 2023. These particular dates were filled with various tensions. Tensions were initiated when Serbs in north Kosovo boycotted local elections and later clashed with Kosovo police and KFOR when new Albanian mayors took over positions. Crisis lasted till the end of summer and was further radicalized in September, when an armed conflict between the paramilitary group of local Serbs and the Kosovo police clashed in Banjska monastery. This event itself was not the subject of our study, but all the conclusions from the report in front of you can be extended to that case as well.

We analyzed 247 media news items in total. Using a content analysis method, we monitored sources and who the media rely on to set the public agenda when there are crisis situations. In addition, we monitored which topics the media put in focus, what is the tone of the text, i.e. whether the media maintains a neutral position or criticizes/supports and which events sparked the reporting. In addition, we took into account reporting concentrated on a production of a large amount of news, and visual presentation accompanying the reporting. An important factor is whether the media, under the pressure of fast and up-to-date reporting, have violations and disinformation or breaches of ethical code.

The most notable difference compared to the entire research period is that in periods of crisis and intensive reporting, the topics and the tone of the reports changes significantly. When crisis events are reported, the differences in the media become deeper and the narratives of the two propagandas collide.

¹ Media reporting on Serbia and Kosovo relations: Conflict or Cooperation - Report can be found at <https://birnsrbija.rs/>

Some of the key results include:

- Media are carriers and sometimes amplifiers of the inflammatory messages conveyed by political leaders who put the blame on the “other side”.
- In this mutual blame game, it is hard to fully understand realities on the ground, as political leaders offer completely opposite interpretations on how the incidents occurred (while Vučić claims that Kurti himself organized attacks on Serbs, Kurti blames Serbian extremists directed by the official Belgrade).
- Mixed messages are also extended to the role of the international community (EU and USA before all) which was the one sending clear crisis de-escalation messages. Although both sides salute the diplomatic efforts, their engagement is often described as belated or as supportive of the “other side”.
- Key crisis messages are more homogenized than usual. Political leaders lead the agenda, but other Government officials follow. In the Serbian case, even opposition parties’ messages are in line with official politics.

Context: Situation on the ground

In the Kosovo local elections in April 2023, in which the main Serbian political party (Serbian List) did not participate, because it boycotted the elections, the majority was won by Albanian parties in 4 municipalities where Serbs are the majority population. On May 26, Albanian mayors took over the seats they had won in the elections. Because of this, there was an escalation of protests and boycotts in the municipalities in the north of Kosovo. The escalation was followed by armed conflicts, injured citizens and protests in front of municipal buildings. On May 29, the first date we selected for this case study, NATO troops in Kosovo were injured in clashes with Serb protesters who opposed the Albanian mayors in the Serb-majority municipalities. Shock bombs and tear gas were used in that conflict. As a result of that conflict, more than 50 people were injured.

On June 28th 2023, the second date we took into the sample, the Kosovo Government declared the groups operating in the Serb-majority north, Kosovo Civilna Zastita (Civil Protection) and Brigada Sever (North Brigade), terrorist organizations. This move of the Kosovo Government has been considered uncoordinated by the USA, EU, NATO. EU officials confirmed that punitive measures have been communicated to the Government of Kosovo, as a result of the EU’s assessment that Kosovo had not taken the required steps to reduce tensions in the north. Those measures included several suspensions, including the work of the bodies created on the basis of the Stabilization and Association Agreement and other high level bilateral meetings. The Stabilization and Association Agreement between Kosovo and the EU is still frozen due to the situation in the north. In addition to the imposed sanctions and punitive measures, Kosovo is losing several million euros from IPA funds in 2023.

On July 5, the third date we included in the sample, after the period of escalated conflicts and provocations, the international community and their representatives called for calming the situation, because neither Serbia nor Kosovo took steps towards deescalation at that moment. The European Union’s special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, Miroslav Lajčak, met in Belgrade with the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, in an effort to de-escalate the situation in the north of Kosovo.

Research results

In conflict and crisis situations the intensity of media reporting immensely changes. The media is overwhelmed by a large number of news that they regularly publish, following developments over conflicts and attacks.

The texts are in a short format, fact-based, in order to comply with the imperative of speed and up-to-dateness. This leaves little room for fact checking and can lead to misinformation.

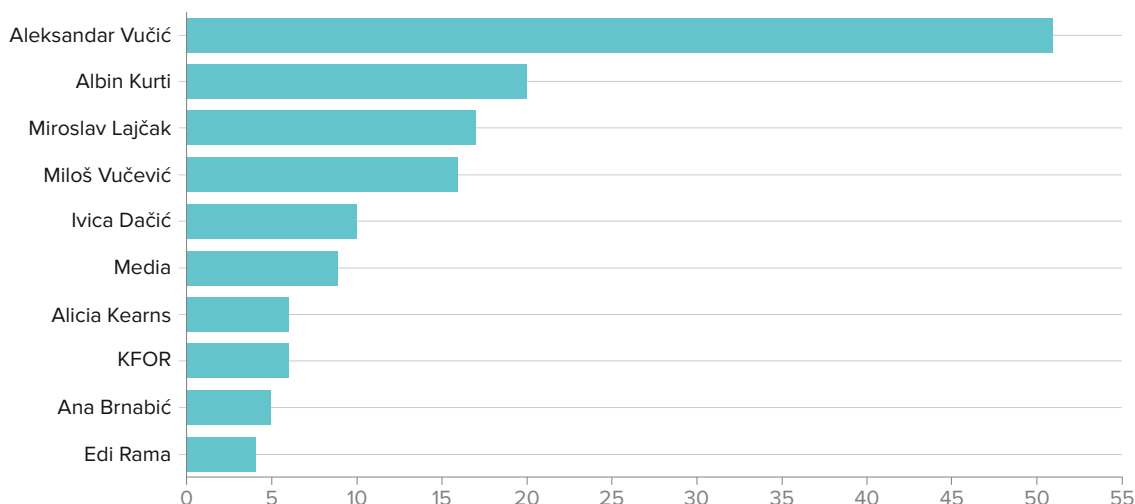
Therefore, it is crucial to identify the key sources who lead the agenda, as media serve as carriers of their messages. The statements of the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and the Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti are most often quoted in the media. They are recognized as agenda drivers in mainstream reporting, as our initial analysis also shows. Their mutual blaming for the crisis and inflammatory messages is more open than usual. For example, in live TV broadcasting Vučić claims that “Kurti has only one desire - to cause conflicts in Kosovo and Metohija, to lead to bloodshed in the entire region, and only few politicians want to hear the truth and understand the essence”. Kurti, on the other hand assessed that in the north of Kosovo there were no peaceful gatherings, but “protests by a bunch of extremists under the direction of official Belgrade. Serbian nationalist, chauvinist and pro-Kremlin graffiti with masked extremists who target, vandalize and attack everything that is not Serbian”.

Apart from the two of them, statements are made by the other representatives of the government of both countries, which are mostly aligned with the statements made by key political leaders.

The important aspect of the crisis is the reaction of the international community and their response in de-escalating the crisis. Numerous media in Kosovo and in Serbia reported on high level political talks and measures, especially issued on the EU level which is considered to have a leading role in conflict resolution and overall Kosovo-Serbia negotiations. Officials from the USA, EU, KFOR and NATO have been involved in resolving disputes between Serbia and Kosovo during times of crisis.

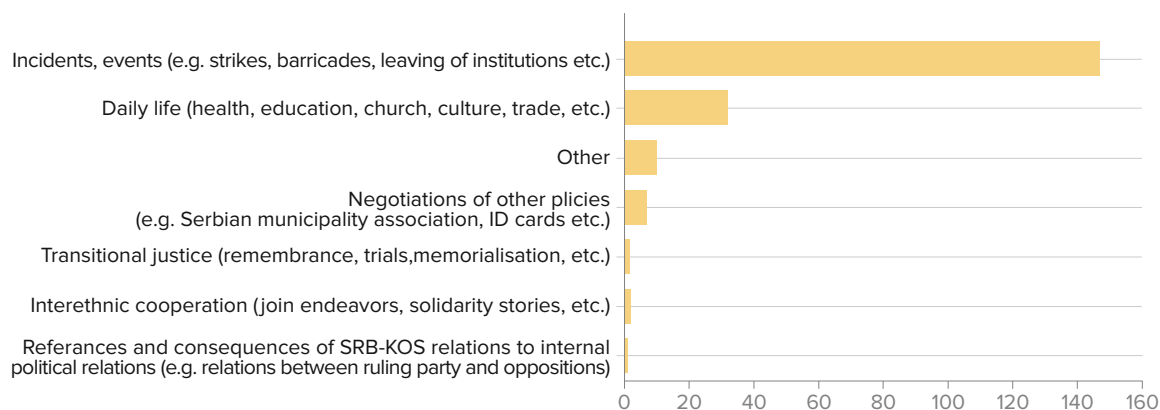
Messages of their diplomatic efforts are mixed, coming from two colliding positions. On one hand, efforts to come up with a clear plan for crisis resolution were greeted, while on the other hand, they are blamed for supporting the “other side”. For example, Serbian highest Government officials refer to Kosovo as a “project of the West” and the international community should discipline “their pet project”.

Sources



The topics that the media focused on the most during the crisis coverage are related to incidents, protests, conflicts and unrest, which was expected, especially having in mind that most media had their crews or correspondents in the field and were able to produce a lot of live content. In these periods, topics of negotiations and possibilities to resolve the conflict by political means were not reported sufficiently. Negotiation initiatives are usually communicated by the international community members and they were key sources for these types of messages. Hardships of daily lives and crisis effects on daily functioning of the people were also reported.

All topics



The tone of media reporting is usually changed as the statements of key agenda drives change. As key political messages become more inflammatory, media outlets can choose to either carry them or to amplify them. This is especially visible in tabloid headlines with sensationalistic and provocative wording.

During the crisis, key messages about the conflict, who are the victims and who are the perpetrators, become more homogeneous thus enhancing the already built narratives on mutual relations. Critical tones towards its own Governments, both in Serbia and Kosovo, are therefore detected in a smaller number of articles. In Kosovo, for example, there were reports critical of the government for the fact that it brought the situation to the point of imposing sanctions on the country. In Serbia, mostly in Danas na N1, the Government was criticized for not adequately supporting Serbs from Kosovo.

Additionally, in some cases, the media in Kosovo have not adequately addressed the civil Serbs point of view and the reason why there was a protest in the north of the country, but rather focused reporting on journalists being attacked, cars being damaged and they are being endangered by organized gangs.

Conclusion

The times of crisis yet again emphasizes the importance of the robust media systems that nourish independent and professional media outlets. Media plays a crucial role in disseminating timely and accurate information during crises. It helps the public understand the situation, potential risks, and government responses. It also holds governments and crisis actors accountable for their actions.

However, as this analysis shows, there are several challenges and criticisms. Media outlets may be biased, emphasizing certain narratives and inflammatory messages coming from key political leaders. These messages are not only inflammatory but in many cases they are more unified than usual, and enhance already built narratives on the “other”. Due to agenda drivers the entire tone of the reporting changes.

Rushing to report on fast pace changing events in the field, media are left with little room for fact checking or deeper analysis of the events. On the other hand, live coverage is more intensified than usual.

This Case Study is a part of the research of the project “Fostering a media inter-cultural exchange as a milestone towards a reconciliation process between Kosovo and Serbia”. It is produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of BIRN Serbia and Internews Kosova and may in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

OCTOBER 2023.



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