



/ ANALYSIS /

SERBIAN MEDIA OUTLETS
ON THE TOPIC OF MONTENEGRO



ANALYSIS:

**Media monitoring of the
Serbian media outlets on the
topic of Montenegro**

FOR THE FOLLOWING PERIOD

10/01/19 – 09/30/20

PODGORICA, OCTOBER 2020

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Introduction

This report is based on an analysis of a year-long monitoring process that lasted from October 1, 2019, to September 30, 2020, done by the Digital Forensic Center (DFC). The focus was on the Serbian media outlets, which have great readership in Montenegro.

The report seeks to identify the primary narratives about Montenegro that were spread by the Serbian media outlets. This research encompasses 11.104 articles with Montenegro as the keyword and provides an insight into narratives and the amount at which they were spread by the most read Serbian news portals in Montenegro.

The analysis showed that during 12 previous months, the news portals *Alo*, *Espresso*, *Blic*, *Srbija danas*, *Kurir*, *Informer*, and *Novosti* had been the most read Serbian media in Montenegro and at the same time the media that most often were spreading the content of debatable quality.

Daily coverage of the Serbian media on Montenegro would not be particular at all, had it not been dominated by sensational headlines, and the narratives addressing the broad audience. The monthly media reports show that the Serbian media are widely read in Montenegro, which raises concerns even more on the possibility of manipulating the Montenegrin public.

The report explains the main narratives that had been identified as part of the research project, with analysis of the domains to which they belong, connections with the key social and political events, keywords, and how the audience engaged with the various narratives.

Methodology:

Monitoring includes qualitative and quantitative research. Several media monitoring tools, at our disposal, have been used to find, monitor, collect and filter data referring to Montenegro.

ANALYZED PERIOD: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020

FOLLOWED MEDIA:

- **Alo**
- **Blic**
- **Informer**
- **Kurir**
- **Novosti**
- **Srbija danas**
- **Espresso**

KEYWORD: Montenegro

USED PARAMETERS:

- **Direct articles**
- **Relevant articles**
- **Comments**
- **Narratives**
- **Domains**
- **Tags**

This report understands a **narrative** as an open set of stories, events, and ideas grounded in values and beliefs to resonate with the targeted audience; or as a way the media spread information about a particular event.

Articles from the initial search results were filtered and categorized as **directly** or **indirectly** dealing with the subject in question, in this case, Montenegro. An article was categorized as **directly** relating to the subject only when the subject of interest was addressed. In the case of an article mentioning the subject of interest but primarily regarding another topic/subject, then the article was categorized as **indirectly** dealing with the subject in question.

A second step in the categorization process was taken for all **direct** articles. Those regarding sports, weather, telecommunications, livestock, and others, were excluded from the sampling and labeled **irrelevant** unless a narrative was found. In case a narrative was identified, the article was labeled **relevant** to the research and further studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Relevant articles were qualitatively divided across adequate **domains – economic, security, political, and social**, based on the content of an article. An article may be categorized as simultaneously belonging to more than one context.

THE POLITICAL DOMAIN – focuses on stories about foreign affairs, local and/or regional politics, cooperation with the EU and NATO, bi- and multilateral relations, adoption of laws, work of political parties, challenges such as crime and corruption and elections.

THE SOCIAL DOMAIN – combines stories related to social and cultural developments, religion and history, ethnic, religious or social divisions in countries, civil unrest (protests), rising poverty and unemployment, etc.

THE SECURITY DOMAIN – relates to articles concerning armed forces, military capabilities (including armament), military exercises, NATO cooperation, cyber security, criminal offenses of criminal clans and liquidations.

THE ECONOMIC DOMAIN – includes articles about economic developments, trade relations among countries, economic sanctions, foreign investments, etc.

Interactions of readers have been measured as well, through tracking the number of **comments** left below each article.

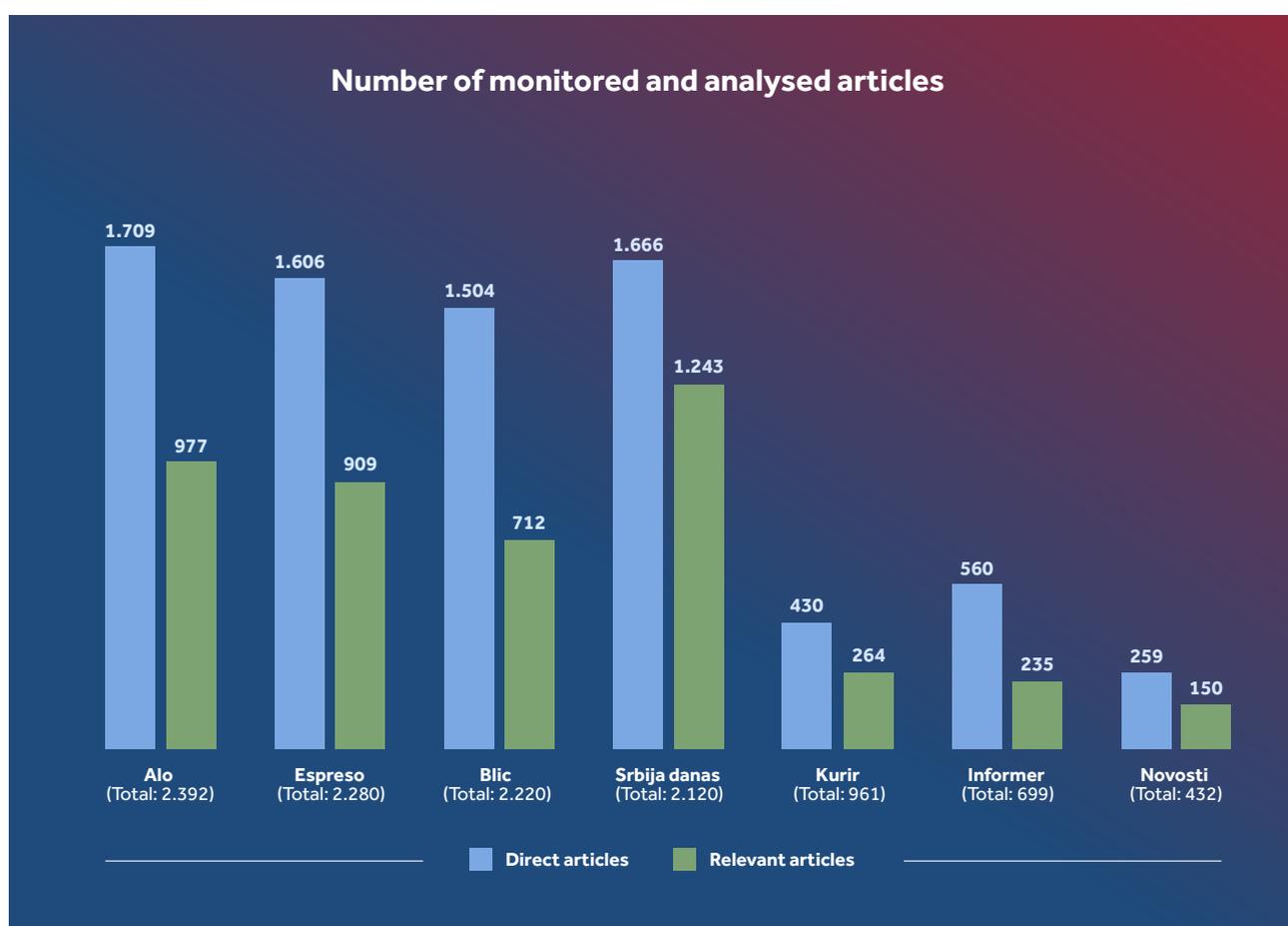
Words used in articles were also analyzed, resulting in a list of the most mentioned, i.e. used **tags**.

Key findings and data:

ANALYZED PERIOD: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020

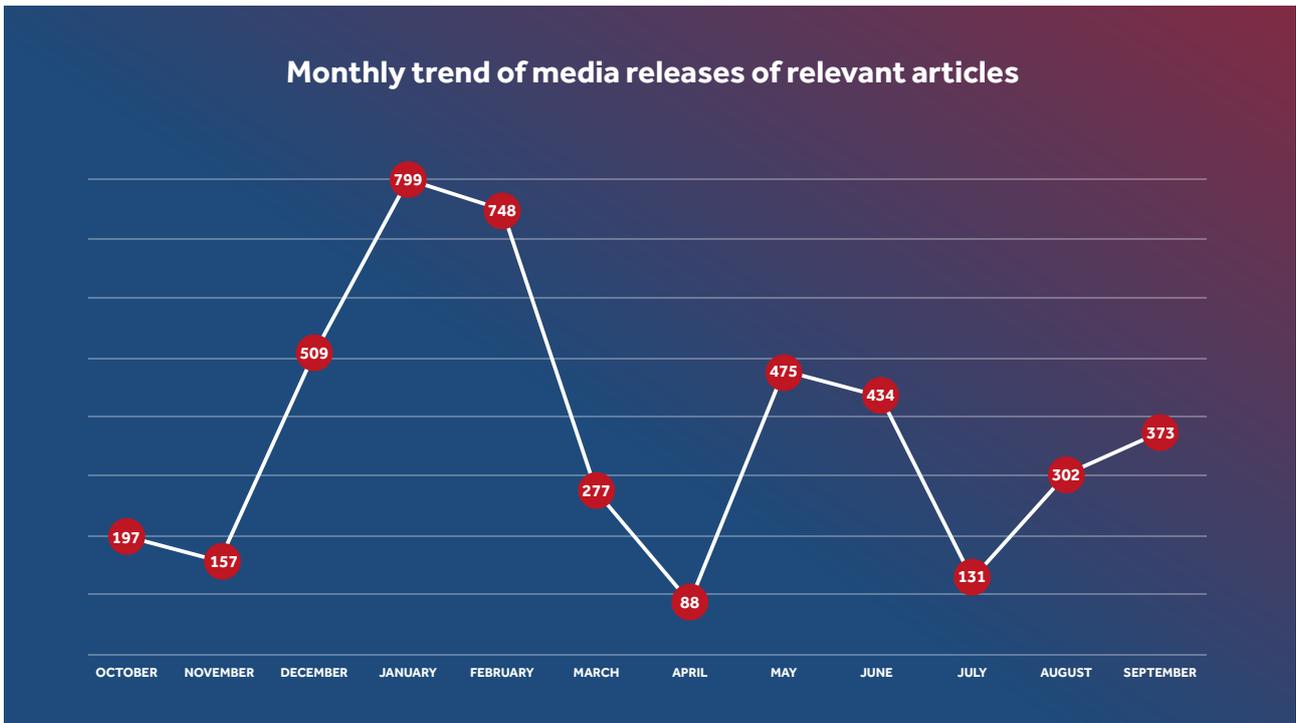
SUBJECT: Montenegro

Monitored content on the Serbian media outlets generates a total of 11.104 articles containing the keyword *Crna Gora* (Montenegro), while 7,734 of them were directly targeting Montenegro and events in it. For the purpose of monitoring, 4,490 relevant articles were identified out of the 7,734 direct ones. We have excluded articles related to sports, weather, telecommunications, and livestock unless they contained a particular narrative.



Graph 1: Total, direct and relevant articles by media outlets

The graph (**Graph 1**) shows the number of total articles, the number of direct articles, and the number of relevant articles by media. The majority of texts with the keyword Montenegro was published on the portal *Alo* – 2,392, then on *Espresso* – 2,280 and the portal *Blic* – 2,220 articles. However, the majority of articles relevant for our research was registered on the news portals *Srbija danas* – 1,243 and *Alo* – 977 articles.



Graph 2: Monthly trend of media releases

This trend of publishing by month (**Graph 2**) shows that the Serbian media outlets were the most active in December, January, and February, which coincides with the period when the Law on Freedom of Religion was adopted and when processions were held.

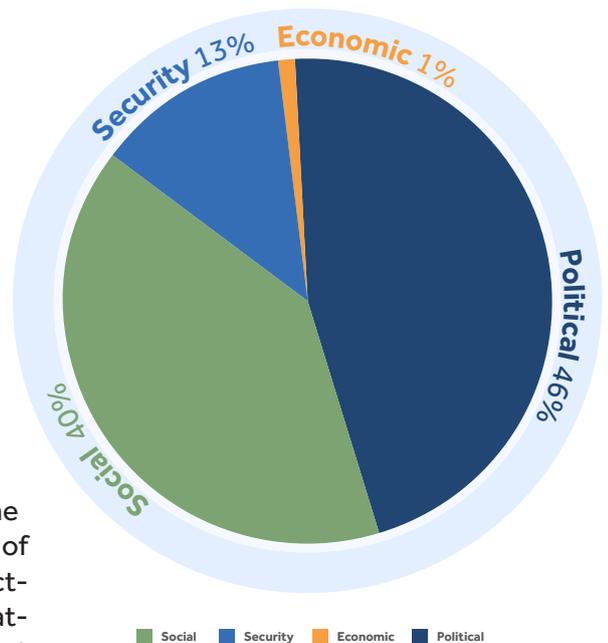
Quantitative and qualitative analysis was performed for all articles from the selected media outlets. Quantitative monitoring included recording data on the number of published articles on Montenegro, the number of comments on articles, and the number of key narratives and topics. Qualitative monitoring involved noticing narratives and describing the content of the article and observing domains related to the topics being reported.

Domains

Relevant articles were qualitatively divided among four domains – political, social, security, and economic. This decision was based on the primary topic of the article. Each one could be categorized as belonging to more than one domain.

Articles mostly referring to the political domain amounted to 2,909 (46%) articles in total. A total of 2,484 articles (40%) referred to the social domain, then 823 (13%) articles referred to the security domain, and 77 (1%) articles referring to the economic domain (**Graph 3**).

It is important to emphasize here that monitoring covered the year marked by political turmoil, elections, and the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion. All these political events affected society and the phenomena in it – protests, processions, beatings, arrests, divisions, and tensions. It is interesting to note that the least articles are registered in the economic domain.



Graph 3: Four domains

Comments

When it comes to the number of comments that readers left on the relevant articles, the articles on the portal *Espresso* attracted the most attention with 21,295 comments for one year period. On all other portals, during the twelve-month period, there were less than 5,000 comments, which is displayed in the table below (**Table 1**). The most commented articles treated the relations between Montenegro and Kosovo ([link](#)), the rights and position of Serbs in Montenegro ([link](#)), the organization of processions in Montenegro, and the support from the region to the defense of shrines ([link](#)). The articles in which statements of President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic ([link](#)) and Patriarch Irinej ([link](#)) were transmitted referring to the situation of Serbs in Montenegro and the support provided by them from Serbia caught great attention of the readers. A large number of comments were noticed on the articles spreading the narrative that President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic was infected with coronavirus, that his condition was difficult, and that he was asking for help from Russia and France ([link](#)). This turned out to be fake news. According to the number of comments on articles that read that Serbia was not on the list of countries that could freely enter Montenegro, the *Kurir* portal dominated ([link](#)). A large number of comments were also registered on the articles published after the elections, quoting the statements of President Vucic ([link](#)), one of the DF leaders Milan Knezevic, and the leader of the coalition *It's in Black and White* Dritan Abazovic.

Most comments are dominated by a narrative of

support or criticism of a particular political option, person, or action. All analyzed media portals had comments with elements of disputable content, although in different volumes. Comments containing severe insults, hate speech, swear words dominated the discourse, but there were also ones in which a positive tone is present. The positive comments that stand out were those praising leader of the coalition *It's in Black and White* Dritan Abazovic and presenting him as an intelligent politician who deserved to get an opportunity to prove himself.

When it comes to the negative comments, insults on national grounds are present as well as negation of Montenegro and Montenegrins. The readers's comments found on the analyzed news portals included the following: *Montenegrin* is just a territorial detriment, all Montenegrins are Serbs and only those having some interest in it identify themselves as Montenegrins, the issue is whether Montenegrins are autochthonous people, are they Croats or extraterrestrials. Strong support to the processions was expressed in the comments and there was also a proposition to gather the Serbian Defense Council and mobilize the army *since there is no time to lose, brothers in Montenegro are in need of help*.

Within the comments, the readers could regularly find requests not to visit Montenegro during summer vacation since everyone knows that Serbs are unwanted there, and those who decide to visit Montenegro after all, are described as persons who need help.

MEDIA	COMMENTS
ESPRESO	21,295
KURIR	3,168
BLIC	2,429
ALO	1,187
SRBIJA DANAS	933
INFORMER	552
NOVOSTI	199

Table 1: Number of comments per media

Narratives

All relevant articles underwent quantitative and qualitative analysis, and 10 different narratives were identified as the main ones (**Table 2**)

	Narrative	Tags	Timeline/event	Number of relevant articles
1.	Montenegro is a criminal and a captured state	Criminal clans, drugs, police, murder, corruption, nepotism, private state	12 months	1.571
2.	Montenegro wants to seize the Serbian shrines	Shrines, property, church, temples, robbery	12 months	1.208
3.	Serbia will protect endangered Serbs in Montenegro	Human rights, religious rights, language, culture, lays off	12 months	972
4.	Repression of the Montenegrin regime	Protests, processions, police, beating, arrest	November-August / Litanies and political protests in Budva	552
5.	Montenegro is not a desirable tourist destination	Tourism, tourists, tourist destination, undesirable guests, high prices, borders, disease	October-December, February, May-August / tourist season	280
6.	Montenegro's decision not to open border with Serbia is political	NKT, IJZ, borders, politics, tourism, Vucic, Brnabic, Markovic, undesirable guests	May-August / Coronavirus	126
7.	The unstable situation in Montenegro can lead to a civil war	Civil war, police, protests, processions, rights, arrest, stones, tear gas	December-March / Processions	111
8.	The Montenegrin regime is prone to electoral fraud and manipulation	Elections, voting, voter list, ID, Kosovo, Albania	July-August / Elections	103
9.	The regime is spreading divisions and tensions and will not hand over power peacefully	Tensions, division of society, regime, state of emergency, mandates	September / Elections	99
10.	Coronavirus is an excuse to ban processions	Processions, coronavirus, public gatherings, preventive measures	February-July / Coronavirus	80

Table 2: Identified narratives with a number of articles, related keywords, and events

Given that the Montenegrin social and political scene this and last year was marked by big events: adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief, processions resulting there-from, coronavirus, and parliamentary elections that had brought about narratives of their own, the negative narratives were launched almost on a daily basis.

1

The most common narrative is that **Montenegro is a criminal and a captured state** with 1,571 articles and was present in the Serbian media throughout all 12 months. The adjective criminal sends out a message that the criminal activities in the region are originating from Montenegro and that the most notorious criminal organizations ([link](#)), the most vicious homicides, robberies, kidnapping, and drug dealing ([link](#)) have their roots in Montenegro. While captured means that it is captured both politically and socially. Some of the messages sent out and suggesting bad conditions in Montenegro are: state institutions are captured as they are dominated by corruption ([link](#)) and nepotism ([link](#)), non-independence is present in all three branches of government, the Montenegrin regime does not respect human or religious rights ([link](#)) and it aims at creating a private state ([link](#)).

2

During the entire monitoring period, there was a narrative that **Montenegro and the regime in it want to seize church property ([link](#)), i.e. Serbian shrines**. The reason for this narrative was found in the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and it gained in importance after the adoption of the same Law in December 2019 in the Parliament of Montenegro.

3

The third most represented narrative (with 972 articles) is the one that **Serbia will protect endangered Serbs in Montenegro**. For a whole year, this narrative has been *filling* the Serbian media columns and was particularly popular with the processions going on. It presented Serbs in Montenegro as endangered in terms of human rights, freedoms ([link](#)). Moreover, they are deprived of right to Serbian values, religion ([link](#)), and of learning the Serbian language. Due to the abovementioned, they cannot find a job ([link](#)), and assimilate in the society. The articles also read that the Serbian authorities will do their utmost to protect the directly affected interests of the Serbian people in Montenegro. ([link](#)).

4

The adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the processions, gave rise to narrative that **Montenegrin regime is using repression**. On a daily basis, they were reporting that the Montenegrin regime was using the police force to apprehend ([link](#)), beat and persecute both *the believers and the clergy*, that it did not allow the freedom of expression on social media and that it had been attacking the opponents in every possible way. To strengthen the narratives, even the Army of Montenegro was targeted by the Serbian media, in the sense that it had been taken by the government to the streets to prevent the processions ([link](#)).

5

A significant number of articles has narrative that **Montenegro is not a desirable tourist destination**. Montenegro's tourist industry has been targeted for years through the Serbian media's steady pattern. However, the epidemiological situation and measures introduced due to the coronavirus pandemic have additionally deepened and intensified the campaign of deteriorating the image of Montenegro as a tourist destination, through the articles that present Montenegro as an expensive and unsafe tourist destination ([link](#)) with

dirty beaches and aggressive people. The media outlets also write that tourists are at risk of being beaten and experiencing inconveniences if they go to the Montenegrin coast ([link](#)). They also do not recommend going to Montenegro because there is a kind of tension that can turn into conflict ([link](#)).

6

Even the global coronavirus pandemic did not *lower* the tone of the Serbian online media. If anything, they were writing that the Montenegrin government was unable to cope with the virus ([link](#)) and that it had been hiding the number of the infected ([link](#)). When it comes to the coronavirus and the measures taken by Montenegro to combat the spread of the infection, the narrative: **Montenegro's political decision not to open border with Serbia** stands out. This narrative is marked by the significant statements of the Serbian officials ([link](#)), but also the independent media reports stating that the reason behind the decision of the Montenegrin regime to close its borders for Serbia was political and not epidemiological. Their main *ace in the hole* was that the Serbian tourists were not welcome there ([link](#)). The articles stated that the authorities in Montenegro had a problem with the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church ([link](#)) and that this was the real reason for not opening the borders.

7

Articles related to the issue of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the processions in Montenegro spread the narrative that situation in **Montenegro is unstable and can lead to a civil war**. This narrative emphasizes that Montenegro is under the state of siege, that roads are being blocked during the processions, that the police deal with the people with pepper spray and that Montenegro is on the brink of fratricidal war or civil war.

8

Media outlets in Serbia paid great attention to the parliamentary elections in Montenegro held on August 30. The spread of negative narratives that took place during July and August had a goal of its own – to create more tensions. The dominant narrative was the one about **the regime continuing with three-decades-long activities of electoral fraud and manipulation ([link](#)) to stay in power**; this time by vote-buying (IDs) ([link](#)), inviting foreigners primarily coming from Kosovo ([link](#)) and Albania ([link](#)) to vote for the DPS, and by inciting riots. However, none of the stated was supported by evidence.

9

The narrative that **the regime is spreading divisions and tensions and will not peacefully hand over power** with 99 articles in September says that the regime and the ruling party spread divisions ([link](#)) among the citizens and base their policy on that. In addition, they raise tensions ([link](#)) among the public through their performances, and the patriotic gathering is cited as an example ([link](#)). These articles also emphasize that the DPS will not hand over power so easily, but will try in every way to prevent it or at least postpone it (*purchase of mandates* ([link](#)), state of emergency ([link](#))).

10

In the ten most common narratives, there was also the narrative that **the regime was using coronavirus as an excuse to ban the processions** ([link](#)). It is emphasized that the measures concerning public gatherings are introduced only with a goal to prohibit the processions, and not due to the seriousness of the epidemiological situation ([link](#)).

2020 Montenegro Elections Narratives

In addition to these ten narratives that dominated the Serbian media outlets about Montenegro in the previous year, following narratives were mostly present during the 2020 Montenegro parliamentary elections.

During the election campaign, we recognized the following narratives: *Opposition cooperation can bring down Djukanovic*, *The regime fears elections after which it will be changed* and a narrative which portrays these *parliamentary elections as a struggle for the survival of the state*.

The declaration of the election results was followed by the narratives on *divisions that occurred in Djukanovic's DPS*, *falling apart of the DPS*, which was proved by alleged incidents among the party's representatives, withdrawal of members and councilors from the party, *unraveling of a tapestry of crime that has been suffocating the whole country*.

There were also claims that *President Milo Djukanovic could present the public with a couple of surprises in order to undermine the constitution of the new Government without the DPS*. In his attempts to stay in power, one of the scenarios presented was a declaration of a state of emergency due to the abrupt increase in the number of infected.

During the analysis, a narrative was noticed that *President Djukanovic accused President Vucic and Serbia of his failure in the elections* was noticed. On the other hand, the Serbian media outlets point out that *Serbia and Montenegro are two fraternal states that must keep up the best relations in the region*.

Although after the elections the Serbian media outlets had supported the three opposition coalitions after the elections and pointed out that *this tripartite coalition advocates peace and democratic institutions* at the end of the monitored period, the

change in the narratives regarding Montenegro's new majority was noticeable. The shift happened because of the signing of the *Agreement* among the leaders of three coalitions on September 9, after which once heroes they have become *traitors* overnight *who have turned their backs on Serbs*.

Conclusion

This quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Serbian media outlets' content on Montenegro reveals the effort to combine real facts with the fake ones, the exaggerations, or the presentation of facts out of the context in order to shape public opinion.

The narratives dominating in the Serbian media outlets encourage feelings of unease, insecurity, and worries. If we look back, the image of Montenegro as a criminal state, mafia organization, where human rights are violated and elections are held under numerous irregularities, has been continuously created during the past few years. The only novelty is the narrative on the inability of the state to fight coronavirus after the COVID-19 pandemic had made its way to our region as well.

The media dominated by propaganda and declared as the absolute record-holders in violation of journalism ethics and standards by the Press Council of Serbia include portals such as – Alo, Informer, Kurir, Blic, and Novosti ([link](#)).

Tensions in Montenegro have begun with the adoption of the Law on the Freedom of Religion and later on with the religious-political processions. A whole range of Serbian media outlets has become a creator of and a filter for channeling several threatening narratives into our media space. Instead of contributing to calming the sensitive situation in the Montenegrin society, the media additionally heated it up with their reporting.

The political conflict between the state institutions in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the coronavirus pandemic, and the elections are the key events, which were followed by a large number of narratives in the Serbian media outlets. The Serbian media focused on the alleged lack of PCR testing laboratory in Montenegro and on whether Montenegro was hiding the numbers of the infected.

To deepen the already existing tensions between Podgorica and Belgrade, the media distributed a narrative that Serbs could not enter Montenegro because of political reasons, and not because of the epidemiological situation, emphasizing that the Montenegrin authorities had a problem with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Serbian people.

The elections in Montenegro, held on August 30, became the Serbian tabloids' major topic for August, which threw themselves into the election campaign with their full potential.

The narratives we explored and presented aimed at undermining democracy, radicalizing the political circumstances, belittling what Montenegro has been doing in the fight against coronavirus, encouraging the fight for the church property, and portraying Montenegro as a criminal and a captured state. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the goal of these narratives was to provoke the emotional charge of the citizens and result in additional divisions and tensions.

Such reporting had led to dangerous prejudices against Montenegro, its citizens, and institutions among a large number of people in Serbia, but also in Montenegro, having in mind the reach and the readership of these portals in our country as well. It is evident from the foregoing that the Serbian media have been paying great attention to Montenegro, especially since the beginning of the processions, but in an extremely sensationalist and inciting way, often taking information out of the context, violating journalism ethics and human moral code of conduct

