

Between East and West: How Serbian journalists cover the war in Ukraine

A qualitative study investigating how journalism culture shapes Serbian coverage when framing the conflict in Ukraine

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Abstract

The press coverage of any armed conflict has traditionally played a crucial role during times of war since major abuses of human rights and war crimes are brought to the public due to journalists' coverage. When Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, it dominated the news for weeks since many parts of the world were heavily affected. Many scholars have investigated the challenges that come when reporting on wars and conflicts. There are, however, few studies that have focused on Serbian journalists. Therefore, this study sets out to investigate how Serbian journalists cover the war in Ukraine and what influences their reporting by conducting in-depth interviews with seven journalists working the political beat. Nygren et al. (2018) found that journalistic culture and political context direct and shape the coverage to a large extent. Therefore, Thomas Hanitzsch's model of journalism culture (2007) is used as the main theoretical framework of the project.

The study has shown that Serbian journalists generally believe that staying objective and presenting all sides of the conflict should guide the coverage of the war. However, they are put in a difficult position because of their country's conflicted stance: Serbia has ties to Russia and the EU; it condemned the war in Ukraine but refused to impose sanctions on the aggressor. Consistent with the previous literature, the study found that Serbia's political-historical context shapes the journalistic coverage when reporting on the conflict. Journalists are generally critical of their government but tend to agree with it when discussing the war. This finding can be linked to the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999 and the Serbian economy, which heavily depends on Russian oil, gas, and investments and would considerably decline if Serbian sanctions were imposed on Russia. Although, when counteracting propaganda, fake news, and disinformation, some Serbian journalists took a more active and assertive role in reporting on behalf of the socially disadvantaged, which in this case was the Ukrainian people who were underrepresented in the media coverage.

Keywords: conflict, journalism culture, Russia, Serbia, strategies, tactics, Ukraine, war reporting

Table of content

- 1. Introduction 1**
- 2. Background..... 3**
 - 2.1 Current policy 3*
 - 2.2 Media Landscape 6*
- 3. Aim and research questions 7**
- 4. Previous research 8**
- 5. Theoretical framework 11**
 - 5.1 Journalism culture 12*
 - 5.2 Strategies and tactics 13*
 - 5.3 Patriotic journalism 14*
- 6. Methodology 15**
 - 6.1 Qualitative interviews as a method 15*
 - 6.2 Data material and conduct 16*
 - 6.3 Ethics 18*
 - 6.4 Limitation and validity 19*
- 7. Results and analysis 20**
 - 7.1 A polarized media landscape 21*
 - 7.2 Social media and commercialism 23*
 - 7.3 Ethical norms 26*
 - 7.4 Counteracting propaganda and fake news 29*
 - 7.5 The switch from adversarial to loyal to the power 31*
- 8. Discussion..... 35**
 - 8.1 Future research 37*
- 9. Conclusion..... 37**
- 10. Reference list: 39**
- 11. Appendices 42**

1. Introduction

On the 24th of February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, bombing major cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa. Putin called it a “special military operation” rather than the full-scale war that has forced millions of Ukrainians to flee their own country (Zinets & Vasovic 2022). Russia has denied Ukraine its own statehood for years, and the invasion was justified by Putin with the aim to “demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine” and to protect those people he said the Ukrainian government had been torturing and genocidally killing for eight years (Kirby 2022). The event represents a significant escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which started in 2014 when Russia seized the parliament in the Ukrainian region of Crimea and annexed the territory (Reuters 2022). As a result of the war, 13,000 people died, a quarter of them civilians (RFE/RL Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2019), and more than a million Ukrainians fled the country (BBC 2014).

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, 143 countries have condemned the annexation (Al-Jazeera 2022), and sanctions have been imposed by the US, European Union, and other Western nations on Russia to limit their ability to pay for the war (BBC 2022). The tension between the Western and Eastern worlds has intensified once again. Describing the ongoing situation, Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, said: "What we have heard today are not just missile blasts, fighting, and the rumble of aircraft. This is the sound of a new Iron Curtain, which has come down and is closing Russia off from the civilized world" (Zinets & Vasovic 2022).

As a result of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, many parts of the world have been affected politically and economically. Since Russia is one of the world's largest oil and natural gas producers, and Russia and Ukraine are important commodity exporters, the export of critical resources, such as grain, has been disrupted, and the availability of essential raw materials, such as oil and natural gas, has become more uncertain. World market prices for fossil fuels have risen; in Europe, energy prices have increased significantly. Higher energy and food prices are pushing up inflation at a time when the rate of price increase is already high in several countries (World Bank 2022).

Journalists worldwide have been widely covering Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war's global impact. Press coverage of any armed conflict has always played an essential role during wartime since serious human rights violations, and war crimes are brought to the public's attention due to the journalists' coverage. The same applies to the war in Ukraine, where numerous people died, and atrocities have already been reported (BBC 2022a; Lock 2022). But reporting during wartime may be challenging for journalists when the war occurs in their nearby area politically, culturally, and geographically speaking, or, in other words, when their country is involved. Nygren et al. (2018) found that journalists often find themselves in the crossfire of the conflict. In those highly tense moments, journalists find it challenging to balance their professional values of objectivity and neutrality and show impartiality against their country.

A country that is of high interest to study in the context of war reporting is Serbia due to its peculiar geopolitical situation and hesitant stance on the war in Ukraine. Serbia has so far condemned the invasion but refused to impose sanctions on Russia. The Serbian coverage has not been studied, even though the country is a fascinating case study because of its ties with Russia and the EU. Significant events have led to its complex stand in the war in Ukraine, but the most crucial are the Yugoslavian war in the 1990s and the 78-day-long The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of Belgrade in 1999 (Axelsson Sofroniadou & Sjögren 2022). Another aspect is that Serbia has close ties to Russia, which is not only seen as a Slavic and Orthodox Christian brother land (Lindahl 2022a), but Serbia's economy is dependent on Russian oil and gas subventions. The nations have been close allies for centuries, and despite Serbia's recent efforts to establish stronger ties with the West, their bond remains solid. The contradiction is that Serbia applied for EU membership in 2009 and in 2014 it was accepted as a candidate country. Hence, there is pressure from the EU on Serbia to take a stand against Russia (Axelsson Sofroniadou & Sjögren 2022)

This study aims to understand how Serbian journalists cover the war in Ukraine and what influences their reporting. The other reason I have chosen to study Serbia is that I was born and raised in Sweden with a Swedish father and a Serbian mother. Growing up, I have frequently visited the country but have never spent time investigating Serbia's history, politics, and society. Therefore, I want to conduct this study to fill an important knowledge gap in journalism studies but also for my personal knowledge.

2. Background

This chapter will focus on the most crucial events from the Second World War to the present day, relevant to how Serbian journalists, politicians, and society at large relate to Russia and the war in Ukraine. First, however, it is essential to illuminate that history reaches beyond that year, involving decisive events that have led to Serbia's upbringing as a nation. Since 1912, the country has been involved in four extensive and vicious war, which has left a deep imprint on the country and its people: The Balkan War, First World War, Second World War, and The Yugoslavian War. To understand what factors may influence Serbian journalists today, it is important to trace the country's political history and, therefore, place this paper in a proper context:

2.1 Current policy

Serbia is a landlocked country in the west-central Balkans, with its capital in Belgrade. For most of the 20th century, it was a part of Yugoslavia. The six republics that made up Yugoslavia was Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Montenegro. From 1992, The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisted with only two states: Serbia and Montenegro. By February 2003, the Yugoslav Federation had been transformed into the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006, the union was peacefully dissolved, leading to each country being independent (Lindahl 2022b).

Since 2012, Serbia has been governed by the nationalistic Serbian party Srpska Napredna Stranka, SNS, with Aleksandar Vučić as President. Since the country applied for EU membership in 2009 and was accepted as a candidate state in 2014, Vučić has implemented several reforms for Serbia to be accepted as a member of the EU. However, the government insists that the country still cares about maintaining a great relationship with Russia, which is seen as a Slavic and Orthodox Christian brother land (Lindahl 2022a). Russia has also assisted with loans as well as energy, gas, and arms deliveries, and Moscow supports Serbia in resisting Kosovo's independence which is a great political issue (Axelsson Sofroniadou & Sjögren 2022; Lindahl 2022a).

Since 2019, Serbia has had a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the EU. However, if Serbia joins the EU it needs to stop trade with EEU (Lindahl 2022a).

Although Serbia has implemented reforms to join the EU, the political situation in Serbia is on a downward trajectory. Freedom House, a non-profit organization that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom, and human rights, rates Serbia as a transitional or hybrid regime with an index score of 46 out of 100 regarding democracy percentage. Corruption, controversial elections, a decline in media freedom, and freedom of association, among other factors, threaten democracy in the country (Freedom House 2022).

History

The Second World War

Accordingly to Cox (2002), the Second World War in Yugoslavia during 1941-1945 was one of European history's most complicated periods of fighting. When the war ended, a tenth of Yugoslavia's population had been killed, and 3.5 million were homeless. More victims had been reaped in the internal battles than in the fight against the occupying powers (Lindahl 2022c).

Thus, by the middle of 1945, the Partisans led by Tito had driven out the Germans and crushed domestic opposition, and the kingdom was formally abolished (Cox 2002; Lindahl 2022c). Tito intended to create a different kind of Yugoslavia based on social principles. Serbia became the largest of six sub-republics of the communist-ruled Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Belgrade became the seat of all joint administrations and the new republic's capital (Lindahl 2022c).

The post-war period 1945-1980

Tito was an excellent disciple of Josef Stalin, and the new constitution was based on Soviet principles. But Tito's ambition to form a confederation of the communist-ruled states of the Balkans with himself as a leader led Stalin, who wanted no competition, to exclude Yugoslavia from the communist community in 1948 (Lindahl 2022b). After the Tito-Stalin break, direct American Aid flowed into the country, totaling over \$500 million (Cox 2002). It was not until 1956, when Stalin died, that Yugoslavia resumed its relationship with the Soviet Union (Lindahl 2022b).

The breakup of Yugoslavia

After the death of Tito in 1980, major unrest broke out in Kosovo, and in 1981 demonstrations erupted. Soon after, Albanian rebels demanded Kosovo to be recognized as a

republic and the unrest that began to unfold worked as a catalyst for future conflict (Cox 2002; Resic 2006). Slobodan Milošević became the president of the Serbian communist party in 1989 and fought to "restore the significance of the Serbs" and made Kosovo a symbolic issue (Lindahl 2022b). The economic and political disruption within the Yugoslavian federation was unavoidable, and in 1991 Croatia and Slovenia declared independence (Lindahl 2022b).

In 1992, Bosnia and Macedonia voted for secession. Because of this, a civil war in Bosnia and Hercegovina broke out. The war in Bosnia broke out because most Bosnia Serbs and Croats vowed they would not live under a government dominated by Muslims (Cox 2002). A horrific war began, which lasted until late 1995. In the conquered areas, the non-Serb civilian population was driven away, killed, or put in concentration camps. All parties to the war used these methods, but the Serbs systematized them (Lindahl 2022b). In 1995, the Serbs occupied the "safe area," Srebrenica in Bosnia, where about 40,000 Bosnian Muslim refugees were held. The Serbs began their attack, and around 7,000 Bosnian Muslims were hunted down and killed in and around the city by Serb Forces (Cox 2002). This catastrophe startled public opinion in the West and prompted the United States to intervene.

In 1998, a growing conflict between Serbs and the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo turned into a war. Reports of abuses from the Serbian side led NATO in March 1999 – without a UN mandate – to launch bombing raids against Belgrade (Lindahl 2022b). The airstrikes lasted for 78 days, and 3,000 civilians and soldiers were killed. 23,000 bombs and missiles were dropped on Serbia, causing enormous damage to buildings, roads, bridges, power plants, refineries, factories, communications centers, and other targets (Cox 2002). Once the bombing of Serbia started, Serbs became increasingly defiant of NATO and supportive of their government.

After the war, the Serbian economy was devastated, and tens of thousands more Serbs lost their jobs. The transportation and communications networks were also wrecked (Cox 2002).

Serbia after the fall of Yugoslavia

Following the fall of Yugoslavia, Serbia reformed a union with Montenegro in 2003.

Montenegro joined the Union only reluctantly, and it dissolved in June 2006 after a majority of Montenegrins voted for independence (Lindahl 2022b). Serbia adopted a new constitution

based on European values but declared Kosovo an integrated part of Serbia. The state introduced a parliamentary republic led by The Democratic Party (DS).

In February 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia. The US and most EU countries quickly recognized Kosovo, while Russia and China did not (Lindahl 2022b).

2.2 Media Landscape

The Serbian media landscape is highly fragmented and polarized. Journalists are put under pressure by the political elite and an increased state influence. According to Rankovic (2023) the transformation of the media system in the last 17 years has been slow, incoherent, and incomplete. Print media is characterized by declining readership, while digital media expands at a more rapid pace. Simultaneously, intensive competition in advertising pushes media outlets toward government funding causing political pressure and censorship. Reports Without Borders (RFS) explain the current situation in Serbia:

“Award-winning, quality journalism, which investigates crime and corruption, is caught between rampant fake news and propaganda. While the legal framework is solid, journalists are threatened by political pressures and impunity of crimes committed against them” (Reporters Without Borders 2022).

Serbia has 863 print media—daily and periodic papers, 309 radio stations, 211 TV stations, 432 Internet portals, and 57 “editor-formatted websites.” The country also has three news agencies, and 123 media outlets are registered as “undefined” (Rankovic 2023). The most influential media outlets include the public broadcaster Radio Televizija Srbije (Radio Television of Serbia - RTS) and the independent television network N1 (Reporters Without Borders 2022).

The state's increasing influence is an example of the decreasing democratization of the media landscape. For instance, state influence grew more robust in 2021 through Telekom Srbija, a joint-stock company in which the state is a majority shareholder as they used controversial maneuvers to outcompete other practitioners in the media market to increase its hold over the cable network (Freedom House 2022b).

According to Reporters Without Borders (2022), journalists critical of the ruling party have restricted access to interviews with government representatives and public information. Investigative and qualitative journalism have a limited audience and are mainly featured online and in a few independent media outlets. Journalists critical of the regime are often exposed to public allegations of treason and criminality by the ruling-party representatives and pro-government media (Freedom House 2022b).

Decreasing democracy goes hand-in-hand with the downbeat progress of media freedom. SNS, the ruling party, has continuously hindered political opponents by pressuring independent media, political opposition, and civil society organizations and eroding democratic institutions. The Press Freedom Index, conducted by Reporters Without Borders, ranks performance out of 180 countries according to criteria including respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, media pluralism and independence, and the legislative, institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operate. In 2021, Reporters Without Borders (2022) ranked Serbia as number 93 out of 180 countries; the following year, it was ranked number 79. Similar to the Press Freedom Index, Freedom House publishes an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties. In 2022, Serbia scored 62 out of 100 on a scale of 0-100, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic (Freedom House 2022a).

3. Aim and research questions

Many challenges arise when covering a military conflict. Journalists must navigate through propaganda, disinformation, and political and military pressures. In addition, previous research has established that journalists may struggle to maintain their professional autonomy under pressure from the audience and leaders to show loyalty to the country and share their government's stance. Based on these statements, this study seeks to investigate what guides Serbian journalists' reporting of the war in Ukraine and what kind of challenges they encounter by conducting qualitative semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists that have their beat in politics. Therefore, I propose the following two research questions:

- How do Serbian journalists cover the war in Ukraine?
- What influences their reporting?

4. Previous research

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the challenges that come when reporting during wartime and conflicts. However, most of the studies have concentrated on the coverage of the United States and NATO's involvement and less on Eastern Europe countries (Fengler et al. 2018). After conducting a literature review, I managed to identify four studies that examined the coverage of the war in Ukraine and one that included Serbian news coverage (Fengler et al. 2018).

In Journalism in the crossfire – media coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014, Nygren et al. (2018) compare the coverage of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine during 2014 in mainstream media of four different countries: Sweden, Ukraine, Russia, and Poland.

The study aimed to analyze which factors influenced the journalists when covering the war by conducting quantitative content analysis and qualitative interviews with journalists. By analyzing different dimensions, Nygren et al. (2018) revealed significant differences among the journalists in different aspects such as framing of the conflict, the portrayal of actors involved, and word choices and national settings, as well as the approaches and perceptions among the journalists. In the final analysis, they discovered that professional culture, patriotism, self-censorship, and political context play an important role when explaining the coverage (Nygren et al. 2018). For example, within the journalistic culture, authors discovered that Ukrainian journalists favored partisanship over neutrality and defined themselves as part of the defense of their nation. Swedish media, on the other hand, distanced itself from the conflict (Nygren et al. 2018, p. 1074).

The study also led to another important finding: Nygren et al. (2018) found a contradiction between journalists' perception of their professional duties and the actual coverage. In a recent survey, Polish, Swedish and Russian journalists put forward that objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality were the most important when reporting during wartime. However, when Nygren et al. (2018) compared these results with the content analysis, they could discover a clear bias in the coverage. For example, the authors discovered that Russian coverage was dominated by support for the Russian government and for civilians in eastern Ukraine. In contrast, Polish coverage focused on highlighting a potential threat from Russia. Moreover,

Nygren et al. (2018) found that the Russian perspective was hardly visible in Poland and Sweden's news coverage.

Overall, Nygren et al. (2018) conclude that each country's political-historical context correlates strongly with how journalists covered the conflict in mainstream media and that the framing is closely related to the political situation in each country.

Besides the dimension analyzed in this study, i.e., the relationship between journalists and the military, professional culture, patriotism, self-censorship, and political context, the authors propose an additional important dimension for future studies. Nygren et al. (2018) imply that commercialism and the extent to which both the market and the audience influence the coverage should be adapted to further studies in the analysis scheme. Also, they suggest that the role of digital media and how it correlates with traditional media should be implemented. The suggested dimensions have been established in this study when conducting interviews with Serbian journalists.

When the war started in the east of Ukraine, Ukrainian journalists were put in a difficult position to decide how to report on the conflict. Nygren et al. (2018) could observe there was a confrontation in practice among Ukrainian journalists. Interviews showed that some journalists preferred neutrality, while others favored partisanship. In *Between Dialogue and Confrontation: Two Countries - One Profession Project and the Split in Ukrainian Journalism Culture*, Voronova (2018) takes this discussion further.

According to Voronova (2018), some journalists argued that it was better to imply patriotic journalism, protecting the state interest, than to follow international standards. For them, it was inadmissible to act neutral, considering that their role is to emphasize the Ukrainian people and army. Others, on the other hand, preserved traditional principles of independence and objectivity. In their opinion, patriotic journalism could turn Ukrainian press into a "propaganda machine". Due to the different strategies that media professionals applied when covering the war and fighting propaganda, the community split. Voronova (2018) suggests that this problem could be avoided if propaganda of all kinds was only fought with the help of professional standards that should remain the same even in times of conflict.

In *Information wars: Eastern Ukraine military conflict coverage in the Russian, Ukrainian, and U.S. newscasts*, Roman et al. (2017) examined media framing during wartime, how countries shape public opinion through media outlets, and how that affects the perception and public opinion. They found that the coverage of the conflict varied considerably in Ukrainian, Russian, and US media by studying a year of coverage of the Eastern Ukraine military conflict in major Russian, Ukrainian, and American newscasts.

For example, Roman et al. (2017) discovered that the U.S. media highly relied on the U.S. and foreign officials as sources, with which American officials accounted for almost half of the overall coverage. Ukrainian media would frame separatists in negative terms, whereas they would use neutral or positive terms for Ukrainian defense forces, labeling them as ‘our guys’ and ‘heroes.’ Russian journalists would frame the conflict in Ukraine by using similar symbol descriptions used in WW2, such as ‘fascists,’ ‘extremists,’ and ‘punitive operation’, and hardly reported fatalities among Ukrainian defense forces and separatists. Similar to previous research, Roman et al. (2017) found that the media's portrayal of the war echoes the government's positions and concentrates heavily on sources of their respective governments.

When conducting a literature review, I could only find one study examining how Serbian journalists have been covering the war in Ukraine. In a study entitled *The Ukraine conflict and the European media: A comparative study of newspapers in 13 European countries* by Fengler et al. (2018), Serbia was one of the countries involved in comparative content analysis, investigating how the crisis was covered.

According to Fengler et al. (2018), recent studies have been devoted to analyzing the coverage of the Ukraine conflict in Russia, Ukraine, and selected Western nations. However, there has not been much prior research done in Central-Eastern Europe or on countries like Serbia that had historical ties with the Soviet Union and are thought to be longtime Russian supporters.

Fengler and her colleagues’ analysis of the coverage in 13 countries showed “remarkable differences.” The authors were able to distinguish a pattern in the amount of coverage. They divided the 22 European newspapers into three categories (Ukrainian and Russian newspapers excluded): *High attention to the conflict*, *limited attention to the conflict*, and *marginal attention to the conflict*, whereas Serbian newspapers were categorized as *marginal*. On the

contrary, the authors could find Germany, Poland, and Switzerland, giving high attention to the conflict, and Latvia, The Czech, British, Dutch, and Portuguese newspapers limited attention. The reason why German and Polish newspapers gave high attention to the conflict was seen as an effect of “Warsaw’s and Berlin’s position as key actors in EU diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict” (Fengler et al. 2018, p. 407). The proximity in terms of geography and culture, as well as the concern over Russian aggression in areas that were formerly under the control of the Soviet Union, were other explanations for the extensive coverage of the fight in Polish and Latvian publications (Fengler et al. 2018).

Fengler’s et al. (2018) investigation revealed that Russia dominated the coverage much more than European actors and institutions. Russian actors—most notably President Vladimir Putin—shaped the way Europe was covered, reflecting Russia's aggressive politics and the West's hesitant response. Similar to previous studies, Fengler et al. (2018, p. 414) would conclude that “[...] national differences appear to shape journalistic decision-making in covering the conflict.”

General conclusion

The scholars are united in the perception of what directs and shape journalists’ coverage when reporting on conflicts. The most notable is that journalists tend to reflect their government’s stand. There is also a correlation between the coverage and the nation’s politic-history context. The other dimension is how the journalistic culture shapes the coverage. For example, previous research could find that some journalists approached the ideal of neutrality, whilst others saw a possibility of combining the profession of journalism and activism.

5. Theoretical framework

Nygren et al. (2018) found that professional culture plays an important role when explaining the coverage. Therefore, by understanding a particular journalistic culture, one might discern what values govern journalists’ work and decision-making process, including the one related to the war in Ukraine. Thomas Hanitzsch offers an elaborate model of journalism culture that allows researchers to investigate how journalists perceive their role, which ideals they favor, and what directs them by identifying elements that can be empirically measured.

5.1 Journalism culture

Hanitzsch's (2007) framework suggests that journalism consists of three essential constituents: institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies, further divided into seven principal dimensions: interventionism, power distance, market orientation, objectivism, empiricism, relativism, and idealism. Within each dimension, two extreme poles span a spectrum. Nevertheless, Hanitzsch (2007) emphasizes that journalists rarely tend to behave as extremely as total “loyal” to the power or “adversarial” but rather somewhere between the poles.

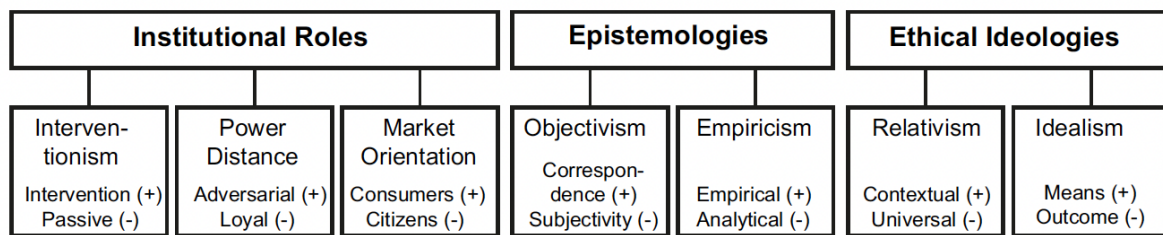


Figure 1. Hanitzsch model over the three constituents and seven principal dimensions (Hanitzsch 2007, p 371).

The dimensions of interventionism, power distance, market orientation, objectivism, and empiricism will be the most beneficial to investigate Serbian journalism culture for this study. Institutional roles direct journalism’s responsibility and function in society. In the first constituent of the institutional role, there is the interventionism dimension. This dimension consists of two extreme poles: intervention and passive. It allows the researcher to investigate to which degree journalists stretch from promoting changes, getting socially involved, and advocating to being detached, passive, and neutral. The power distance dimension reflects how journalists position themselves to power in society. On the adversary pole, journalists challenge the power and its institution and serve as a “fourth estate.” On the opposite, there is a form of journalists tending to be loyal to power. Sometimes, they contribute to propaganda and agitation and serve as a mouthpiece of the ruling representatives. Market orientation is the third dimension within the institutional roles, which measures what guides news production: the market or the citizens. On the spectrum between consumers and citizens, consumer journalism subordinates the logic of the market and produces journalism that the audience demands at the expense of what they should know. On the other pole of the dimension, journalists view the public as citizens and are guided by the public’s needs. The aim is to provide citizens with information so they can be self-governing.

Hanitzsch (2007, p 375) refers to the second constituent, epistemology, as “the study of knowledge and the justification of belief.” The first dimension, objectivism, is related to how truth can be attained and is concerned with the perception of reality. On the correspondence pole, “journalists claim the existence of an objective and ultimate truth “out there” that ought to be “mirrored” and not be created, invented, or altered in any way” (Hanitzsch 2007, p. 376). On the contrary, subjective journalists believe there is no objective truth, the news is just a depiction of reality, and all representations are necessarily selective and require interpretation.

Empiricism explores how journalists relate to the importance of facts versus analysis. Empirical journalists prioritize factual knowledge, observation, measurement, evidence, and experience. They argue that truth, in the main, must be supported by facts through investigating and fact-checking. On the other hand, analytical journalists consider truth to be substantiated by analysis, opinion, ideas, values, and reasons.

Hanitzsch’s (2007) model of journalism culture will be beneficial for this study since it provides an empirical measurement tool that will enable this study to answer its research questions. The model is versatile and covers different aspects of journalism culture. Since this study aims to seek answers through in-depth interviews, the model corresponds with the given method since it allows one to be analytical and examine the answers from different perspectives.

5.2 Strategies and tactics

In order to investigate how Serbian journalists navigate through a landscape dominated by powerful nations, it would be helpful to utilize Michael de Certeau’s model *strategies* and *tactics*. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, originally published in French in 1980, Michel de Certeau established a conceptual map of *strategies* as the enactment or assertion of power by privileged actors and *tactics* as the maneuvering of the dominated subject in modifying and negotiating this power. One could simplify *strategies* as the “calculated” and in the power of the situation. In contrast, the *tactics* are acquired to navigate through this landscape constituted and administered by the strategies. Certeau (1980, p. 6) uses the metaphor “the art of the weak” to explain tactics with a total absence of power in the “movement in the enemy’s field of vision.”

Translated to journalism, *tactics* are manifested by the journalists participating in the study, navigating through *strategies* established by the institutions of the Serbian government, Kremlin, the European Union, and NATO. The owners of the media outlets and the editors are also important actors with their own interests and loyalties. They, too, can put in place strategies to fulfill their aim/agenda that journalists have to overcome via specific tactics. There is also a strategic landscape constituted of ethical rules of journalism that journalists must navigate. Since journalists are significantly disadvantaged and outgunned compared to the institutional actors with whom they must cooperate, this theory seeks to investigate which tactics journalists have developed to maintain their position.

5.3 Patriotic journalism

Patriotic reporting is a widely recognized phenomenon that frequently occurs when covering mainly violent events, like war and terrorist strikes. Patriotic journalism distinguishes from the traditional model of journalism, identified as objective and neutral. Instead, journalists adopt a journalistic coverage characterized by solidarity and an emphatic manner toward their nation.

However, ‘traditional’ objective journalism is not a universal tradition but is more likely to be applied in Anglo-Saxon countries (Ginosar & Cohen 2019). Since Serbian culture may differ in its perception of professional identity, it is crucial when employing this idea to compare "conventional objective" journalism to nationalistic journalism with caution. Therefore, it is important to recognize that Serbian journalists may verify patriotic journalism as ‘good’ journalism and as a neutral part of the journalism culture.

The probability of applying a patriotic manner is likely to have a stronger impact when covering a conflict involving the journalists’ nation. Therefore, Ginosar & Cohen (2019) emphasize the importance of recognizing whether the journalist’s nation is engaged in the conflict or detached. Thus, different approaches follow.

Ginosar & Cohen (2019) refers to five main features of patriotic journalism:

1. “[...] when there is public consensus on an issue, journalists tend to act within the boundaries of this consensus and do not present facts and views that deviate from the consensus. However, when there is a ‘legitimate controversy’ regarding an issue,

journalists objectively present different facts and views.” (Ginosar & Cohen 2019, p. 6)

2. Traditionally, journalists rely on sources of the elite and serve them in the same manner during a national crisis. As a result, journalists frame the conflict in the same way as the government and do not offer alternative interpretations.
3. Journalists struggle to balance between their professional and national identities, whereas the national identity dominates during a crisis and “drives journalists to act in a patriotic manner” (Ginosar & Cohen 2019, p. 6).
4. In their professional employment, journalists exhibit behaviors that reflect how these terrible situations have personally affected them.

The fifth approach refers to television journalists that do not apply to this study.

Following the four approaches that have been addressed, Ginosar & Cohen (2019) present three indicators that may identify patriotic coverage, which corresponds to earlier descriptions.

1. The journalistic coverage lacks neutrality and objectivity, and the journalists do not offer opposing viewpoints or alternative stories.
2. The media does not offer the public alternative frames of the story and instead adopts the official state or military framing of the event or conflict.
3. The journalists adopt various expressions and gestures of solidarity with the public.

6. Methodology

6.1 Qualitative interviews as a method

This study is based on seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Serbian journalists specialized in political reporting. Traditionally, qualitative interviews are assessed when studying an organization’s activities, the work of professional groups, or people’s experience of daily situations (Ekström & Larsson 2019). The method is one of the most well-known tools for understanding people’s experiences, motives, and opinions. Rubin & Rubin (2012) points out that in-depth interviews “examine the complexity of the real world by exploring multiple perspectives toward an issue. This approach to data gathering allows one to see life in the round, from all angles” (Rubin & Rubin 2012, p. 4).

Correspondingly, Ekström & Larsson (2019) urge the importance of contextualizing the respondents' stories relative to their surroundings. The researcher needs to take into consideration politics, social and cultural climate. In the case of this study, special attention should be given to the working environment of the journalist.

Researchers conducting qualitative methods follow a constructivist approach focusing on how people perceive their world and interpret their experiences (Rubin & Rubin 2012). According to constructivists, the reality is socially constructed, meaning cultural norms and mutually shared understandings influence it. Using this method will allow me as a researcher to capture the complexities of social and human subjective phenomena that one cannot see, count, or measure.

The semi-structured approach was chosen in this case due to several reasons. Semi-structured, as the term suggests, means that the interview has a framework of themes to be explored whilst approaching an open form allowing new ideas and questions to be conveyed during the interview. It also allows for open-ended responses from participants for more in-depth information; therefore, the interviews result in rich data. The prepared in-advance interview guide helps the interviewer keep respondents on topic and allows them time to open up about sensitive issues and freely seek answers within themselves.

Moreover, the qualitative interview is an appropriate method for several reasons. Since this paper aims to investigate journalists' experiences, emotions, and how they navigate through political, social, and journalistic culture, this method bodes well with the theoretical framework. Conducting in-depth interviews allows me as a researcher to get deeper insight and access into a narrow field by reconstructing events I've never experienced. However, there are certain drawbacks associated with the use of qualitative interviews as a method that will be discussed in the limitation section.

6.2 Data material and conduct

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with Serbian journalists covering politics and the Ukraine war. This study did not delimit any media outlet since the focus was on the journalist's individual experience. However, it is important to highlight that individual

journalists are formed by their newsroom policies and ethics, and will influence their perspectives.

For me to get be able to reach out to Serbian journalists, I got help from mutual contacts at the beginning. Once I was given contact details with the first journalist, I wrote a text message and presented myself, the thesis, and why I chose to study Serbia. Then, I explained the participant's rights so that they felt secure and more willing to participate in the study. If they said yes to being a part of this study, I asked if they knew other Serbian journalists who may be interested in participating. The so-called "snowball effect" was applied as a method for me to reach out to more journalists, which was effective. However, I also got help from family members who work and live in Serbia and had contacts with journalists. Also, I successfully contacted two media outlets via phone.

Six semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in Belgrade face-to-face, and one took place over an online meeting. The interviews lasted from one hour to one hour and a half, with an average of one hour. In total, three women and four men from seven different media outlets were interviewed. Six of seven interviews were held at their editorial newsroom, whereas one took place over an online meeting. All interviews were conducted in English and recorded using a mobile phone for later transcription. At the beginning of each interview, we went through the informed consent form provided by Södertörns University. Once they felt informed, they had to sign two copies, whereas they were given one, and I was given one. The names of the interviewees and the media outlets were withheld, and confidentiality was offered to allow for a candid discussion of sensitive topics such as political opinions and personal beliefs.

Three of the interviews were conducted during their work while coworkers were nearby. However, the interviews were held in separate rooms. Then, five interviews were carried out after working hours when no coworkers were present. It would have been beneficial for the study if all the interviews had been conducted after working hours when the editorial newsroom was quiet and empty. My interpretation was that the interviewees who interviewed after working hours felt more relaxed than the ones who conducted the interviews during working hours.

All the interviews followed an interview guide (see appendices) formulated and tested in advance. The interview guide functioned as an instrument covering themes such as professional ideals, how to cover the war in Ukraine, and Serbian journalism culture that spoke to the research questions. As the nature of semi-structured interviews, the discussion had to cover specific topics. However, other questions were formulated as the interview proceeded. Thus, when the interview moved forward to explore new themes that also addressed the study objectives, some questions prompted rich, in-depth responses that came naturally.

Also, during the interview, I recognized that many questions emerged within each other. Or the interviewee would already reply to one of the questions without knowing he or she would have done that. As a result, some questions were dropped during the interview. However, Rubin & Rubin (2012) illuminates that a semi-structured interview is separate from normal conversations since the researcher keeps a record of the conversation rather than just listening. This perspective allowed me to make these choices since my perception is that it made the interview better and more natural.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the answers were evaluated using thematic analysis. Already in the interview process, I could discern recurring patterns and topics that were distinguished. When analyzing the answers, I would categorize and cluster the most obvious themes, make connections between those and the theoretical framework and previous literature, and analyze them in the context of the research questions. Once the analyzing process was running, other disguised topics would emerge more distinctly. I withdrew quotes from the interviews that captured the essence of each theme and condensed and edited the quotes for clarity without changing their meaning.

6.3 Ethics

All research should conduct ethically. When it comes to conducting interviews, research is permeated by ethical questions. As Kvale et al. (2014) point out, this method depends on the social relation between the interviewer and the interviewee. It relies on the researcher's ability to create such a safe environment that the interviewee feels free to express their emotions and

beliefs with the purpose of their private events being registered for public use (Kvale et al. 2014, p. 33).

To build trust with the interviewees, I introduced myself and the nature of the research. The respondents were given information that their identities would be concealed, and confidentiality was offered to allow them to speak freely without fearing repercussions. I based my decision to conceal the interviewees and give them confidentiality on ethical principles. Before conducting the interviews, each interviewee had to sign an informed consent form. After the interviews, they could review and withdraw quotes and read my analysis and interpretations. This was necessary to create a trustworthy atmosphere and, as a researcher, ensure that I understood everything correctly. Further on, they had the right to withdraw quotes before publication.

The fact that I have personal connections to Serbia is both advantageous and disadvantageous for this study. On a positive note, it made me more involved and interested as a researcher since I got to learn new facts about the country, politics, and society and experience the culture by living in Serbia for two weeks. My personal relation to Serbia offered me unique insights by having spent much time with Serbian relatives from growing up. I also consider my visit to Serbia, spending much time with Serbian people, contributing to this unique insight.

However, growing up and living in Stockholm, Sweden, influenced by western norms, differs from how Serbia's general public perceives the world. In many aspects, I do not support their way of politics, norms, and values. Therefore, it could be to the study's disadvantage that I have some negative feelings toward the country. On the other hand, I believe that nothing is entitled before proving the opposite and that every man should be approached with an open mind. I appreciate learning about different cultures and values as long as one respects one another, and the fact that I am aware of these negative feelings helped me keep them at bay, and I did not allow them to guide this study or influence your results.

6.4 Limitation and validity

The primary limitation regarding the method is that the study must rely on the respondent to respond truthfully. Usually, people portray themselves positively. Therefore, journalists may not be eager to disclose their more problematic behaviors. There may also be a significant gap

between what journalists say and what they do. To get a full picture, I would also need to analyze their work via content analysis. This would have enabled me to examine the topic from a broader and deeper perspective. However, my only option was to conduct qualitative interviews in English since I do not speak Serbian. I tackled that limitation by including different types of questions, reflecting various aspects. For example, I covered their perspectives on their work and the works of their peers in the journalistic community to get a broader understanding. Further, Rubin & Rubin (2012) illuminates that conducting cross-language interviews involves a researcher and conversation partner who does not share a common native. The negative aspect is that “the core issue is that literal, word-for-word translation often misses the underlying cultural concepts. A word might be readily translated but have quite different connotations in the two cultures” (Rubin & Rubin 2012, p. 185–186). However, we used English which both speak very well, and I asked follow-up questions to ensure I understood everything correctly.

Moreover, it is important to illuminate this study’s limitations concerning cross-cultural barriers. Rubin & Rubin (2012) explain culture as a set of values, beliefs, and ways of interpreting the world shared by a group of individuals. Since I, the researcher and interviewer, originate from another culture, it is important for me to apply a reflexive identity for me to allow and understand new ways of thinking. On the other hand, respondents may conceive limitations if the interviewer acts in a way that does not respond to their culture. When the subject of interest is in an exposed situation, the respondent tends to become more protective of their own interests. Therefore, Rubin & Rubin (2012) emphasize that it is useful for a researcher to be aware of a culture's values and norms to gain as much trust as possible. The fact that my family origins from both Serbia and Sweden allowed me to understand Serbian culture and helped me when I was in Belgrade to build trust by sharing personal stories from previous visits to Serbia and stories about my family. My perception is that the interviewees felt culturally closer connected with me, which made them relax and trust that my intention with this study was built on genuine interests.

7. Results and analysis

The data was collected by in-depth interviewing seven Serbian journalists working in Belgrade covering politics and the war in Ukraine, where five of the seven journalists have been visiting Ukraine and actively reporting on the war. The results will be presented and

analyzed in relation to previous research and theoretical framework.

7.1 A polarized media landscape

One of the primary problems regarding the status of the media in Serbia is the large involvement of the government in the ownership structure of numerous media outlets, as well as the influence of the ruling parties on state- and privately-owned media outlets. However, there are still independent media sources in Serbia. Although, they are marginalized and frequently under continual attack by the politicians of the ruling majority. The pro-state media outlets dominate the market, distributing approximately 80 percent of the content.

Russian and foreign media outlets are also present on the market. Serbia distributes Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, which have been banned in the EU since March due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Western and Chinese media also figures in Serbia; China Radio International, CRI, has been the most active Chinese media. Besides the news distributed by registered media outlets, social media greatly influence the information flow.

The interviewees confirmed this view and argued that the Serbian media landscape was very polarized and toxic. Also, the interviewees expressed concerns that most media outlets in Serbia were in the hands of the ruling party. When asked about their views of the Serbian journalistic community, one interviewee stated:

“The media scene is extremely polarized, extremely pro one side and against the other side, and that is the main thing, we are separated, we are pro-government and against the government.”

This view was echoed by another informant who said:

“I think people watching television with different providers do not have the same picture of Serbia, which is crazy. The situation looks like this because, on the one side, you have media who are openly pro-government. They do not bring experts or people from the opposition to comment. Then on the other side, you have people who want to fight the government, or you have media who are trying to be objective.”

When questioned about the media environment, one participant stated that the current situation reminded them of the 1990s when media were closely connected to the ruling power, characterized by censorship and corruption. Journalists and media outlets who criticize the government are often called out by the ruling party for being foreign agents, spies, or traitors.

“There are very few outlets trying to be a corrective force; most of them are propaganda for the center of political power. Second, our government is well versed in navigating public discourse, which means that even when we push important things forward, it usually falls on deaf ears.”

Many interviewees expressed concerns about the difficulties they experienced in getting first-hand information from the government and state-owned institutions. Some felt that the pro-government media were getting exclusive news, which caused much frustration. The comment below illustrates the struggle:

“Once, I sent a few emails to our Minister of Foreign Affairs because our Minister said he would maybe go to Moscow when the war started. I sent him emails so he could either confirm or deny this statement. He never replied to me, and the next morning he went to one television channel that was pro-government to talk about the trip to Moscow. I asked first, but he went to people closer to him instead.”

According to the interviewees, when reporting on the war in Ukraine, most Russian propaganda was spreading through media connected to the government and from the Russians. It was also expressed that media outlets in Serbia include all kinds of points of view, such as Russian, Western and Ukrainian perspectives. As a result, the participants explained their situation to be flexible, meaning they could report on the war from several perspectives. However, the most common view was to counteract Russian propaganda and pro-Russian news by covering most of the content from a Ukrainian perspective.

One important finding was that all the participants, except for two, explained that they had not decided how to cover the war with their newsroom. It seemed that it was up to one and each how they wanted to present the war. For example, one of the interviewees said they would report on the war from a Ukrainian perspective, whereas their colleague would report on the war from a Russian perspective.

Thus, to summarize how the polarized media landscape has affected the reporting of the war in Ukraine, one can put forward that it has created fragmented coverage. One of the main reasons is the high diversity of different media outlets reporting on the war from many angles. Although diversity could be argued as something positive, the Serbian media landscape has rather become fragmented, and as one of the interviewees said, people in Serbia who watch TV with different providers do not share the same picture of Serbia, meaning they will get different information about the war in Ukraine. The main reason for this is the government's control over the media, which has made it a useful tool for them, assisting them in achieving their political goals.

7.2 Social media and commercialism

The growing impact of social media and the internet on the market and the flow of information is one of journalism's major concerns. This problem is growing since journalism lacks a functional business model. As a result, many media outlets struggle financially, competing for advertisements and readers since many digital media outlets rely on advertising to survive. One of the more experienced journalists illustrated the struggle with this new digital media landscape like this:

“At the moment, I don't like anything. This is becoming more and more stressful. When I was younger, I used to enjoy this profession because I could travel worldwide, meet interesting people, and explore new cultures. Now it's only about writing and publishing more and more stories.”

This concern was echoed by another participant who said:

“In Serbia and everywhere else in the world, print media have big problems because most people, like my children, always use the phone. They don't want to buy the newspaper, and we have fewer and fewer readers.”

To be able to reach massive audiences, journalists find themselves in a content-creation hamster wheel. They must produce tons of content that would attract many users and potential consumers of the ads on the website. In addition, journalists are overworked and in constant competition, with everyone else holding a smartphone. Apart from the struggles discussed,

social media increases fake news, propaganda, and disinformation, making it easier for people and nations to spread these messages.

To keep up with this altered media landscape, one of the participants explained that they had joined TikTok as one of their channels to distribute news, where the main target group is young people who normally don't read the news. This statement is confirmed by Silitto (2022), who recently reported that the number of people consuming news content on TikTok has increased globally from 800,000 in 2020 to 3.9 million in 2022, whereas print, TV, and radio news outlets still dominate in older age groups. Talking about this issue, the interviewee argued that it creates a big gap between older people who watch television and read the newspaper and young people who do not since they get information from different sources.

Commercialism is recognized by Hanitzsch (2007) as market orientation, a dimension that directs journalism culture and guides news production. On the continuum of market orientation, Hanitzsch (2007) distinct the population between consumers and citizens. Journalism that subordinates the market's logic tends to have a high market orientation. When there is a strong focus on the market, the media prioritizes what viewers want to know over what they ought to know. In contrast, when journalism gives prior to the public interests, it is accepted to be journalism's main goal to provide citizens with the knowledge they need to be free and self-governing.

The journalists who established TikTok in their newsroom see young people as citizens, which is why they are trying to get to them and inform them about the situation in the country. However, the journalists understand how media habits have changed and are trying to reach them where they are: on TikTok. At the same time, they may realize, from the commercial point of view, that by attracting more readers, they ensure the survival of their media outlet. Due to the changing media landscape, there could be a possibility that journalists are more concerned with both dimensions today than before. If the media outlets miss out on readers, the advertisement will be lost too. Then, the media outlets will let more and more journalists go. One could say that the different poles of the dimension: citizens and consumers, do not diminish one another but need to cooperate for the media outlets to function.

With media that depends on market logics the challenge is left to journalists, deputies, and editors-in-chief to decide what is most essential and how to strike a balance between what

they should publish and what would gain more clicks. Regardless of how they prioritize, either their finances will take a hit or certain national groups or special interests.

For example, when talking about commercialism, one interviewee said:

“Of course, we are following what our readers are attracted to. I also read what Serbian people are talking about on Twitter. If there is something trending, we will have to publish something about it the next day. Also, one good thing about clickbait is that I can allure them to read about, for example, Syria by putting an interesting title to the article.”

Discussing media logics another participant expressed similar thoughts on how to balance what the audience should read and what they want to read:

“The main instruction is that we follow both, and then we decide in the middle. For example, we wrote an article about Germany’s new counselor, published it on our website, and positioned it on its front page. However, it was barely read but had to exist because it was the main world event. Since we are a commercial media, we must publish stories people want to read to keep getting money from investors. Doing so allows you to publish stories that should be written.”

However, when asked how interested their audience was in reading about the war in Ukraine, all the participants agreed that the demand was high, even after nine months. One interviewee said that the topic has been highly read and that their newsroom hasn’t had any problem grasping the audience’s attention.

In this study, a variety of perspectives were expressed regarding how much the market influenced their news production and what tactics should be implemented to counteract them. Further, there was a clear distinction in how the participants approached this topic based on their age. A recalling pattern was that the younger participants were more appealed to adopt new standards, whereas the older participants were more likely to approach this topic cynically. However, a common view among the interviewees was that social media was hard to navigate due to its powerful dominance.

Overall, one could argue that the financial instability of media outlets makes journalists focus more on seeing the users as consumers rather than citizens. On the spectrum between citizens and consumers, journalists are today forced to move closer to one of the extremes. However, the war in Ukraine is a highly demanded topic, giving journalists more freedom to write stories they feel are necessary.

7.3 Ethical norms

All participants agreed that most media outlets in Serbia did not follow ethical norms when reporting on the war in Ukraine. Neither would they do it when covering domestic affairs. For example, one interviewee said:

“The media scene here is chaotic when it comes to reporting on the war. I don’t know if you know, but on the first day of the war, the 24th of February, one Serbian portal wrote: “Ukraine attacked Russia.” It was a huge article, and we were all shocked. They are a tabloid and the most widely read because they are cheap.”

This incident was confirmed by a second source who stated:

“The main pro-regime daily, and I'm not kidding, published on their cover page: ‘Ukraine attacked Russia.’ So, while the rest of the world was reporting that Russia invaded Ukraine, a pro-regime daily from Belgrade chose to report otherwise.”

When asked about their perception of ethical norms and what they considered “good” journalism, the participants demonstrated a consensus. Correspondingly to the study conducted by Nygren et al. (2018), the participants were united in the perception that journalism should be objective, neutral, and “show both sides” of the conflict and that the main task was to provide the public with information.

However, there were some discrepancies among the participants when asked what role the journalist should play on the spectrum between a detached observer and an activist when covering the war. When asked something general, journalists gave a standard response about objectivity. But when asked to relate to a spectrum, more nuances answers followed.

Some considered that the advisory role equally meant to be an “activist,” which did not correspond to their journalistic ideal and profession, while others believed that their way of pushing certain stories could be seen as a sort of activism. One of the interviewees argued that their way of agenda-setting and pushing stories to affect public opinion could be reckoned as “activism”:

“When I write news, I try to be an observer and to find confirmation about the information. However, I was somewhat of an activist in Ukraine because I wanted to share the experiences of those Ukrainian people with the Serbian population to persuade them not to believe in Russian propaganda. I wrote those articles to show the people the other side. So that you can call activism; it wasn’t based on facts but on human stories. So, I was advocating for people who suffer from Russian aggression. You can call it activism. But I’m not a supporter of activism in daily basis writing.”

A similar discussion was put forward by another participant who argued that the influence and “power” they have as journalists to affect the public discourse or to change the destiny of vulnerable people was the biggest motivator.

“Once I wrote an article about a Romani girl who lived in very bad conditions, and some editors in different television stations read that article and made reportages on television about it, and it changed her destiny. It happens rarely, but when it happens, I think this is one of the most beautiful things in this job.”

Hanitzsch (2007) refers to the spectrum between a detached observer and an activist as interventionism. He argues that journalists stretch from passive and detached to participating and intervening. Following a previous statement that suggested that some media outlets in Serbia distribute Russian propaganda, the results of this study indicate that the participants shared the view that their goal was to counteract this propaganda. But how they wanted to achieve it was different. Some embraced a traditional approach, dedicating themselves to objectivity and impartiality, while others saw their position as journalists as a possibility to promote change. These results reflect those of Voronova (2018), who also found that the Ukrainian media community was split in their perception of how they should counteract propaganda. She found that some journalists saw a chance to combine their duties as

journalists and activists. However, others condemned the trend toward activist and patriotic journalism. Due to this, the Ukrainian journalism community has become polarized.

Although one cannot compare Serbia to Ukraine, some parallels can be drawn in how journalists counteract and adjust when located in restrictive environments. The Russian aggression in 2014 toward Ukraine can be seen as a metaphor for the Serbia governmental abuse of the media since 2012. Taking Certeau's (1980) model into account, the government uses strategies to assert its power over media outlets. For example, representatives of the ruling party and pro-government media have launched several attacks against media outlets and civil society groups, including unfounded accusations of criminal activity or treason. Further, Telekom Srbija, a joint-stock company in which the state is a majority shareholder, has made controversial attempts to strike commercially dubious deals to harm its primary rival, United Group. In addition, intense competition for restricted advertising drives media to depend on government support, rendering them vulnerable to different types of influence and censorship.

When asked about covering the war in Ukraine, the participants were unanimous that the government did not restrict them as much as when covering domestic affairs. For example, one of the interviewees explained why they chose to cover foreign affairs and not domestic as this:

“The reason is that I will not get censored and will not be in conflict if I'm covering foreign affairs. If you work here, there are things you can write and you cannot write about.”

On the whole, the most common view among the participant regarding what motivates them to work as journalists was described as bringing forward stories, writing about problems, sharing stories from different cultures and perspectives, and as one of the interviewees described it, “to be the servants of the people.” On the other hand, however, when covering the war, the most common opinion was that a journalist should always stay detached, observe the situation, and bring forward various views. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these responses and to illuminate the fact that there may be a significant gap between what the journalists say and what they do since people usually portray themselves positively.

7.4 Counteracting propaganda and fake news

When covering the war in Ukraine, most participants agreed that the biggest issue was fighting Russian propaganda, fake stories, and disinformation. These stories were distributed mostly by Serbian providers, broadcasters, newspapers, and Russian media outlets in Serbia. Several respondents expressed worry about the internet and social media's impact on public opinion. For example, one interviewee said:

“There are stories spreading here that Russians are ‘killing Nazis,’ which are Ukrainian people. I want to protect people who read my stories from that influence because that’s propaganda and not news. I am doing that by sharing the Ukrainian side since few media outlets in Serbia cover their side of the story.”

Further, there was a consensus among the participants that Russia was the aggressor and the invader and that their duty as journalists was to fight propaganda and present both sides of the conflict. However, the interviewees claimed that propaganda was distributed from both sides of the conflict, meaning Russia on one side and Ukraine, NATO, The European Union, and The United States on the other side. Talking about this issue, one interviewee stated:

“Nothing is reliable in war; everything is propaganda. On the good and bad side, everything is propaganda. Because both sides want to show that they are the best, so you know Ukrainian officials also make propaganda.”

Another participant commented:

“During the war, both sides are using propaganda.”

This dilemma of navigating through official statements and choosing whom to trust was put forward as one of the most challenging issues to manage during war reporting. However, since all participants agreed that Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim, they would more likely be critical of Russian statements. Also, fake news and disinformation were more likely to be distributed by Russians and pro-Russians. Also, an important aspect is that this war had been going on for nine months when the journalists were interviewed, meaning they had the time to understand and grasp the situation. The comment below illustrates this issue:

“Information flew from Ukraine, Russia and the EU, and we had a hard time, in the beginning, knowing whom to rely on. But I think as the war went on and the

months went by, we all learned whom we can trust, and when we get information, we can make a judgment on whether it is true or false, based on everything that has happened.”

Different strategies have been implemented to provide the public with correct information. Firstly, the interviewees emphasized the importance of always presenting both sides of the conflict, which means Ukraine and Russia in this context. Further, most participants explained the importance of not jumping to conclusions and fact-checking information by confirming it from external news portals. In most cases, BBC, Reuters, and The Guardian were the most reliable sources. These sources were favored; hence they correspond with the participant's journalistic ideal. Subsequently, most participants explained that they would trust media outlets with journalists on the field more.

Thus, going to Ukraine during the war was positive because the participants would gain sources and experts on the ground, which they wouldn't have had contact with without visiting. One of the participants also expressed that they perceived the war in another way after visiting Ukraine:

“Before going to Ukraine, I thought I would witness a Ukrainian nation and people wanting to fight Russia. Although, I found another situation, a human situation. I would say people in Ukraine aren't as interested in the war as Zelensky says. People want to escape, or they want to stop the war as soon as possible. People would say, ‘yes, I have friends in Russia, so it's not a problem with Russia, but the problems lie with Putin and politicians.’”

This statement emphasizes the significance of journalists visiting the field to understand and report on the human situation of the conflict. As this quote indicates, the participant would have interpreted the conflict from a political point of view before going rather than from a human point of view. This perspective was put forward by another participant:

“You were there, and you saw crying people. You met people who told you they had lost their loved one, home, everything. They had seen grenades flying over their heads. As a human being, you get the urge to sympathize with them, to help them, and to make the world see the truth as you see it.”

There was a consensus amongst the interviewees that this war was between Russia and Ukraine, with NATO, The European Union, and The United States supporting Ukraine. In this context, interviewees considered that Serbia should stay neutral but were pushed by various foreign powers to take sides.

7.5 The switch from adversarial to loyal to the power

The study revealed a significant difference in the participants' discourse when talking about their government in a global context versus an internal one. In their accounts, journalists were unanimous in the matter that they supported how the government handled the Ukraine conflict. The participants agreed with Serbia's position, recognizing Russia as the aggressor but refraining from imposing sanctions against it. The most frequently mentioned reason is the journalists' experience of the Yugoslavian war, and especially the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999. One of the most striking results from the study is that the Yugoslavian war was related to how the participants perceived the current war in Ukraine.

One could observe this switch in the participant's perception of the government and link it to the power distance dimension by Hanitzsch (2007). The distance and tension between journalists and those in power extend, according to Hanitzsch (2007), from adversarial to loyal. On the end of the dimension, adversarial journalists have a long tradition in liberal democracies and openly challenge power. They critique political institutions and are often understood as serving as the "fourth estate." On the other hand, loyal journalists tend to embrace patriotic journalism, self-censorship, or acting as a spokesperson for the government or a political party.

The study revealed that journalists shared society's negative emotions toward NATO and agreed with the government on how they have handled the situation, condemned the war but refused imposing sanctions on Russia. Discussing NATO, one interviewee said:

"People here who support Russia are fueled with anger towards NATO because of the bombing in 1999. The general opinion in Serbia is that not everyone supports Russia, but they don't like NATO, which supports Ukraine. So, in the end, they don't like Zelensky because NATO supports him, but they don't like Putin either."

Another interviewee put forward a similar response:

“People have extremely negative feelings about NATO ever since the bombing. Many people see this conflict as a war between NATO and Russia, and the majority will not be on the side of somebody who bombed them in 1999. So, a lot of feelings we have right now are coming from that year and everything that followed.”

Concerning refraining from imposing sanctions on Russia, the participants were united in the perception that it would be impossible for Serbia to impose those. The primary explanations were explained by one of the interviewees:

“Serbia depends on one hundred percent of Russian gas and oil. To take sides in this war and declare sanctions against Russia would be like a homicide for Serbia. Most people in Serbia are quite poor, and approximately fifty percent of the population hardly manages to pay their bills for electricity and gas. It would simply be impossible if they had to pay two times more for electricity and gas. If that happened, people would eventually have to go to the streets, and that’s not good for any government. Therefore, our government stays neutral in this situation. We are not enemies with Russia, nor the EU.”

This view was echoed by another interviewee:

“I absolutely agree with how they handled the situation because they didn’t associate with this war and haven’t gotten involved. It would have been like shooting your own hand if we imposed sanctions on Russia because we are closely economically connected with them.”

The situation itself, regardless of the war in Ukraine, is very complex, but it ultimately boils down to the fact that Serbian people have negative emotions toward NATO and the US after the Yugoslavian war. Also, despite the fact that Serbia has been a candidate country for EU membership since 2014, the country has a strained relationship with Western countries. Simultaneously the government has a good relationship with China, which has invested a large amount of money in Serbia’s infrastructure. But most importantly, the reason why

Serbia cannot impose sanctions on Russia is that Serbia's economy depends on Russian gas and oil. Contrary to expectations, this study found that most interviewees neither identified with the EU, the Western world, or Russia. They identified as Serbian and valued their independence. There was also a clear consensus that most participants identified as European but not necessarily as members of The European Union. Culturally speaking, many felt closer to Russia, considering they also belonged to the Orthodox Church and were descended from Slavic ancestors. However, some participants argued that they felt closely connected to the western world due to Netflix, for example, and similar western media and the internet. Although, this didn't make them a part of the western world.

This finding is consistent with previous studies. Journalists, just like other people, are torn regarding their preferences. However, previous studies have emphasized that Serbia stands “with one foot in Russia and one in the EU” and that the nation is torn between the EU and Russia.

This study shows the complexity of the situation, where Serbia is a hub influenced by both the western and eastern worlds. It can thus be suggested that it is impossible to push Serbia to “choose” one side of the conflict.

What this position means for the coverage of the war in Ukraine could be seen from two perspectives. The positive aspect of this is that Serbian journalists stand in quite a unique position, letting them understand the conflict from various perspectives. Hopefully, it will help them to bring forward critical and nuanced opinions that echo to the public. On the other hand, this unique position could be seen as a blessing in disguise. There is a risk that the Serbian coverage becomes too diverse and confuses the audience. Moreover, the trauma from the Yugoslavian war and the bombing in 1999 could take over, seep through, and direct the coverage. Although, in general, the participant explained that they positioned themselves somewhere in the middle, presenting both sides of the conflict but being more restrained towards Russian information and when talking about Russia. Since most of them agreed upon their government's stand in the conflict, it made them more careful to involve Serbia. There was rather a concern that their role was to observe the war, put forward truthful information, and counteract disinformation rather than push Serbia into the conflict.

From this point of view, one can look at this situation from a patriotic perspective. By agreeing with the government's position toward the conflict, the journalists may display some signs of patriotic reporting (they are not being critical towards Vučić and the governing party), but a content analysis is necessary to locate the features described earlier and understand if that is the case. Ginosar & Cohen (2019) made a distinction between “their war” and “our war” when analyzing whether journalists apply patriotic journalism. Observing the participants' results from a patriotic point of view, one can argue that they perceive this war as ‘their’ war. The most common opinion was that Serbia should stay detached, neutral, and observe.

On the other hand, in a certain way, the war in Ukraine triggered some patriotic feelings in the society since it fueled anger for the US and solidarity for Russia from some of the population. This suggests that the war in Ukraine could be seen as “our war.” For example, one of the participants expressed the situation like this:

“Serbian people see Russia as their big brother who is helping us, sometimes not really, even though we choose to believe otherwise. Then when your big brother goes to war with the guys bombing you in 1999, it is very difficult to convince people that things aren't as black or white as they see them.”

However, there were discrepancies between the patriotic public attitude and the participants' opinions since they considered their role as journalists to portray the conflict nuanced and objectively. There was rather a consensus that their role was to push the public opinion against pro-Russian opinions. The participants in this study showed no solidarity with Russian officials but with Ukraine. Although, they did not feel harm toward Russian citizens.

8. Discussion

As previously discussed, the extensive participation of the government in the ownership structure of several media outlets, as well as the influence of the ruling parties on state- and privately-owned media outlets, is one of the key issues affecting the status of the media in Serbia, contributing to a systemic pro-government media bias. Independent media outlets and those critical of the ruling party are marginalized, and journalists have faced physical attacks, smear campaigns, and punitive tax inspections. Despite advanced legislation and a constitution that guarantees freedom of the press and a penal code, media freedom is undermined. Changes in the environment in which these organizations function have led to several unfavorable circumstances that have seriously hampered their development and jeopardized their overall survival. Their reach is also not as extensive as the reach of media outlets under the state's influence.

One can observe the ruling party as a calculating power pushing the corrective force further away, using conscious maneuverings to gain ground and impact. To understand what tactics Serbian journalists have developed to survive in a hostile environment, one can investigate this issue on an individual, organizational, and institutional level.

Individual Serbian journalists that stand critical of the government must navigate a media landscape restricted by limits, which is getting increasingly challenging. The individual journalist is outgunned compared to representatives of the ruling party and the powerful institutional actors. As a result, journalists employed different strategies to ensure they could do their job.

One of the main tactics developed is that journalists gather in clusters, cooperating and supporting each other. Therefore, they are more likely to be in a newsroom with like-minded people and editors supporting their opinions. Moreover, some Serbian journalists choose to focus on foreign affairs since it gives them more freedom and motivation to publish various stories. Another tactic embraced by journalists is the use of social and digital media as a channel for them to distribute news and push their own stories. The government cannot restrict them in these environments since they do not possess these platforms' power and the Internet remains unregulated in Serbia.

Serbian independent media outlets have adopted similar tactics as individual journalists, using social media as a platform for publishing. Although social media has its dual role and the popularity and usage of social media are both to their advantage and disadvantage. On a positive note, independent Serbian media outlets can use the Internet and social media to bypass political pressure and publish their stories. However, social media and the internet are also opponents, utilized by journalists, organizations, unprofessional bloggers, writers, and other creators to produce material and distribute their stories. Therefore, social media, and algorithms, could be seen as a calculating power whose landscape media outlets need to navigate and negotiate through, but also as a tool adopted by the media outlets as a tactic to distribute news.

Struggling to be sustainable, media outlets use social media to attract and reach the audience. They also join social media platforms with the aim of reaching a younger audience. For example, TikTok is considered the main platform to reach a younger public who normally does not read the news. Media outlets also follow and write about topics trending on Twitter to attract readers. Furthermore, since graphics and video formats draw the most attention, visual formats are favored and more likely to be published. Even though clickbait journalism gets criticized, some media organizations see the advantage of making astounding headlines as an opportunity to allure readers to their platform and get them to read more articles. Not only does the newsroom gain from it, but the readers also, in the best of worlds, read articles they did not intend to and, in that way, get more informed. Turning to a financial perspective, since the independent and oppositional media outlets do not get state funding, many are owned by foreign cooperatives and privately owned media groups.

To ensure the survival of journalism as an institution, Serbia has a constitution that guarantees freedom of the press and a penal code that does not treat libel as a criminal offense. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has also been implemented as a body protecting journalism. There are also regulations prescribing how prosecutors and the police should react when journalists are attacked. In addition, various independent self-regulatory bodies have been established to monitor journalism. A Serbian journalists' code of ethics has also been shown to promote commitment to freedom of thought, speech, and expression, as well as the independence of the media.

Although there is a judiciary protecting journalists and journalism, it has yet to prove its independence and effectiveness in protecting the freedom of the press. Journalists have relatively minimal space to negotiate in the landscape of the ruling power. Similar conclusion can be made when discussing journalists' freedom on social media and internet. Journalists depend on media giants, such as Google and Meta, whose algorithms dictate what content is consumed. Overall, journalists are in a difficult position where they are restricted everywhere but in different ways.

8.1 Future research

This study contributes to our understanding of what influences Serbian journalists when covering the war in Ukraine through in-depth interviews. However, as previous literature has detected, there are discrepancies between what journalists say and practice. Therefore, conducting a content analysis comparing how Serbian journalists portray themselves and their actual coverage would have been interesting to study. Additional research could focus on countries similar to Serbia, where journalists cover conflicts in their nearby areas. For example, Hungary is a great case study since this country shares Serbia's geopolitical position, torn between closer ties to Russia and EU membership.

Further research could also usefully explore the discussion regarding tactics. For example, media scholars could examine what exact tactics journalists use in different hostile environments. They could also explore how social media platforms are adapted as tools to negotiate through these restrictive environments and what they mean for journalism.

9. Conclusion

The present research aimed to examine how Serbian journalists cover the war in Ukraine and what influences their reporting. One of the main findings, consistent with previous research, is that Serbia's political-historical context correlates strongly with how the participants perceive and cover the conflict. Serbia's position is complex in this context and, in some way, paradoxical, with ties to the EU and Russia. The government has condemned the war but refused to impose sanctions on Russia. With this, Serbia keeps itself neutral and detached.

This position and actions are reflected in how the participants framed their coverage. This study showed that the participants condemned the war but were against imposing sanctions. Similar to their nation's stance, they would express criticism towards Putin and the Russian military but not of the Russian people. Furthermore, the peculiar geopolitical position Serbia makes the coverage more diverse and nuanced, helping journalists understand the conflict from many perspectives. However, this study has also shown that the war in Ukraine has triggered patriotic feelings since NATO and the US are two major actors involved in this conflict. Since the negative shared emotions toward NATO were one of the most common themes to emerge from this study, one can presume that these emotions direct journalists in various ways - consciously and subconsciously. Although this study found that journalists favored objectivity and neutrality, one cannot disregard the fact that they are human with emotions that could affect their reporting.

Moreover, this study has been able to show that independent and non-governmental media favor global journalistic standards, such as objectivity, neutrality, and detachment, and that the most important principle was to show both sides of the conflict. However, there were some discrepancies in what role the journalist should play on the spectrum between a detached observer and an activist when covering the war. Since propaganda, fake news, and disinformation were put forward as one of the main issues the participants had to deal with; some argued that activism journalism was necessary to adapt to counteract propaganda.

Another interesting finding to emerge from this study was how the journalists moved across one of Hanitzsch's (2007) dimensions, which refers to the journalist's position toward power, from adversarial to loyal, when talking about the war. The journalists were critical of the government in general, but when they discussed the war, they agreed with the government. The reason behind the approval was mainly described in economic terms, where Serbia would go bankrupt if Russia interrupted their gas and oil deliveries to Serbia. Since the journalists also are Serbian citizens, it is reasonable to assume that their argument for supporting the government in the war was based on the tremendous private consequences that would occur if Russia opposed Serbia. The study confirmed the validity of Hanitzsch's model and dimensions and the fact that it is a spectrum. However, this study also shows that journalistic culture is shifting, and journalists' position to power can change depending on the topic they are covering.

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11. Appendices

The Interview Guide:

Background and professional ideals

- Please tell me a bit about your professional background.
- Why did you become a journalist with a beat in politics?
- What motivates you to work as a journalist?
- How would you describe “good journalism”?
- What role do you consider journalism plays in society?
- What role should the journalist play in relation to those in power/ to the government?
- How would you describe journalism culture in Serbia?

Follow-up:

- How closely do Serbian journalists follow ethical norms?
- Would you say they are united or, on the contrary, divided in any way?

Covering the war in Ukraine

- Are you personally covering the war in Ukraine?
- What sources do you rely on when covering the conflict? Do you find them reliable?
- How did you (as a reporter and a media outlet) decide how you cover the conflict (i.e., the angle of the coverage)?

Follow up:

- Did you decide on the angle with your editor or other colleagues? Did you discuss it during a meeting?
- How would you describe your newsrooms’ relation to the government?
- Do you agree with the way the newsroom is reporting on it?

- The Serbian government backs the UN resolution condemning the war but hasn’t joined

- Western sanctions against Russia. Still, Vucic claims he wants to take Serbia into the European Union while maintaining a good relationship with Putin. Also, the Serbian
- people seem conflicted since many people here support Russia while hoping for EU membership... How is it for you to report on the war in this context? Why?

Follow-up:

- What word would you use to describe it?
- Do you feel pressured to frame the conflict in a way that's "in line" with Serbia's position on the war? If yes:
- Have you faced any issues when framing it opposite Serbia's stand?
- Have you developed any tactics to stay "on good terms" with the people/the government/in line with your media outlet?
- Have you faced any ethical dilemmas while reporting on the war? Could you please describe it? How did you deal with them?
- Do you remember a specific situation when you felt obligated to frame a conflict in a certain way? May this obligation occur from those in power or within yourself?
- With your opinion on "good journalism" as a benchmark. How do you relate to that ideal when covering the war in Ukraine?
- What role do you think the journalist should play when covering a conflict? On the spectrum between detached observer and activist?
- Have you experienced any difference in your emotional attachment to this conflict compared to a situation when covering a conflict is more distanced from your nation?
- If yes, why do you think it's so?
- Has the war affected you personally in any way? Do you think it has impacted your reporting, and how?
- How do Serbian journalists cover the war, in your opinion?
- Have you noticed that other media outlets/journalists report differently when Serbia as a nation is affected?
- Why do you think the coverage looks the way it does?