



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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## Serbia - The Ukraine crisis in the Serbian media, November 2013 - March 2014

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. The present brief report describes the main fault lines of Russian media discourse on the political crisis in Ukraine between late November 2013 and April 2014. This present paper is based on information and articles published in the four most prominent daily newspapers in Serbia: Politika, Danas, Vecernje novosti, Blic, and the weekly Vreme.

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## Serbia - The Ukraine crisis in the Serbian media, November 2013 - March 2014

This paper is based on information and articles published in the four most prominent Serbian dailies: Politika, Danas, Vecernje novosti, Blic, and the weekly Vreme. Although serious research journalism is on the verge of dying out in the Serbian media, Politika, Danas and especially Vreme are usually recognized as quality papers that tend to publish not only informative, but also more or less analytical texts. By contrast, Vecernje novosti and Blic are popular dailies that publish short, informative and sometimes tabloid-oriented texts.

The Serbian media first became interested in the Ukraine crisis in November 2013, when the Ukrainian government decided not to sign an association treaty with the European Union. Although that information was published/broadcast in all Serbian media, the details of the treaty and the negotiation process were never explained. Moreover, the economic dimension of the problem and Ukraine's economic interests were barely mentioned and analyzed. The only two articles that (superficially) tried to tackle this issue appeared in Politika and Vreme. Although the journalist in Politika stated that the Ukrainian economy was making significant losses due to the reduced volume of trade with Russia, most of the article wasn't based on statistical data, but on various statements made by the Ukrainian governing elite.<sup>[6]</sup> While written in a similar tone, the piece in Vreme was slightly more analytical and gave an overview of the gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>[7]</sup>

The aggravation of the crisis, the protests on the Maidan in Kiev, and the first casualties prompted further media interest. However, while the volume of published articles significantly increased, the way in which the topic was handled remained broadly the same. Ignoring the historical and political context in which the crisis arose, journalists tried to give a balanced account of the situation in Ukraine. All 'sides' involved in the crisis were given the same space - articles quoted statements made by the Ukrainian officials and opposition leaders, as well as officials in Brussels, Moscow and Washington. Yet most published articles were merely a summary of the information disseminated by major news agencies like Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse (AFP), RIA Novosti and the like. In most cases, journalists skillfully avoided giving their own point of view regarding the crisis and rarely tried to analyze events. Thus, newspaper editors bombarded their readers with information but made no effort to put it in context. Without venturing deeper into the historical and political background of the crisis, journalists usually stated, in one or two sentences, that the country was divided into a pro-European West and a pro-Russian East. With the exception of several foreign (Russian, Polish, American) specialists, who were briefly quoted in different articles, experts were never consulted. As a result, the majority of readers couldn't really grasp the genesis of the crisis, although many intuitively felt that the situation in the Ukraine very much resembled the situation in Yugoslavia in the late 1980s.

Several factors determined the general attitude of editors and journalists to covering the Ukrainian crisis - a lack of knowledge about the topic; the specific geopolitical position of Serbia (and its policy of close collaboration with both the European Union and Russia); a reluctance on the part of Serbian officials to express their attitude towards the crisis, especially after the referendum in the Crimea; and, last but not the least, the low standard of journalism in the Serbian press as a whole. However, despite the uniform tone that prevailed, from time to time one could identify the standpoint of the Serbian media. Several articles claimed that the great powers - Russia, the European Union and the United States - follow their

own interests and thus don't care much about the Ukraine and its people.<sup>[8]</sup> Vreme wrote: "It appears that the international community is more the catalyst of violence than the factor that contributes to the easing of tensions."<sup>[9]</sup> This point of view is reminiscent of the perception of the majority of the Serbian population of the role of international community during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Perhaps the best explanation of this emotional attitude could be read in Politika: "The similarity between the Yugoslav and Ukrainian scenarios can be seen in the media. Leading Western media, according to the usual recipe that was seen in our country as well, report on the Ukrainian crisis using simplified images of the struggle of good guys against bad guys. Even a cursory glance at the reporting of the New York Times and CNN on the wars in the former Yugoslavia, where Serbs were identified as the main culprits, closely resembles today's reporting from Ukraine, where only one side is criticized while the other is represented as a victim."<sup>[10]</sup>

## Press coverage of the crisis

The parallels drawn between the Ukraine crisis and the Serbian situation became more frequent after Vladimir Putin's statement: "Generally, I believe that only residents of a given country who have the freedom of will and are in complete safety can and should determine their future. If this right was granted to the Albanians in Kosovo, if this was made possible in many different parts of the world, then nobody has ruled out the right of nations to self-determination, which, as far as I know, is fixed by several United Nations documents. However, we will in no way provoke any such decision and will not breed such sentiments."<sup>[11]</sup> This statement made Serbian officials uneasy and led to speculation in the media. At first, nobody understood what Putin was really trying to say and whether he was suggesting that, under new circumstances, Russia might be ready to recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Many experts and leading political figures were asked to give their opinion and draw parallels between the cases of Kosovo and Crimea. Slobodan Samardžić of the Demokratska stranka Srbije (DSS) who is supporting interruption of negotiations with the European Union and closer ties with Russia, is of the opinion that 'Putin has perhaps made a wrong comparison between Kosovo and Crimea in hasty'. Dusan Bajatović, the Socijalistička partija Srbije (SPS) Vice President and the Srbijagas Director does not think that Putin has made a mistake in hasty. He thinks that Russian President has compared something that cannot be compared. "I do not think that Kosovo had the right to self-determination", Bajatović argued, "since historically it belongs to Serbia. On the other hand, Crimea is historically Russian territory". The right to self-determination of Crimea depends on the people who live there. By this statement Putin only gave an example of double standards - Bajatović claims. He did not want to say directly if Crimea had the right to self-determination" Borislav Stefanović, the Demokratska Stranka (DS) official and former Foreign Ministry political director is of the opinion that Serbia should respect territorial integrity of other countries because Serbia itself is struggling for the respect of its territorial integrity. Crimea is yet another proof that things might go out of control when international law is violated - Stefanović says for the Blic. The Srpska napredna stranka (SNS) officials were not in the mood to comment the yesterday's statement by the Russian President. Igor Mirović, the SNS vice president says that at the moment Serbia should be neutral and that secession of Crimea is huge geopolitical topic.' The most important thing is that no bloodshed happens and Serbia should mind its own business - Mirović says.<sup>[12]</sup> Although opinions and answers differed, it was often pointed out that Russian policy towards the independence of Kosovo would remain unchanged. Experts stressed that the case of Crimea is not a precedent (in other words, it was not the first time Russia broke international law), because Russia unilaterally recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, six months after Kosovo proclaimed its independence.<sup>[13]</sup> However, the fear that Serbia might be the only loser in a game of chess between Washington, Brussels and Moscow remained. Vreme wrote: "It is conceivable that the West might offer the return of the Crimea

into the arms of Russia in return for the final recognition of Kosovo's independence."<sup>[14]</sup>

The referendum on Crimea coincided with the Serbian parliamentary elections. Thus, the possible implications of the referendum results were slightly overshadowed by the (unexpected) results of the elections. However, after a day or two, the media gradually began to focus on the position of the future Serbian government with regard to the results of the referendum on the Crimea. According to published reports, Brussels and Washington are both putting pressure on Serbian politicians to take a stance in the Ukrainian crisis. While leading politicians are trying to sit on the fence for as long as possible,<sup>[15]</sup> journalists are debating about how to take a stance that would be equally acceptable for both the West and Russia. "Do we have Tito's response to the Ukrainian crisis?" is the title of the article that appeared in Politika several days ago. One of those interviewed, who preferred to remain anonymous, stated: "Serbia will not have room to say no. The bitterness and helplessness of the West in the Ukrainian crisis will be converted into pressure on weak and helpless countries such as Serbia to line up with them. Thus, Serbia will find itself in the paradoxical situation of taking a clearly determinate stance, although in the Crimean problem nothing depends on Serbia [...]. As Professor Predrag Simic said the other day, we need a solution that would resemble those Tito used to have, but I doubt that we will be able to find it".<sup>[16]</sup>

## Conclusion

Although coverage of the Ukrainian crisis in the Serbian media was often superficial and information-oriented, readers with minimal knowledge of the genesis of the crisis could easily draw their own conclusions. A lot of foreign articles - usually from the New York Times and various German newspapers (FAZ/Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Der Spiegel etc.) - were translated. Stereotypical images were not conveyed in Serbian media and the Cold War rhetoric (that could be heard on CNN or Russia Today) was never used. However, the media coverage of the crisis in the past few weeks has corroborated the assumption that several journalists (and not only journalists) all too often believe that many political issues revolve around Serbia.

## Footnotes

1. Website of Politika: <http://www.politika.rs/>.
2. Website of Danas.rs: <http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/naslovna.1.html>.
3. Website of Novosti: <http://www.novosti.rs/>.
4. Website of Blic: <http://www.blic.rs/>.
5. Website of Vreme: <http://www.vreme.com/>.
6. Zašto Ukrajina okreće leća Evropi, Politika (23 November 2013), retrieved 25 April 2016, URL: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Sumrak-narandzaste-revolucije.sr.html> (Note: due to the original website already expired, link in that case refers to the related source at the Internet Archives. - The administrator, 25 April 2016).
7. Milan Milošević, Zašto kažeš Julija, kad groši ne da'eš, Vreme (28 November 2013), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.vreme.rs/cms/view.php?id=1154306>.
8. Istočna strana, Politika (23 December 2013), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Istocna-strana.sr.html>; D. Stojanovidj, Kome će pripasti Ukrajina, Politika (27 January 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Kome-ce-pripasti-Ukrajina.sr.html>.
9. Biljana Vasić, Vatrene Ulice, Politika (20 January 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.vreme.rs/cms/view.php?id=1169315>.
10. Dragan Viktorić, Ukrajina kao bivša Jugoslavija?, Politika (21 February 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Ukrajina-kao-bivsa-Jugoslavija.sr.html>.
11. Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine, Official Internet Ressources of the President of Russia, retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6763>.
12. Natasa Latkovic, Kosovo and Crimea not same, Blic (5 March 2014), retrieved 25 April 2016, URL: <http://english.blic.rs/News/10249/Kosovo-and-Crimea-not-same/print> (Note: due to the original website already expired, link in that case refers to the related source at the Internet Archives. - The administrator, 25 April 2016); see also article: Vucic - We must have responsible view concerning Ukraine, URL: [www.tanjug.rs/news/122588/vucic-we-must-have-responsible-view-concerning-ukraine.htm](http://www.tanjug.rs/news/122588/vucic-we-must-have-responsible-view-concerning-ukraine.htm) and article Serbias stand on Ukraine unchanged, URL: [www.tanjug.rs/news/122574/serbias-stand-on-ukraine-unchanged.htm](http://www.tanjug.rs/news/122574/serbias-stand-on-ukraine-unchanged.htm) (Note: these last two links already expired and unfortunately are no longer available, even on the Internet Archives. - The administrator, 25 April 2016).
13. Jelena Milić, Ima li sličnosti između Krima i Kosova, Blic (31 March 2014), retrieved 25 April 2016, URL: <http://blog.blic.rs/1183/Ima-li-slicnosti-izmedju-Krima-i-Kosova> (Note: due to the original website already expired, link in that case refers to the related source at the Internet Archives. - The administrator, 25 April 2016).
14. Andrej Ivanji, Ritualne pretnje zapada, Vreme (6 March 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.vreme.rs/cms/view.php?id=1179455>.
15. Serbia's stance on Ukraine "must be responsible", b92 (24 March 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=24&nav\\_id=89742](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=24&nav_id=89742); "No pressure from West over Crimea crisis", b92 (25 March 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=25&nav\\_id=89765](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=25&nav_id=89765).
16. Biljana Baković, Imamo li titovski odgovor na ukrajinsku krizu, Politika (26 March 2014), retrieved 29 March 2016, URL: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Politika/Imamo-li-titovski-odgovor-na-ukrajinsku-krizu.lt.html>.

