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Coverage of the European Parliament Elections by Media Portals in Serbia

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Abstract

The media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion about the European Union (EU), but a lack of effective communication and cooperation between the EU and the media results in inadequate coverage, fueling distrust and skepticism among citizens. In Serbia, which is a candidate for EU membership, there is an increasing trend of distrust towards EU institutions. According to the research conducted by the Ministry of European Integration in 2022, less than half of Serbian citizens would support joining the EU in a referendum. The media is expected to play a key role in clarifying topics that are unfamiliar to the public, such as European integration and the functioning of EU institutions in general. However, earlier studies on media portrayal of EU institutions in Serbia reveal a predominantly factual approach, with limited in-depth analysis, an elite-focused depiction of Europeanization, and frequent reliance on national officials as sources, with minimal inclusion of EU representatives or experts. Building on the findings of earlier research conducted in Serbia, this study seeks to answer the research question: "How did online media portals in Serbia report on the 2024 European Parliament elections?" This exclusive focus on online media aims to provide insights into the digital news landscape and its role in shaping public discourse around the elections. The analysis focuses on the key topics highlighted, the main actors featured, and the tone of the discourse. A textual analysis was carried out on 1,044 articles published across 44 Serbian media portals between June 1 and June 14, 2024, covering the period immediately before and after the European Parliament elections.

Keywords

European Parliament elections; European Union; media coverage; Serbia

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1. Introduction

The communication components of the European Union (EU) and its institutions constitute a crucial segment in ensuring public support and securing legitimacy for EU policies. De Vreese (2007) conceptualizes the EU as a shared communication space, or public sphere, comprising various communicators, with communication primarily mediated by mass media. In this context, the role of the media is not to foster affection for the EU, but rather to inform citizens and enable them to make independent and critical political decisions. According to Souliotis (2022), the marginalization of EU-related topics in the media, the prevalence of negative reporting, and the dominant framing of EU issues through conflict and drama contribute to what is known as the EU's communication deficit. This deficit can have significant consequences, including diminishing public trust in the EU, undermining the legitimacy of its institutions, and ultimately reinforcing Euroscepticism. Conversely, through alternative narratives and agendas, mainstream media can play an important role in reducing Euroscepticism within their respective nation-states (Ștefănel et al., 2023).

This is particularly significant in the context of transitional societies that are not on par economically with leading EU member states. In such contexts, concerns related to economic security and national identity remain highly influential. Post-materialist values—such as self-expression, environmental awareness, and multiculturalism—which Inglehart identifies as central to supranational integration via shared non-material values (Inglehart, 1977, 1997, 2008), are still at an early stage of development in these countries. This specific socio-political context contributes to the persistence of Euroscepticism among citizens, with mass media playing a potentially decisive role in shaping this dynamic. The media can act either as a catalyst or a barrier to the adoption of these values, and accordingly, may portray the EU either as an opportunity for connection and prosperity, or as a threat to national identity (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). In this context, De Vreese (2007) does not perceive the role of the media as limited to merely selecting and framing information about the EU. Rather, he argues that the media actively contribute to constructing the EU as a public communicative space. In doing so, the media indirectly influence patterns of political participation among citizens, as well as the formation of their attitudes toward the European integration process. This influence is particularly pronounced when citizens are consistently exposed to news about the EU. Moreover, there is a clear correlation between the positive tone of media coverage and public support for European integration (e.g., Brosius et al., 2019; Daminov, 2024; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).

It is also worth emphasizing that conventional political trust differs significantly from citizens' trust in the EU and its policies, given that the latter pertains to a supranational institution. National political trust can be cultivated through everyday socio-political engagement by individuals, although this, too, is largely influenced by media reporting. In contrast, trust in the EU and its institutions is more distant from the everyday lives of ordinary people. This is especially true for those living in non-member states. Only a small number of individuals have direct, personal experiences with EU policymaking, and most topics related to the EU's competences rarely become subjects of public discussion—unless such conversations are initiated by the media (De Vreese, 2007). In this context, it may be assumed that media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and, ultimately, citizens' attitudes toward the EU. As Boomgaarden et al. argue, "EU news affects public knowledge about, attitudes towards, and support for European integration, enlargement or specific policies" (2010, p. 506).

Moreover, media effects tend to be the strongest when the audience possesses little to no prior knowledge of a given topic and, consequently, has not yet formed well-established opinions on the issue at hand (Klapper, 1960). Within the context of this study, this aspect is particularly relevant, as Serbian citizens have undergone profound transitional changes over the past decades. New and unfamiliar challenges have emerged—ones that were largely absent or unknown under the socialist system. Specifically, Serbia officially embarked on its transition process following the political changes of October 2000. While the formal shift from a socialist to a democratic political system was almost immediate and visibly apparent, the path toward substantive democratization has been neither swift nor straightforward. One might even argue that this process is still ongoing. Jakubowicz and Sükösd (2008) comment on the crucial role of the media in the broader democratization of societies undergoing political transition. They particularly highlight that the media are not merely transmitters of reality, but educators of transitional audiences about the significance, roles, and functioning of democratic institutions. In transitional countries, the media are expected to play an active role in fostering democratic culture and civic understanding. Moreover, the development of a sense of belonging to the European cultural and political space, along with learning how democratic and European institutions operate, remains an ongoing process—one marked by numerous challenges and fluctuations—even after more than two decades. Soon after, while the democratization process was still incomplete, Serbia entered a new socio-political phase by being granted candidate status for EU membership in 2012. A society still in the process of learning about democratic values and procedures at that time entered a new phase—dealing with the complex questions surrounding EU membership candidacy. It is therefore logical that the media, as in the above-mentioned broader democratization of transitional societies, played a crucial role in this context as well. The manner in which the media portrayed the accession process and EU institutions to their audiences likely had a significant influence on how Serbian citizens would come to perceive and relate to European institutions and integration. Although this article does not examine the direct impact of media coverage on public attitudes toward the EU, the findings of recent research (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2022) indicate that support for Serbia's European path is at an all-time low. If a referendum on EU membership were held tomorrow, fewer than 50% of Serbian citizens would vote in favor. This decline in support can be indirectly linked to the way the EU and its institutions have been represented in the media.

The Serbian media landscape is marked by political polarization, systemic pressures, and a decline in press freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders (2024), Serbia's position on the World Press Freedom Index reached a historic low in 2024, despite a slight improvement in 2025. Freedom House has also recorded a steady decline in democratic standards, with Serbia classified as "Partly Free" since 2018 and scoring 56/100 in 2025. Although the legal framework is formally aligned with EU standards, implementation remains weak due to political influence over editorial policy, legal threats against journalists, and widespread self-censorship (Mitrović & Milojević, 2025). The media sector's economic fragility, particularly among local outlets, as well as non-transparent funding further contribute to limited media independence. Ownership structures often obscure political affiliations, making the landscape appear pluralistic, but, in practice, independent journalism faces increasing constraints (Jaraković, 2019).

Over the past few decades, there has been extensive research focused on analyzing media coverage of the EU and its institutions in Serbia. These analysis revealed that media outlets generally reported in a factual manner, without providing deeper analysis of the subject, while the most common sources cited in the articles were international and domestic politicians. Meanwhile, the opinions of citizens are completely marginalized—thus,

the process of Europeanization is elitized and disconnected from the daily lives of ordinary people (Milinkov et al., 2013; Pralica & Janjić, 2016). Also, the reporting on EU-related issues—while partly influenced by the editorial policies of media outlets—is shaped by the political agenda imposed by external actors, with the discourse on the EU largely shaped by the perspectives of national political figures (Krstić, 2015). A discourse analysis of articles published in the most visited online newspaper editions in Serbia in 2016 indicated a more intensely negative portrayal of the EU compared to previous years. The study also identified the presence of overt hate speech targeting the EU and its institutions, depicting the EU as a "threatening," "destabilizing," and "punitive force," while Serbia was portrayed as "humiliated," "yet proud and dignified" (Drašković et al., 2016).

In recent years, media coverage of EU integration and the role of EU representatives in Serbia's accession process has undergone a notable transformation. EU-related issues are increasingly present in widely read tabloid outlets aligned with the ruling political structures, as well as on social media platforms. These tabloids, together with popular pro-government commercial TV channels, often resort to sensationalism, spread disinformation, and rely on unverified sources. Their reporting on EU matters frequently redirects public attention or is used to discredit particular EU officials through orchestrated smear campaigns (Krstić, 2023). As Stojiljković and Spasojević (2018) note, the relationship towards the EU in Serbia is characterized by a paradox wherein formal pro-European rhetoric coexists with skepticism and criticism within the media landscape. According to these authors, media outlets, particularly those aligned with political elites, often serve as channels for disseminating populist messages that rely on simplistic and emotional narratives rather than analytical and objective reporting on EU integration. They argue that the topic of the EU is instrumentalized politically to mobilize voters and legitimize governing authorities, while selective coverage and sensationalist headlines contribute to ambivalent and polarized public attitudes. This polarization within the media sphere, combined with a lack of critical journalism, results in public disorientation and a diminished quality of information regarding the EU accession process. Consequently, populist discourse in Serbian media simultaneously appropriates pro-European narratives and populist elements, fostering confusion and distrust towards the EU (Stojiljković & Spasojević, 2018).

Various studies show that Serbian media coverage of EU topics varies due to differences in timeframes, media types, and research focus. However, they commonly conclude that such topics are often marginalized, influenced by national politics, and rarely include citizens' views. Building on prior research, this study aims to address the following research question: "How did online media portals in Serbia report on the 2024 European Parliament [EP] elections?" Although the focus of the analysis is narrowly defined—both thematically and temporally—concentrating solely on the period immediately before and after the EP elections, the findings of this study allow for broader interpretive insights. They reveal how the EU and its institutions are represented in the media to Serbian citizens. Furthermore, as the EP continues to expand its competences and increasingly influences decisions that affect the daily lives of EU citizens, media coverage of this institution, even outside electoral periods, remains a highly relevant subject of scholarly inquiry (Gattermann, 2013; Souliotis, 2022, pp. 7–49).

2. Methods

A total of 1,044 articles published on 44 media portals were analyzed, covering the period from June 1 to June 14, 2024, immediately before and after the EP elections. The articles were collected through the database naslovi.net. Naslovi.net is an online news aggregator that collects content from 156 online media outlets

in Serbia, encompassing a wide spectrum of media types, from local news providers to specialized online magazines. The aggregator operates by capturing all news articles in real time from its listed websites at the moment of publication, without selective filtering. For the purposes of this study, a search was conducted using the keyword "European Parliament," resulting in the identification of 44 media portals that reported on topics related to the EP during the analysis period. Importantly, the selection criterion was not predetermined but emerged organically from this keyword-based search. This approach aimed to encompass all online media outlets covering the EP, irrespective of their editorial profile or reach. Since the sample includes media sources often excluded or underrepresented in similar studies, it was anticipated that the resulting media landscape would offer a more comprehensive and nuanced picture.

The database included the names and characteristics of all media outlets whose articles were analyzed, and some of those outlets are explicitly identified in the main text wherever specific media content is cited. Where relevant for interpretation, additional information on the editorial orientation and ownership structure of these outlets is provided. For full transparency and to facilitate contextual understanding, a comprehensive list of all 44 analyzed portals, including details on their type, ownership, and editorial profile, is available in the Supplementary File 1 (Appendix A).

In this study, the media article served as the unit of analysis. Each article from the database was first coded and subsequently classified according to predefined categories: (a) "the main topic of focus," (b) "the dominant source of information in the article," and (c) "the tone of discourse" (with respect to the EU and its institutions, particularly the EP). With the exception of the tone of discourse—where predefined categories included positive, neutral, and negative—the operationalization of the other two categories was not established a priori. Instead, subcategories were inductively developed during the analytical process. As a result, 12 subcategories were identified for the main topic of focus, and 14 subcategories were identified for the dominant source of information (these will be presented in detail in the following section).

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the principles of textual analysis, as part of a broader qualitative data analysis process, encompassing data storage in a database, and the grouping and definition of categories and subcategories. The analytical approach used was both deductive and inductive; that is, data, codes, and theory were compared simultaneously (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The analysis was conducted manually by three researchers. All members of the coding team were involved in coding the entire sample. Prior to the analysis, the coders held calibration sessions to align their understanding of the categories and ensure consistency in application. A codebook was developed iteratively, based on initial readings of the material, and finalized through joint discussion. During the coding process, any discrepancies in categorization were resolved through group discussions. When consensus could not be reached, the final decision was made based on majority agreement among the coders. Due to the collaborative nature of the process and the relatively small coding team, an intercoder reliability coefficient (e.g., Cohen's Kappa) was not calculated. However, a high level of agreement was achieved through ongoing communication and iterative refinement of the coding scheme. The final version of the codebook, with category definitions and examples, is included in the Supplementary File 2 (Appendix B).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Which Issues Were Framed as Particularly Significant in Serbian Media Coverage During the EP Elections?

Topic categorization is a key step in analyzing media coverage of the EU and its institutions, as it reveals how these actors are most frequently framed and which narratives dominate public discourse in Serbia (Burazer et al., 2021). By emphasizing particular aspects of an issue, the media guide public attention and define what is perceived as relevant (Entman, 1993), thus shaping the framework within which EU-related debates take place. A key feature of this study is its purposive sampling and focus on a narrow time frame—immediately before and after the EP elections. While all analyzed texts addressed the EP elections, thematic subcategories emerged during coding, offering a clearer picture of how the elections were framed in Serbia. In cases of thematic overlap, the dominant issue was identified and categorized accordingly.

In the majority of the texts (N = 646), the focus was on the "elections in the context of the EU," and this was framed in the broadest sense (see Table 1). This category encompasses texts in which the EP elections are viewed through the lens of the EU, the impact on the political dynamics within the EU after the election, predictions about events, and/or indications of the consequences of the election results (1a, 1b):

> 1a: "Polling stations are open, today is the last day to vote for the EP" ("Danas poslednji dan," 2024).
>
> 1b: "Four scenarios that will determine the next President of the European Council: Which names are in the running?" (Fortuna, 2024).

Table 1. Quantitative representation of texts in relation to the category "topic in focus."

Topic in focus	Number of texts	%
Elections in the context of the EU	646	61.78%
National elections	165	15.80%
Elections in the context of Serbia	117	11.21%
Profile of EU politicians	43	4.12%
Elections in the context of Russia	35	3.35%
Elections in the context of enlargement	15	1.44%
Elections in the context of the region	7	0.67%
Elections in the context of migration	6	0.57%
Elections in the context of the economy	5	0.57%
Elections in the context of the USA	2	0.19%
Elections in the context of Ukraine	2	0.19%
Elections in the context of the European Football Championship	1	0.10%
Grand Total	1,044	100.00%

"National elections" emerged as a significant theme during the analysis. This is evidenced by the fact that there were a total of 165 articles in which this theme was dominant. Specifically, this theme refers to media articles reporting on national elections in EU member states. In some countries, national elections were held

concurrently with the EP elections. However, the calling of early elections following poor results in the EP elections (such as in France) was a frequent topic in Serbian media during the period of analysis. An example of a headline from this category is: "Le Pen: I will be a candidate in the early parliamentary elections in France" ("Le Pen: 'Biću," 2024). Additionally, in the news item titled "Germany not considering new elections after poor results of the ruling coalition in the EP elections" (M., 2024), the focus is on the parliamentary elections in Germany, while the news "Corrective measures in Athens after the EP elections: Mitsotakis hinted at the possibility of a government reshuffle" (Tanjug, 2024a) discusses the elections in Greece. Such news stories about national elections in EU countries were the second most frequent category (Table 1) during the period of analysis.

Given the context in which the research was conducted, "elections in the context of Serbia" were a theme that ranked third in terms of the number of articles ($N = 117$). Within this theme, the primary focus was on what the new composition of the EP could mean for Serbia, particularly regarding EU accession. The rise of the far-right was a frequent topic during the analysis period, including in the context of Serbia, examining how the strengthening of the far-right in the EP might impact the general attitude towards Serbia. For example, one of the news items from this category is: "If the far-right wins in France: Will the relationship towards Serbia and the Kosovo issue change?" (Ž., 2024). Additionally, the issue of Serbia's EU accession was a theme within this category, and among the analyzed articles were news pieces such as: "How the new composition of the EP could influence EU enlargement and Serbia's status?" ("Kako novi sastav," 2024) and "What is the effect of the European elections on Serbia?" (TV Nova, 2024).

The theme of "EU politician profiles" was notably prominent ($N = 43$). These articles often focused on controversial figures—such as former convicts or influencers—frequently presented in a sensationalist manner. Over half of them (22) had a negative tone, suggesting an intent to undermine the credibility of the EP. By highlighting eccentric candidates, the media portrayed the institution as frivolous and unreliable.

"Elections in the context of Russia" was a theme in which the EP elections are linked to Russia, either through comments from Russian officials about the elections or through messages from European politicians to Russia ($N = 35$). The presence of this theme can be interpreted in relation to the context in which the research was conducted. In Serbia, there is often an emphasis on the polarization between pro-Russian and pro-European orientations, both among politicians and citizens, so the reporting on the EP elections in the context of Russia was expected.

Other topics include "elections in the context of enlargement" ($N = 15$), a topic separate from elections in the context of Serbia, as these texts did not focus on Serbia but rather on EU enlargement in general. Then, "elections in the context of the region" (Western Balkans; $N = 7$), "elections in the context of migration" ($N = 6$), "elections in the context of the economy" ($N = 5$), "elections in the context of the USA" ($N = 2$), "elections in the context of Ukraine" ($N = 2$), and "elections in the context of the European Football Championship" ($N = 1$).

The rise of the right-wing in Europe was one of the dominant themes within the aforementioned categories. The majority of the analyzed media outlets pompously proclaimed the victory of right-wing options or at least a significant shift of the EU towards the right, as seen in articles such as "The Right is Coming to Brussels in Giant Steps" (Cerovina, 2024) or "Young Europeans Are Turning Right: Analysis in Five Countries Shows Who the Right Can Rely On" (Euronews Srbija et al., 2024). The strengthening of the right was often linked

to Serbia, through analyses of what such a shift could mean for Serbia's EU membership. The assessments ranged between two extremes: one that certain right-wing options would block further EU enlargement (2a), and the other suggesting that right-wing options in certain countries, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, could be beneficial for Serbia (2b).

> 2a: "All representatives of those right-wing parties that entered the EP are skeptical about the Western Balkans' accession to Europe, even though they belong to the same political group as those who hold the majority and govern in our country, as well as some opposition parties that share the same views" (Beta, 2024).

> 2b: "The friendly cooperation continues, which guarantees peace, stability, and prosperity for our two countries and the region" ("Vučić razgovarao sa," 2024).

The political context in Serbia—marked by a continued decline in freedoms (Freedom House, 2025) and close ties between the ruling elite and right-wing actors in countries like Russia and Hungary—helps explain why pro-regime or right-leaning media often portray the rise of the far right in the EP positively. In contrast, liberal-leaning outlets tend to voice concern over Serbia's EU prospects in light of this shift. These divergent portrayals align with production theories, which argue that media, as institutions influenced by political and economic elites, produce content that serves elite interests (Fuchs, 2010; Garnham, 1979, 1990; Mosco, 2015; Schiller, 1969; Winseck, 2024). The findings thus reflect the ideological imprint of non-media actors on how the EU is framed in Serbian media.

3.2. Who Creates the Narrative?

Information sources in the media—ranging from individuals and institutions to documents and social media—play a crucial role in shaping narratives. This is particularly relevant in the context of complex political issues, such as those related to the EP and the EU, where the selected sources significantly influence how the public understands and evaluates these topics. For this reason, "dominant information sources" were the second category analyzed in the media texts. As previously explained, this category is important because it provides insight into who shapes the narrative about the EU, specifically which sources of information create the image of the EP and the EU for the citizens of Serbia.

As shown in Table 2, the most frequent information sources were "EU politicians." In more than a third of the total number of media articles ($N = 385$), statements from politicians in EU member states were dominant. The dominance of EU politicians as information sources was expected, given that media outlets largely relayed their statements from foreign sources. This practice allows for the appearance of credibility without engaging local experts to provide context or analysis. It raises the question of what Serbian citizens actually gain from such reporting.

Nearly a quarter of the texts ($N = 288$) "did not name any specific sources" (Table 2). In these articles, information about the progress of the electoral process in individual countries was mostly presented without further analysis or interpretation. The large number of articles without cited sources points to a superficial reporting style, focused mainly on basic facts like polling station openings, turnout, or early results. This is consistent with the finding that 75% of the analyzed articles were informational, while only 25% offered

analytical insight into causes, implications, or future developments. An example of one of the analytical articles is: "Winners and losers of the EP elections: What do the election results in the EU tell us?" ("Pobednici i gubitnici," 2024).

Table 2. A quantitative overview of the number of texts in relation to the category "dominant source of information."

Dominant source of information	Number of texts	%
EU politicians	385	36.88%
No source	288	27.68%
Experts	136	13.02%
Media	95	9.10%
National politicians (from Serbia)	57	5.46%
Politicians outside the EU	30	2.87%
Citizens	17	1.63%
NGOs	11	1.05%
Author's text	10	0.96%
EU institutions	6	0.57%
"Experts": Party pundits	4	0,38%
Social media	3	0.29%
PR	1	0.10%
National institutions	1	0.10%
Grand Total	1,044	100%

"Expert" opinions were present in a significant number of articles, representing a shift towards a more analytical approach and a closer interpretation of certain topics related to the EP elections and the EU in general. However, the inclusion of experts is not random or uniformly distributed; instead, media outlets selectively reference experts according to their editorial preferences and the specific thematic focus of their coverage (Albæk et al., 2011). Therefore, we differentiated between independent "experts" ($N = 136$) and "party pundits" ($N = 4$) based on Cross's (2010) framework. Experts were defined as individuals with recognized professional or academic expertise cited in a non-partisan manner. Political commentators affiliated with parties (party pundits) were excluded from this category to avoid conflating partisan opinions with independent analysis. Although party pundits appeared rarely (4 out of 140 cases), their exclusion helped maintain the integrity of the expert category.

References to other "media outlets" as sources were recorded in 95 articles, while "politicians from Serbia" were cited as sources in 57 texts. Although politicians from Serbia are, in effect, politicians from outside the EU, they were categorized separately due to the context of the research and further interpretation of the results. "Politicians from non-EU countries" were sources in 30 texts. "Citizens" were asked for their opinions in only 17 texts; none of the respondents were from Serbia. One of the frequent criticisms directed at the media reporting on European institutions is the absence of citizens' opinions on issues related to EU policies. The marginalization of citizens as sources of information leads to a journalistic approach that dehumanizes the EU and its institutions, distancing them from the public. As a result, they are represented as a cumbersome collection of institutions and diplomatic rhetoric, completely detached from the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Other sources of information are presented in Table 2.

3.3. In What Tone Are the EP and the EU Portrayed in the Analyzed Articles?

When it comes to "the tone of discourse," three categories were predefined: positive, neutral, and negative tone. This referred to the stance toward the EP elections and the EU in general, its institutions, and policies. The operational definitions were as follows:

> Positive tone: Reporting emphasizes benefits of EU integration, praises EU actors, or presents the EU/EP in a favorable light. Terms like "support," "improvement," "cooperation," "assistance," and positive portrayal of EU policies.
>
> Neutral tone: Factual or balanced reporting without evident bias or evaluative language regarding the EU/EP. Descriptive language, quotes from multiple sources, absence of judgmental or emotionally charged words.
>
> Negative tone: Reporting focuses on EU failures, criticism of its policies, or portrays the EU as a threat, burden, or negative influence. Language indicating "imposition," "failure," "hypocrisy," focus on "conditionality," or elite criticism.

The majority of the texts had a neutral tone ($N = 732$). However, nearly a quarter of the analyzed media texts had a negative tone, while a positive tone was observed in only 27 texts (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of texts in relation to the category "tone of the text."

Tone of the text (in relation to the EU)	Number of texts	%
neutral	732	70.11%
negative	285	27.30%
positive	27	2.59%
Grand Total	1,044	100.00%

In the following paragraphs, examples of negative discourse are presented within two analyzed categories: "the topic in focus" and "the dominant source of information." More specifically, attention is given to those subcategories within these two categories that displayed the highest proportion of negatively toned discourse.

When it comes to the category "topic in focus," the subcategory that exhibited the highest concentration of negatively framed content was "elections in the context of the region" (Balkan/Western Balkans)—71%. An example of such a text is an article quoting the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, who concludes: "An expected political earthquake. They have been defeated" (Tanjug, 2024b). The next two topics, where negative tone was present in the same percentage—66% of the total number of texts in that subcategory—were "elections in the context of Russia" (3a) and "elections in the context of migration" (3b):

> 3a: "The EP elections took place under conditions of strict restrictions, the absence of fair competition, and the 'cleansing' of the information field from alternative sources of information, alongside an unrestrained anti-Russian campaign" (Trajković, 2024).

> 3b: "'They represent a threat to the high level of security we are accustomed to in Austria,'" points out our interlocutor" (Filipović, 2024).

The topic of the "EU politicians' profile," with 51% of negative texts, was used, as already mentioned, for subtly and sensationally tarnishing the reputation of the newly elected composition of the EP, with the newly elected MEPs portrayed as "criminals" (4a, 4b), "tycoons" (4c), "Nazis" (4d), and so on:

> 4a: "The footage of her being brought before the court in chains shocked the global public" (Tanjug, 2024c).

> 4b: "Greek politician Fredi Beleris, who was convicted of vote-buying in the mayoral election in the Albanian town of Himare, won a seat in the EP from prison in Albania" ("Iz albanskog zatvora," 2024).

> 4c: "To celebrate his victory with party colleagues, he arrived at the main headquarters in a red Ferrari 296 GTS—Gran Turismo Spider, whose starting price is around 350,000 euros" ("Hrvatski evroparlamentarac u," 2024).

> 4d: "They also highlighted a moment from the party's annual convention where the aforementioned Herbert Kickl triumphantly declared himself the future Volkskanzler, or people's chancellor—a term that was first associated with Adolf Hitler in 1933" (Čurović, 2024).

The fourth most frequent topic with a negative tone was the theme of "elections in the context of Serbia," with as many as 44% of such texts. This is particularly significant, as nearly half of the articles analyzing Serbia's European future express a negative stance toward European institutions and/or Serbia's path to EU membership. This is evident in texts that associate Serbia's "uncertain future with Priština (5a), with the "EU's indecisiveness" (5b), or with "EU politicians who are portrayed as hating Serbia" (5c), among others:

> 5a: "KURTI'S TIME BOMB: Priština has placed its man in the EP. How dangerous is this for us?" (Paunović, 2024a).

> 5b: "Europe has no idea what to do with Serbia, with the Western Balkans. It should have addressed and changed that 30 or 25 years ago" (Komarica, 2024).

> 5c: "Grošelj is, incidentally, a well-known Serb-hater, a man who never misses a single opportunity to hurl the worst accusations at Vučić and our country. Not to mention that all of it is sheer nonsense, but this time Grošelj has outdone even himself (which is no easy feat)" (Paunović, 2024b).

In the category "dominant source of information," the subcategory with the highest proportion of negatively toned discourse was "citizens." Within the articles in which citizens were cited as the primary source of information, 70% conveyed a negative tone. Similarly, 65% of "Serbian political actors" cited as sources reflected a negative tone. Notably, 30% of "experts" also adopted a negative tone when commenting on EU/EP-related topics. To provide a more in-depth understanding, the following paragraphs elaborate on each individual category.

Twelve out of 17 "citizens" expressed a negative stance toward the EP elections and the EU in general. The negative discourse of citizens as a source mostly contained skepticism towards the EU regarding its impact on the daily lives of ordinary people (6a).

> 6a: "I always participate in local and parliamentary elections, but I have never voted in European elections, nor will I in these. Personally, I don't even know who is on the lists, how many people are being elected, nor am I particularly interested in it. It all seems distant to me, so I don't even know what it's about, what is being discussed, and so on. I believe we should focus on improving the situation in our own country, as we are hardly consulted about what is happening or being done in the EU. We are too small for anything more serious, so these elections matter most to those who will be elected, as they will receive high salaries and various benefits, while we will continue living as we always have" (Bradarić, 2024).

When "domestic politicians" are the source, it is expected that they will provide context and examine EU policies in relation to Serbia. Ultimately, politicians from ruling parties enjoy the highest trust from citizens according to election results, making their interpretation in this context even more significant. Although a number of opposition politicians also expressed a negative tone. However, there was a noticeable "denigration of EU politicians" (7a, 7b) and a general "trend of spreading Euroscepticism" (7c; as previously mentioned, 65%):

> 7a: A member of the ruling party's presidency stated: "Schieder doesn't care about the electoral will of the citizens, neither of Serbia nor of any other country" (U., 2024).

> 7b: The Minister of Internal Affairs said: "Sixth-rate politicians" enjoy venting their frustrations on countries and peoples that pursue an independent and sovereign foreign policy, while presenting themselves in Serbia as important players in European politics" (Tanjug, 2024d).

> 7c: One opposition politician stated: "What is most important for us in Serbia is that all these parties are very skeptical not only about the further expansion of the EU but also about the very structure and function of the European integration project. This trend is understood by the average voter in Serbia, who is not against the EU but no longer has the illusion that the negotiating framework imposed on Serbia by Brussels bureaucrats can lead to our country's inclusion in the EU" ("Mihailo Brkić: Opozicija," 2024).

As previously mentioned, "expert opinions"—even when coming from credible professionals—can be subject to media manipulation, as outlets retain the power to select those experts whose views align with their editorial stance. In line with this assumption, we also present the finding that in nearly 30% of the articles, expert opinions had a negative tone towards the EU. These opinions frequently emphasized "the subtle glorification of Russia (8a) or "the uncertainty surrounding the EU's future" (8b, 8c).

> 8a: Slobodan Zečević, director and senior scholar at the Institute of European Studies, and an expert in EU law and policy, commenting on the results of the EP elections, stated: "Europeans fear war with Russia and reject migration" ("Zečević o rezultatima," 2024).

8b: Timothy Garton Ash, prominent British historian and expert on contemporary European history said: "It is bad, and it could get worse, while commenting on the future of the EU after the EP elections" (D., 2024)

8c: Boško Jakšić, veteran reporter and expert in international affairs, commenting on Serbia's European future, stated: "It can't get any better. It is more realistic that the 'status quo' of uncertainty will remain, just as it has for the past two decades" (Stevanović, 2024).

The percentage of articles with a positive tone of discourse was almost negligible—below 3%. One example is an article titled: "Belgrade Claims That EU Membership Remains a Strategic Goal of the Serbian Government: Funding for Science from Brussels" (Radio slobodna Evropa). It is worth noting here that a small percentage of Serbian citizens are aware that the EU has been the largest provider of non-repayable aid to Serbia since 2000. A 2022 study showed that only 28% of citizens identified the EU as the largest donor, followed by China, Russia, and Norway, whereas in reality, after the EU, the largest donors are Germany, Sweden, and Italy (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2022). Moreover, according to a 2022 Demostat survey, one-third of respondents believed the EU to be the biggest source of non-repayable aid to Serbia. Nevertheless, a quarter of those surveyed still believed that Russia had provided the most assistance, while one-fifth considered China to be a major donor of such funds (Demostat, 2022). Misconceptions of this kind may be caused by various factors, including the way media report on such issues—often failing to clearly distinguish between donations and investments—as well as political messaging that emphasizes close ties with Russia and China.

3.4. Why Is the Author's Byline Important?

The "author's byline" is significant for several reasons: it contributes to transparency, supports the professional reputation of journalists and media outlets, protects against the spread of misinformation, and simultaneously increases the public's trust (Harrison, 2020). In addition, the full byline of a journalist indicates that the article is the intellectual work of a professional who stands behind the written words on a topic they have researched, interpreted, and presented to their audience. Although this category—the author of the article—was not explicitly considered in the initial phase of the research, it emerged during the analysis as a relevant and important aspect, particularly in relation to the tone of discourse about the EP/EU and the manner in which the article's byline is presented.

As shown in Table 4, only 256 out of the total number of analyzed texts ($N = 1{,}044$) were signed with the full name of the author/journalist.

Table 4. The number of texts from the aspect of the author's byline.

Author	Number of texts	%
Agency	381	36.40%
Named	256	24.62%
Unnamed	202	19.35%
Other media	139	13.31%
Initials	62	5.94%
PR text	4	0.38%
Grand Total	1,044	100.00%

The largest number of texts were agency news (N = 381), followed by unsigned texts (N = 202), news transferred from other media (N = 139), texts signed with the author's initials (N = 62), and four texts labeled as advertising content. This data can be broadly interpreted to indicate predominantly superficial reporting on the EP elections, which does not require the effort needed for analytical thinking and in-depth research on the topic, but rather relies on secondary sources (e.g., agencies or other media) to fill media space.

The significance of signing a newspaper article, especially when it contains criticism, is also highlighted by the fact that texts with anonymous authors, signed with initials, or where other media are listed as sources, had a negative tone towards the EU and its institutions in 49% of cases. In contrast, the percentage of negative tone in texts signed with the full name of the author was almost half as low—27%. This data confirms that the author's byline, in addition to authenticity and credibility, also carries a degree of authorship responsibility—anonymity can be abused to present unfounded criticism or misinformation, devoid of a sense of professional accountability.

4. Conclusion

Let us now return to the research question: "How did online media portals in Serbia report on the 2024 EP elections?" Based on the analysis conducted shortly before and after the 2024 EP elections (June 1–14), it can be concluded that Serbian citizens primarily followed the electoral process through neutral media texts, with a narrative predominantly shaped by politicians, focusing on how the EP elections would affect EU countries. This study aligns with previous findings that identified a predominantly neutral tone and factual style in EU-related media discourse (Pralica & Janjić, 2016). However, it is also noteworthy that around one-quarter of the texts had a negative discourse towards the EU and its institutions, as indicated by some previous studies (Drašković et al., 2016). A neutral tone of discourse consists of statements that do not convey value judgments, while a negative tone includes statements that express criticism or predominantly unfavorable attitudes toward the EU and the EP. Regarding the dominant sources of information, the results of the analysis confirm previous findings in which politicians were identified as significant creators of the narrative about EU institutions (Krstić, 2015; Milinkov et al., 2013; Pralica & Janjić, 2016), which led to a negative trend of almost complete exclusion of ordinary citizens' opinions on EU-related issues. Our study contributes a new perspective by focusing on online media portals during the EP elections, a dimension that has been largely overlooked in previous research, despite the fact that online media have become the primary source of political information for many citizens (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025, Serbia section). This approach captures the dynamics of contemporary digital political communication and allows for a more up-to-date understanding of media influence in the electoral context.

A separate study by the Ministry for European Integration (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2024), which analyzed media reporting on the EU and Serbia's European integration during a partially overlapping period, shows significantly different results. According to that analysis, the attitude towards EU topics was positive in as much as 44% of media publications and negative in only 3%. The significant difference can primarily be explained by the difference in the topics that were the focus of the analysis—the EU and European integration were the main subjects of the Ministry's research, while our focus was on the EP elections. Another important difference is that the Ministry's research included both electronic and print media, while our research focused on online media portals. This presents an opportunity for further research such as analyzing the reporting differences between traditional and online media. Additionally, based on the available data from the Ministry,

it can be seen that most of the media included in the research are those we recognize as "serious and ethically sensitive" media outlets. On the other hand, our sample included all media stored in the naslovi.net database, regardless of their ethical qualities, meaning that almost half of the analyzed online media were tabloids or outlets of low credibility. Another direction for future research could be a comparison of reporting methods in relation to the quality of the media—tabloid vs. reputable media.

Given the context in which the research was conducted—post-transition countries with unstable socio-political conditions—it is expected that the results of studies concerning the relationship with the EU may show contradictory outcomes, but with a clear tendency towards Euroscepticism. Accordingly, we believe that continuous monitoring of media reporting on EU institutions in Serbia, which includes a broader range of media (by type and editorial policy), would provide more precise insights into the dependence of EU discourse on current political, economic, and social factors. Additionally, it would offer a more accurate view of whether the media in Serbia assume the role of inhibitors or catalysts regarding Serbia's European path and European integration.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used in this study consist of media portal articles collected via the news aggregator naslovi.net. All materials were publicly available online at the time of the analysis.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used during the writing process for translation into English to improve clarity. However, the English language was thoroughly reviewed by a qualified English professor before submission of the final version. All content and analysis are the author's own, and no AI tools were used in these parts.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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