

Serbian audiences' news consumption and choosing sides in the Russia-Ukraine war

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Abstract

Public attitudes toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Serbia diverge sharply from broader European trends, with a majority of citizens siding with Russia. While Serbia's government officially supports Ukrainian territorial integrity, it has refrained from joining EU sanctions, reflecting a complex international position and a media landscape dominated by pro-Russian narratives. In this study, we use original survey data from an online sample of 2,027 respondents to examine how media trust, political orientations, and news consumption patterns shape both sides taken in the war and satisfaction with media reporting. Logistic regression analysis shows that trust in government-aligned pro-Russian media and support for the ruling party are the strongest predictors of siding with Russia. The same variables also explain satisfaction with news coverage of the war, suggesting a transfer of trust between media and message. Those with stronger anti-Western sentiment are more inclined to side with Russia and evaluate war reporting positively. However, the dominant media narratives also support this stance and reassure them of the validity of their worldview. Our findings point to a highly polarised and asymmetrically structured media and political environment, where partisan alignment and selective media trust strongly influence geopolitical perceptions and the views about the media. This research contributes to understanding how political loyalties and media systems influence public opinion in hybrid regimes during major international crises.

Keywords: audiences, media evaluation, news consumption, polarisation, Russia-Ukraine war

Introduction

Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, Serbia's official foreign policy has been a balancing act. On the one hand, the Serbian government expressed principled support for Ukrainian territorial integrity. On the other hand, it has been among the few European countries that have not joined the EU-wide sanctions on Russia. This conundrum stems from the long-standing portrayal of Russia as a friendly state and Serbia's main backer in the international political arena, with the Vladimir Putin-led country enjoying significant support among the Serbian public. In addition, the majority of mainstream media, often labelled as pro-regime, have predominantly reported in favour of Russia throughout the conflict. At the same time, some Serbian interests aligned with those of Ukraine. The Serbian government is inclined to support international law and policies opposing separatism and border changes, given its situation with Kosovo. Additionally, different financial and political stakes have led companies from Serbia to be included in the arms supply chain to Ukraine.¹

Domestically, competitive authoritarianism and illiberal democracy are terms often used to describe Serbia's current political system.² However, Serbian citizens have increasingly opposed the government ruled by the Serbian Progressive Party, especially since Aleksandar Vučić became president in 2017.³ The cases of politically motivated violence, corruption, and election fraud have sparked waves of mass protests against impunity and state capture, culminating in the longest and most massive 2024-2025 student protest, sparked by the fall of a canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad.⁴ Related to these increasingly antagonistic attitudes is the widespread distrust of the media.

We situate our research in a politically polarised environment to examine the nexus between political orientation and news audiences. While previous studies have mainly highlighted media content, people's perceptions and consumption patterns on war-related news remain underexplored. By focusing on such a divisive conflict as the Russia-Ukraine war, this paper aims not only to gain insight into how the public evaluates media coverage on this specific topic but also to explore how audiences' political preferences and demographic characteristics shape their news consumption habits and levels of satisfaction with news.

Literature review

Contemporary warfare is mediated,⁵ especially for people in countries that are not directly affected by the conflict. News on these distant, turbulent events primarily circulates via domestic and international media, which play a pivotal role in constructing public understanding of the conflict and are closely involved in reproducing dominant geopolitical narratives and interpretative frameworks.⁶

When it comes to war-related reporting, state authorities, due to their disproportionate communication power, often exercise significant influence on both traditional and digital media to control and shape

¹ Financial Times. 2025. [Russia calls out ally Serbia over arms supplies to Ukraine](#). *Financial Times*, 30 May 2025.

² Bieber, Florian. 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 34(3), 337–354.

Kapidžić, Damir. 2020. The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20(1), 1–17.

³ Spasojević, Dušan, and Jelena Lončar. 2023. Facing PPotests in Serbia: Patterns of new competitive authoritarianism. *Democratization* 30(7), 1380–1399.

⁴ Beširević, Katarina. 2025. "Nisi nadležan": How a student movement dictates political change in Serbia (2024/2025). *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(1), 30–38.

⁵ Cottle, Simon. 2006. *Mediatized conflict: Developments in media and conflict studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

⁶ Ojala, Markus, and Mervi Pantti. 2017. Naturalising the new cold war: The geopolitics of framing the Ukrainian conflict in four European newspapers. *Global Media and Communication* 13(1), 41–56.

the information flow.⁷ For this reason, research found that mainstream media dominantly follow the government's news agenda, conveying their viewpoints and frames while excluding the voices that oppose the official narrative.⁸

In times of war, media and politicians often use the frame of a friendly or enemy state, as it continues a larger discourse about international relations and correlates with the political-historical context of the country.⁹ Frames suggest specific interpretations and assessments of conflict events, making them understandable.¹⁰ They can shape audiences' perception and understanding of the conflict, and the more widespread, visible, and consistent they are, the bigger their influence is.¹¹

Media reports may shape the interest in conflict, knowledge of basic facts, understanding of conflict origin and cause, and evaluation of military actions, including their legitimacy.¹² However, the media explanations and frames do not influence people bluntly or directly. Instead, the framing results from the interaction of message content and the interpreter's social knowledge,¹³ which means that media messages are more likely to be accepted if coherent with preexisting attitudes and opinions. The judgment about relevant issues, including conflicts and war, is not based solely on media reports. It also relies on existing beliefs, values, previous knowledge, and experience, which all influence how people judge credibility and negotiate the meaning of concrete news.¹⁴

For these reasons, audiences' reception and interpretation of media frames have become much more complex, especially in the era of digital platforms and widespread distrust in news. In the contemporary hybrid media landscape, people can more easily access different narratives on the conflict, even those opposing the government's position. In that respect, social media have become a space for people of diverse generations who seek information outside the legacy media. At the same time, digital platforms are still a double-edged sword regarding news on wars. On the one hand, they enable civilians, soldiers, humanitarians, activists, and refugees to post from conflict zones, and some users may find platforms to be tools for widening viewpoints about conflict. On the other hand, platforms are used for war propaganda and mis- and disinformation campaigns, thus playing "more of an escalatory role"¹⁵ in the conflict. Additionally, platforms' opaque moderating policies can silence

⁷ Meyer, Christoph O. / Baden, Christian, and Marie-Soleil Frère. 2018. Navigating the complexities of media roles in conflict: The INFOCORE approach. *Media, War & Conflict* 11(1), 3–21.

⁸ Holešovský, Tomáš / Bartalosoová, Věra, and Jakub Ketman. 2024. *The Russia–Ukraine War on Czech screens: Television coverage and audience responses*, in *Media, Dissidence and the War in Ukraine*, edited by Bergman, Tabe, and Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman. London & New York: Routledge, 33–47; Seethaler, Josef, and Gabriele Melischek. 2013. 'Something has changed': *International relations and the media during and after the 'Cold War'*, in *The role of the mass media in hostile conflicts from World War I to the 'War on Terror'*, edited by Seethaler, Josef / Karmasin, Matthias / Melischek, Gabriele. and Rommy Wöhlert. Chicago: Intellect, University of Chicago Press, 181–200.

⁹ Nygren, Gunnar / Glowacki, Michal / Hök, Jöran / Kiria, Ilya / Orlova, Dariya, and Daria Taradai. 2018. Journalism in the crossfire: Media coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014. *Journalism Studies* 19(7), 1059–1078.

¹⁰ Entman, Robert M. 1993. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4), 51–58; Meyer / Baden, and Frère. 2018. Navigating the complexities of media roles in conflict.

¹¹ Meyer, Baden, and Frère, *Navigating the complexities*.

¹² Philo, Greg 2002. Television news and audience understanding of war, conflict and disaster. *Journalism Studies* 3(2), 173–186; Philo, Greg, and Mike Berry. 2011. *More bad news from Israel*. London: Pluto Press.

¹³ Ruigrok, Nel / van Atteveldt, Wouter, and Janet Takens. 2013. *Shifting frames in a deadlocked conflict: News coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, in *The role of the mass media in hostile conflicts from World War I to the 'War on Terror'*, edited by Seethaler, Josef / Karmasin, Matthias / Melischek, Gabriele, and Rommy Wöhlert. Chicago: Intellect, University of Chicago Press, 259–289.

¹⁴ Szostek, Joanna. 2018. Nothing is true? The credibility of news and conflicting narratives during "information war" in Ukraine. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23(1), 116–135.

¹⁵ Meyer / Baden, and Frère, *Navigating the complexities*.

some voices, which raises the question about the “role commercial platforms have in arbitrating information about geopolitical crises and international conflicts.”¹⁶

Trust in media is crucial to how audiences consume and interact with news offline and online. The concept often refers to a relationship between a news organisation and its audience based on the assumption that the organisation will perform its professional duty to benefit the audience.¹⁷ Recently, there have been attempts to differentiate between *general trust in news and trust in specific media brands*.¹⁸ Previous research indicates that trust in news in general is positively associated with interest in news, political interest, interpersonal trust, and exposure to television news and newspapers. In contrast, education level and online news exposure were negatively correlated, while a low level of trust is associated with using non-mainstream news sources, such as social media and digital-born outlets.¹⁹

As for trust in specific media brands, studies indicate that it influences the selection of news outlets (citizens are more likely to use the media they trust) and outline it as a necessary precondition for the news media to have effects.²⁰ It is also associated with aligning editorial policy with citizens’ attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of media impartiality.²¹

Moreover, trust in the news media sphere is part of a larger trust nexus, which is connected with people’s perception of other public institutions, particularly political ones.²² Thus, it is closely related to confidence in democracy and its institutions. For that reason, trust in news organisations and political institutions “seems to be connected in an upward spiral in some countries, and a downward spiral in others”.²³ This is especially true for new democracies, such as those born out of previous communist regimes in Eastern Europe, where distrust in news media is still pervasive. Research, especially in illiberal public spheres, suggests that a lack of trust in media pushes people to challenge biased and unreliable news reporting,²⁴ who consider it their responsibility to “put the puzzle together from ideologically diverse and conflicting pieces of information”.²⁵

Existing research primarily focuses on media content when exploring public communication about international conflicts. However, rare attempts to shed light on audience habits, reception, and the relationship between consumed news and understanding of conflict provide some initial insights into

¹⁶ Robinson, Jessica Yarin. 2024. *The moderated war in Ukraine: Twitter, Elon Musk, and the role of private platforms in war coverage*, in *Media, dissidence and the war in Ukraine*, edited by Bergman, Tabe, and Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman. London & New York: Routledge, 76–98.

¹⁷ Hanitzsch, Thomas / Van Dalen, Arjen, and Nina Steindl. 2018. Caught in the nexus: A comparative and longitudinal analysis of public trust in the press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23(1), 3–23; Fletcher, Richard / Andl, Simge / Badrinathan, Sumitra / Eddy, Kirsten A. / Kalogeropoulos, Antonis / Mont’Alverne, Camila / Robertson, Craig T. / Ross Arguedas, Amy / Schulz, Anne / Toff, Benjamin and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2024. The link between changing news use and trust: Longitudinal analysis of 46 countries. *Journal of Communication* 75(1), 1–15.

¹⁸ Strömbäck, Jesper / Tsfati, Yariv / Boomgaarden, Hajo / Damstra, Alys / Lindgren, Elina / Vliegthart, Rens, and Torun Lindholm. 2020. News media trust and its impact on media use: Toward a framework for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44(2), 139–156.

¹⁹ Fletcher, Andl, Badrinathan, and Kirsten. *The link between changing news use and trust*.

²⁰ Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl, *Caught in the nexus*; Štětka, Václav, and Sabina Mihelj. 2024. *The illiberal public sphere: Media in polarised societies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

²¹ Štětka, and Mihelj, *The illiberal public sphere*; Tóth, Fanni / Mihelj, Sabina / Štětka, Václav, and Katherine Kondor. 2023. A media repertoires approach to selective exposure: News consumption and political polarisation in Eastern Europe. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 28(4), 884–908.

²² Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl, *Caught in the nexus*.

²³ Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl, *Caught in the nexus*, 17.

²⁴ Markov, Čedomir, and Young Min. 2020. The origins of media trust in a young democracy. *Communication & Society* 33(3), 67–84.

²⁵ Vihalemm, Triin, and Jānis Juzefovičs. 2023. ‘They say we are all zombies’: Rethinking the role of audiences in a mediated international conflict. *Global Media and Communication* 19(1), 3–28.

how audiences deal with war news.²⁶ A recent study suggests there are, except for apolitical citizens who mostly avoid the news in geopolitical turbulence, two types of audiences: partisan and dynamic.²⁷ Partisan audiences are “loyal and stable in their sympathy for one of the adversaries in the conflict,”²⁸ which is visible in how they compose their media repertoires, avoiding information that conflicts with their ideological position. For that reason, they are also more likely to accept and align themselves with one-sided perspectives. On the contrary, dynamic audiences seek pluralism and compose their own media menu from diverse information and news sources.²⁹

Context

The democratic backsliding of Serbia began in 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) rose to power and “started concentrating power in the executive branch.”³⁰ Since then, frequent, albeit unfair, elections enabled the party, embodied in the president’s figure, Aleksandar Vučić, to exercise its dominance by capturing key state institutions.³¹ Simultaneously, this period “marked the beginning of the atomisation phase for opposition parties.”³² The inability to enact political change through the institutional framework, in tandem with the regime’s reliance on corruption and violence, led to several waves of citizens’ protests. Their demands primarily revolved around the criminal prosecution and resignation of some of the highest members of the office, deepening the divide between the ruling party and the opposition forces. Thus, the contours of the polarisation in Serbia do not reflect the left-right antagonism dominant in other parts of the world, but follow the lines of pro- or anti-regime attitudes.³³

Upon the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Serbian SNS-dominated government, balancing between the West and the East, expressed principled support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity but was one of the few countries that did not join in imposing the EU sanctions on Russia.³⁴ This ambiguity is characteristic of contemporary Serbian foreign policy that uses a hedging strategy and tries to balance among ‘four pillars’ – the USA, EU, Russia, and China.³⁵

Serbia has long and complex relations with all important international factors involved in the Ukraine war, which is reflected in its geopolitical approach and public opinion. Due to NATO’s support for Ukraine, this military alliance is often presented by Russia as its major opponent in this conflict. This narrative has become widely accepted in Serbia, where public opinion research indicates that more

²⁶ Holešovský, Bartalosoová, and Ketman, *The Russia–Ukraine War*; Lynch, Jake / McGoldrick, Annabel and James Heathers. 2015. Psychophysiological audience responses to war journalism and peace journalism. *Global Media and Communication* 11(3), 201–217; Philo, *Television news and audience*; Szostek, *Nothing is true?*; Vihalemm, Triin, and Jānis Juzefovičs. 2020. Navigating conflicts through the media: The sceptical and self-responsible repertoires of Baltic Russian-speakers. *East European Politics and Societies* 36(2), 423–445.

²⁷ Vihalemm, and Juzefovičs, *Navigating conflicts*.

²⁸ Vihalemm, and Juzefovičs, *Navigating conflicts*, 17.

²⁹ Vihalemm, and Juzefovičs, *Navigating conflicts*, 17–18.

³⁰ Ilić, Vujo. 2022. Parliamentary and election boycotts in hybrid regimes: Evidence from Southeastern Europe. *Serbian Political Thought* 78(4), 197–217.

³¹ Ilić, Vujo, and Gazela Pudar Draško. 2022. Elections in Serbia: The return of the opposition? *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 9(2), 1–14.

³² Fiket, Irena, and Dušan Spasojević. 2023. *Opposition in Serbia: Oppression, delegitimisation and extra-institutional engagement*, in *The legal and political conditions of opposition parties in Central and Eastern Europe. An overview*, edited by Baldin, Serena, and Angela Di Gregorio. Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 205–226, 217.

³³ Fiket, Irena / Pudar Draško, Gazela, and Milan Urošević. 2022. Anti-politics as ‘culture of rejection’: The case of Serbia. *Patterns of Prejudice* 56(4–5), 279–296.

³⁴ Vuksanovic, Vuk. 2025. *Serbia’s balancing act: Between Russia and the West*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

³⁵ Nedeljković, Stevan, and Marko Dašić. 2024. *Strategic environment and national interest: The impact of the war in Ukraine on Serbia’s national interests*, in *National interest(s) in world politics*, edited by Đukanović, Dragan / Mišić, Saša, and Nikola Jović. Belgrade: University of Belgrade, 445–468.

than two-thirds of Serbian citizens see NATO as the main culprit for the war.³⁶ The perception is in line with negative sentiment towards the alliance caused by the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Russia, on the other hand, historically has a perception of a friendly state on which Serbia relies for energy supply and support in the international arena, particularly in the United Nations Security Council. These long-lasting master frames of foes and friends have been visible in public opinion research at the beginning of the war, which showed that at that moment, the majority of citizens thought that NATO, the USA, and the EU had more negative roles in the Ukraine war than Russia³⁷ with around 66% expressing a preference for Russia's side in the conflict.³⁸

Given this context, the Serbian public responded to the war in Ukraine differently from most European countries. Unlike the dominant views favouring sanctioning Russia and supporting Ukraine in the EU, the Serbian public opposed these measures (Figure 1). Eurobarometer data shows that in early 2023, around the first anniversary of the beginning of the war, only 29% of Serbian citizens agreed with imposing economic sanctions on the Russian government, companies, and individuals, and 27% agreed with financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine.³⁹

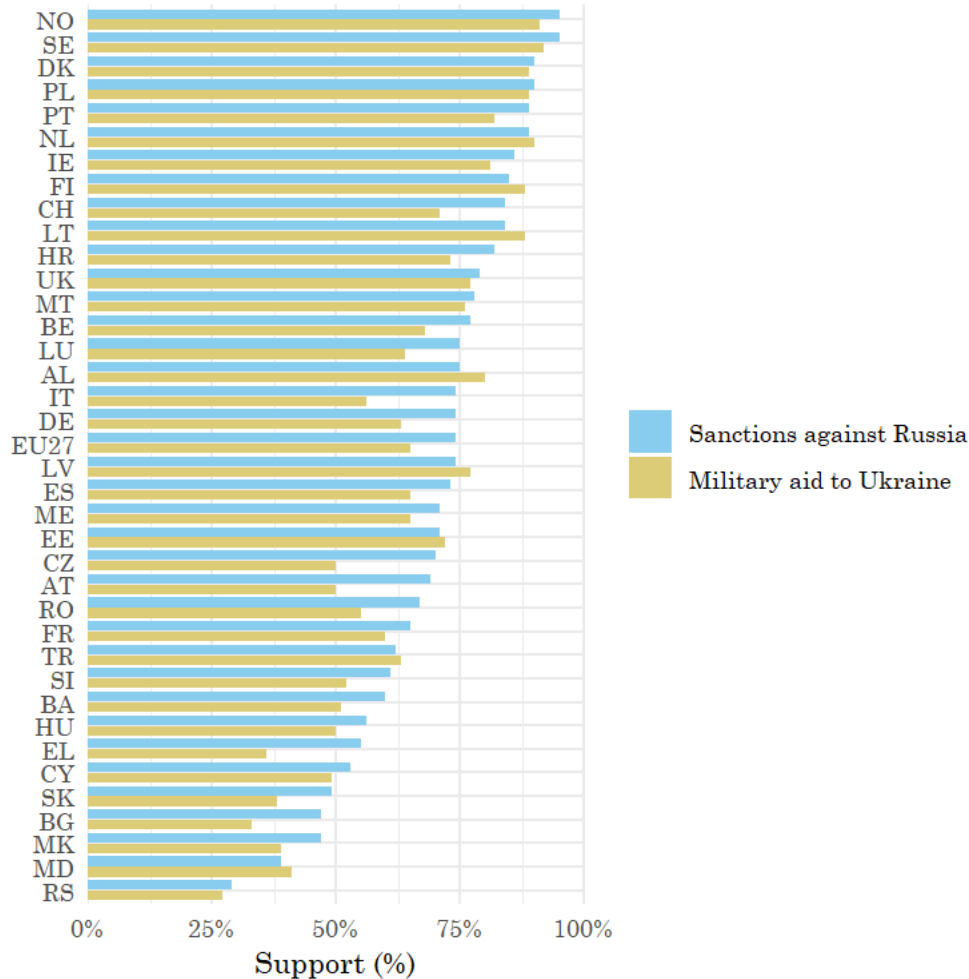
³⁶ Trailović, Dragan, and Stevan Rapaić. 2023. Odnosi Srbije i Rusije u periodu ukrajinske krize. *Nacionalni interes* 19(465), 67–91; CRTA. *Praćenje dezinformacija i propagande o stranom uticaju u Srbiji: Studija slučaja – Izveštavanje srpskih medija pred početak rata u Ukrajini* (accessed: 4 April 2025).

³⁷ Trailović, and Rapaić, *Odnosi Srbije i Rusije*.

³⁸ Ilić, Vujo, and Darko Stojilović. 2022. *Democracy on the Margin of the War*. Opinion poll, May 2022. Belgrade: CRTA.

³⁹ European Commission. *Standard Eurobarometer 98: Winter 2022–2023* (accessed: April 4 2025).

Figure 1: Support for EU measures regarding the war in Ukraine



Source: European Commission. *Standard Eurobarometer 98: Winter 2022–2023* (accessed: 4 April 2025).

Although Serbia's official policy has been driven by two contradictory endeavours – neither to begrudge the EU nor Russia – many mainstream, pro-regime media accepted Russia's strategic framing.⁴⁰ National broadcast television channels Pink and Happy, and tabloid daily newspapers Informer and Večernje novosti were at the forefront of promoting these narratives. These media sources sought to justify the Russian invasion by claiming that Ukraine had initiated the conflict, portraying Russia as defending itself against a Ukrainian "Nazi regime," and framing the invasion as a response to an alleged "genocide" in Donbas.⁴¹ Throughout the war, media narratives critical of the West and supportive of Russia persisted. The United States was accused of operating biolabs in Ukraine, allegedly designed to target Russians, while Ukraine was portrayed as fabricating Russian war crimes and civilian casualties. Additionally, sanctions against Russia were depicted as causing more harm to EU citizens than to Russia itself.⁴²

⁴⁰ Vučić, Marija / Ljubičić, Milica, and Vesna Radojević. *Analiza 4.000 tekstova domaćih medija o ratu u Ukrajini: Dominacija proruskog narativa* (accessed 11 April 2025).

⁴¹ CRTA. *Praćenje dezinformacija i propagande o stranom uticaju u Srbiji: Studija slučaja – Izveštavanje srpskih medija pred početak rata u Ukrajini* (accessed: 4 April 2025).

⁴² CRTA. *Nothing is true, and everything is possible.*

In general, pro-Russian media are recognisable through several thematic narratives: promotion of the Russian version of the international situation, discreditation of the Western cooperation structures (NATO, the EU), representation of Russia as Serbia's closest ally, emphasizing common aspects of Serbian and Russian history and providing "constant reminders of the disputes, the conflict victims, and the real and imaginary damages suffered by Serbs and inflicted on them by their neighbours".⁴³

Balanced or pro-Ukrainian frames could only be found on a pair of cable news channels (N1 and Nova S) and dailies (Danas and Nova), all under the umbrella of the United Media Group conglomerate, who are perceived as critical and anti-regime.⁴⁴

Finally, it should be noted that, unlike many other countries, there is a presence of Russian state media that publishes content in the Serbian language (Sputnik, Russia Today). However, these outlets do not attract a large audience and are not included in our research.⁴⁵

The divisions along pro- and anti-regime lines in Serbia result in a widespread distrust in news outlets and their reporting among Serbian citizens.⁴⁶ The alarming influence polarisation and distrust have over citizens' media habits is suggested by Jakšić and colleagues, who claimed that "media variables are the most powerful predictors of party bloc preferences".⁴⁷ This is reflected in audiences' news repertoires – nearly half the population only watches and reads media brands belonging to one ideologically and politically homogenous group, with more than 40% consuming the closed conservative pro-government news media repertoire.⁴⁸

The split does not only revolve around media brands, but also media types. Television stands out as the main news source among those who favour the ruling party, while those aligned with the opposition find relevant information on social media and websites of mainstream media.⁴⁹ Serbian citizens use social networks as sources of news more than citizens of any other country included in the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2022 global study,⁵⁰ which aligns with the finding that "a deficit of democracy leads people to use social media".⁵¹ This can be explained by the fact that the oppositional actors, civil sector organizations, and alternative news media (all marginalized by mainstream media) use platforms as a crucial channel for disseminating their opinion, analysis, and investigative news pieces. However, the digital sphere is far from a democratic space. It is highly contaminated by disinformation and computational propaganda, especially during periods of heightened social tension, such as the pre-election period. On these occasions, the activities of bot networks intensify and target social media and local news media with the aim "to create a perception of widespread and authentic grassroots support for Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive party."⁵²

⁴³ Yalamov, Todor. 2018. *Russian influence, trust in media and media capture*, in *The Russian economic grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Shentov, Ognian / Stefanov, Ruslan, and Martin, Vladimirov. London: Routledge, 43–65, 56.

⁴⁴ Jakšić, Ivana / Gajić, Đorđe and Nikola Vlajnić. 2024. How partisan media exposure shaped party evaluations in the 2023 elections in Serbia. *Politički život: časopis za analizu politike* 26, 49–79.

⁴⁵ Kleut, Jelena / Ninković Slavnić, Danka / Ilić, Vujo and Igor Ispanović. *Report on digital news in Serbia* (accessed: April 11 2025), 23.

⁴⁶ Kleut, Niković Slavnić, Ilić, and Ispanović, *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

⁴⁷ Jakšić, Gajić, and Vlajnić. *How partisan media exposure shaped party evaluations*, 69.

⁴⁸ Tóth, Fanni / Mihelj, Sabina / Štětka, Václav, and Katherine Kondor. 2023. A media repertoires approach to selective exposure: News consumption and political polarisation in Eastern Europe. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 28(4), 884–908.

⁴⁹ Kleut, Niković Slavnić, Ilić, and Ispanović, *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

⁵⁰ Kleut, Niković Slavnić, Ilić, and Ispanović, *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

⁵¹ Petrović, Dalibor, and Miloš Bešić. 2019. Political informing through social media across Europe – factors and effects. *Sociologija* 61(4), 565–584.

⁵² Nimmo, Ben / Franklin, Margarita / Agranovich, David / Hundley, Lindsay, and Nike Torrey. *Quarterly adversarial threat report* (accessed: 29 October 2025).

Data and method

The data was collected through a Kantar Serbia – TMG Insights survey using the Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method. The sample consisted of 2,027 respondents selected from an online panel, who individually completed the survey between October 21 and November 2, 2022. The average time required to complete the survey was 25 minutes.

The survey was designed to align with the Reuters Institute's global study, Digital News Report. The core questionnaire from 2022 was used, supplemented with questions from previous years and the supplementary research on the war in Ukraine.

A quota sampling method was employed to ensure representation of the adult population of Serbia, reflecting key socio-demographic characteristics based on the latest estimates from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.⁵³ Respondents were selected based on predefined demographic criteria, including gender, age, and region. The response rate was 68%. The collected data were weighted according to gender, age, and region.

As the survey was administered online, all respondents had at least a basic level of internet proficiency. Consequently, the findings in this report more accurately reflect the behaviours and preferences of internet users rather than the entire Serbian population. However, according to statistical data for 2022, 89.4% of Serbian citizens used the internet, while 95.5% used mobile phones.⁵⁴

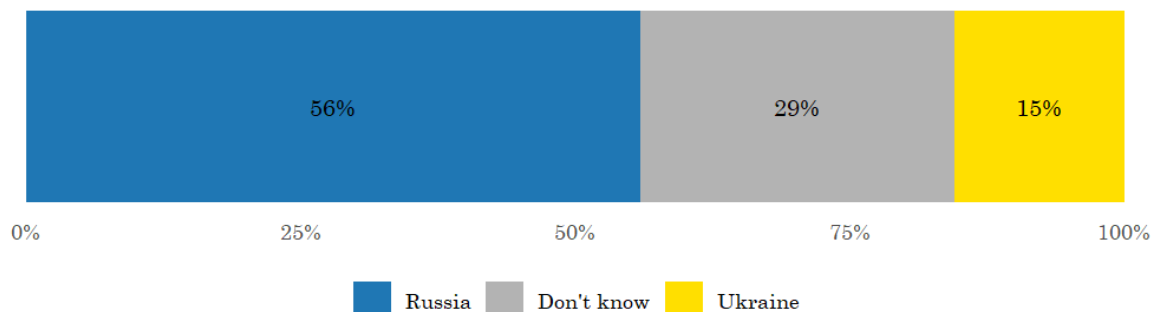
The Serbian audience followed the Russia-Ukraine conflict and relied on online and traditional news sources. Only 12% responded that they did not follow the news about the war at all. Out of those that followed the news, more or less closely, 60% paid most attention to online news sources (online news, online television and radio, online alternative sources, online foreign media with Serbian editions) and 37% paid most attention to traditional news sources (television, print, radio).

The survey also showed that the majority (56%) of citizens support Russia's position in the war. The smaller part of the population (15%) sided with the Ukrainians, while the rest did not take a position (Figure 2). Although the question in our research had slightly different wording than other surveys asking about the orientation towards the side in the war, the findings were mostly coherent.

Figure 2: Serbian citizens' position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Whose position are you more aligned with in this armed conflict?

N = 2027



Source: Kleut, Ninković Slavnić, Ilić, and Išpanović, *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

⁵³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. *Usage of information and communication technologies in the Republic of Serbia, 2022* (accessed 11 April 2025).

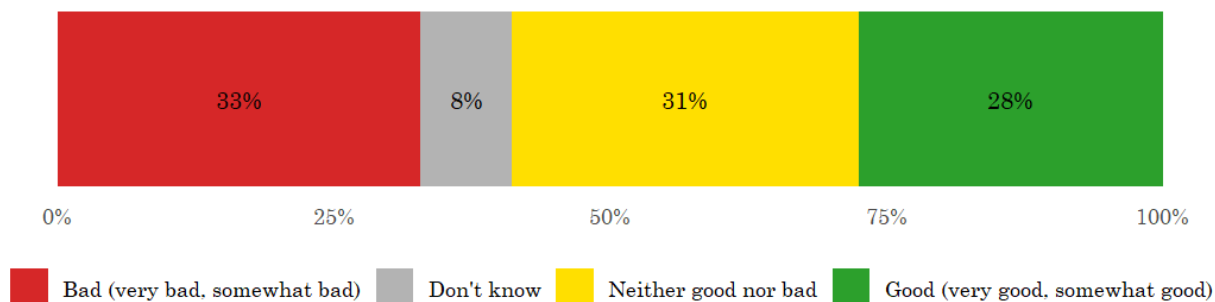
⁵⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. *Usage of information and communication technologies*.

The audience was very divided when evaluating media reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As Figure 3 shows, the respondents were divided in roughly equal parts between those who thought the news media were doing a good job, a bad job, or neither a good nor a bad job in explaining the wider implications of the conflict. Additionally, the respondents gave similar answers to the other two questions about news media satisfaction – how it kept them up to date, and provided a range of different perspectives on the conflict.

Figure 3: Serbian citizens' evaluation of media reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Do you think the news media in Serbia have done a good or bad job in explaining the wider implications of the conflict?

N = 2027



Source: Kleut, Niković Slavnić, Ilić, and Išpanović, *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

Given the theoretical framework and the context of Serbia, we explored the relations between news consumption habits and choosing sides in the Russia-Ukraine war. First, regarding taking sides in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, in the politically polarised environment of Serbia, we expected the support for the government to be positively associated with siding with Russia. Similarly, in the media environment of Serbia, we expected trust in government-aligned pro-Russian media outlets and reliance on traditional media to be positively associated with siding with Russia. Additionally, since trust in news, in general, is positively associated with the consumption of television and newspapers,⁵⁵ and in the Serbian context, national TV stations and tabloid newspapers are the primary media vehicles of pro-Russian narratives, we expect general trust to be associated with siding with Russia. In the media environment that generally favours the Russian side, we expect those with more scepticism towards news media to show greater resistance to the information they receive.

The other dimension we explored is the evaluation of media reporting about the war. We assumed that the more supportive the audience is of the government, the more trust it has in the government-aligned pro-Russian media and in media in general, the more it uses traditional media, and the more it sides with the Russian side in the war, the more satisfied they would be with the quality of news.

Analysis

Two logistic regression models were employed to examine our two research questions. The first model (Model 1) analyses the likelihood of siding with Russia as opposed to Ukraine or being undecided. The second model (Model 2) examines satisfaction with media reporting on the war in Ukraine compared to dissatisfaction or being undecided.⁵⁶ Logistic regression was selected as the appropriate statistical

⁵⁵ Fletcher, Andl, Badrinathan, and Kirsten, *The link between changing news use and trust*.

⁵⁶ In this part of the analysis, we decided to merge support for Ukraine and the undecided into a single category, due to the small number of respondents in the former group, as well as dissatisfaction with reporting with being undecided for the simplicity of interpretation.

method due to its suitability for binary classification problems. Unlike linear regression, which models continuous outcomes, logistic regression estimates the probability of an observation belonging to one of two categories.

The analysis included 1,216 observations for Model 1 and 1,187 for Model 2. Both models were statistically significant ($p < .001$). The overall classification accuracy was reasonably high, 79% for Model 1 and 75% for Model 2. The models demonstrated good fit based on the Hosmer-Lemeshow test results: Model 1 ($\chi^2 = 7.5$, $df = 8$, $p = .49$) and Model 2 ($\chi^2 = 4.6$, $df = 8$, $p = .80$). However, the explanatory power was modest, with Nagelkerke R^2 values of 0.18 for Model 1 and 0.32 for Model 2. The data used in the models was not weighted.

Sides in the war

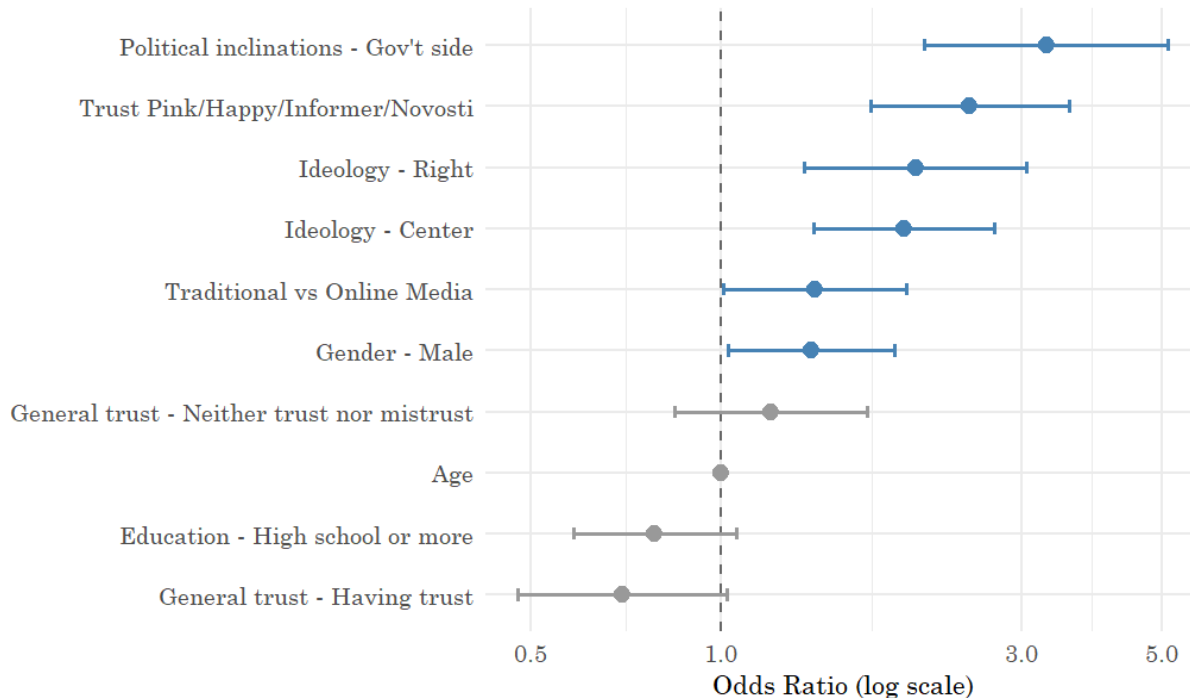
Model 1 explores the likelihood of siding with Russia compared to siding with Ukraine or being undecided as the dependent variable. Three groups of independent variables were included in the model. In the first group are media variables: preference for traditional versus online media, general trust in news, and trust in specific government-aligned pro-Russian media outlets (Pink, Happy, Informer, Večernje novosti). The second group is political factors: left-right ideological identification and political inclination toward government or opposition parties. Finally, we included standard socio-demographic variables: gender, age, and education.

The findings of Model 1 are presented in Figure 4 (point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios) and in Table 1 (coefficients with standard errors, odds ratios, and statistical significance). Concerning the media, respondents who trust the four pro-Russian media outlets had 2.48 times higher odds of siding with Russia compared to those who do not trust these media, controlling for other factors. Those who rely on traditional media for information about the conflict had 1.41 times higher odds of siding with Russia than those using online media. Having general trust in the media appeared to reduce the odds of siding with Russia compared to not having trust, but this effect was not statistically significant.

Political affiliation also significantly influenced the odds of siding with Russia. Respondents inclined toward government parties had 3.28 times higher odds of siding with Russia than those supporting the opposition or neither, controlling for other factors. Right-wing identifiers had 2.03 times, and centre identifiers 1.95 times, higher odds of siding with Russia than left-wing respondents.

Among socio-demographic variables, only gender was significant, with men having 1.39 times higher odds of siding with Russia than women. Age and education did not significantly contribute to this model.

Figure 4: Model 1 – Taking sides in the war



Source: Authors' analysis of survey data-

Table 1: Model 1 – Taking sides in the war

	Coefficient (SE)	Odds ratio	Significance
Traditional or online media (reference: online media)	0.34 (0.17)	1.41	0.045
General trust in news (reference: no trust)			
General trust in news - neither trust nor mistrust	0.18 (0.18)	1.2	0.312
General trust in news - having trust	-0.36 (0.19)	0.7	0.062
Trust Pink, Happy, Informer, or Novosti (reference: no trust & neither)	0.91 (0.19)	2.5	<0.001
Political inclinations (reference: opposition & neither)	1.19 (0.23)	3.28	<0.001
Ideological identification (reference: left)			<0.001
Ideological identification - center	0.67 (0.17)	1.95	<0.001
Ideological identification - right	0.71 (0.2)	2.03	0.001
Gender (reference: female)	0.33 (0.15)	1.39	0.034
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	1	0.797
Education (reference: primary & middle)	-0.24 (0.15)	0.79	0.111
Constant	0.18 (0.32)		0.577

Source: Authors' analysis of survey data.

Satisfaction with the war reporting

Model 2 contrasts satisfaction with dissatisfaction (or uncertainty) about the war reporting. More specifically, it explores the likelihood of respondents perceiving that the media in Serbia have done a

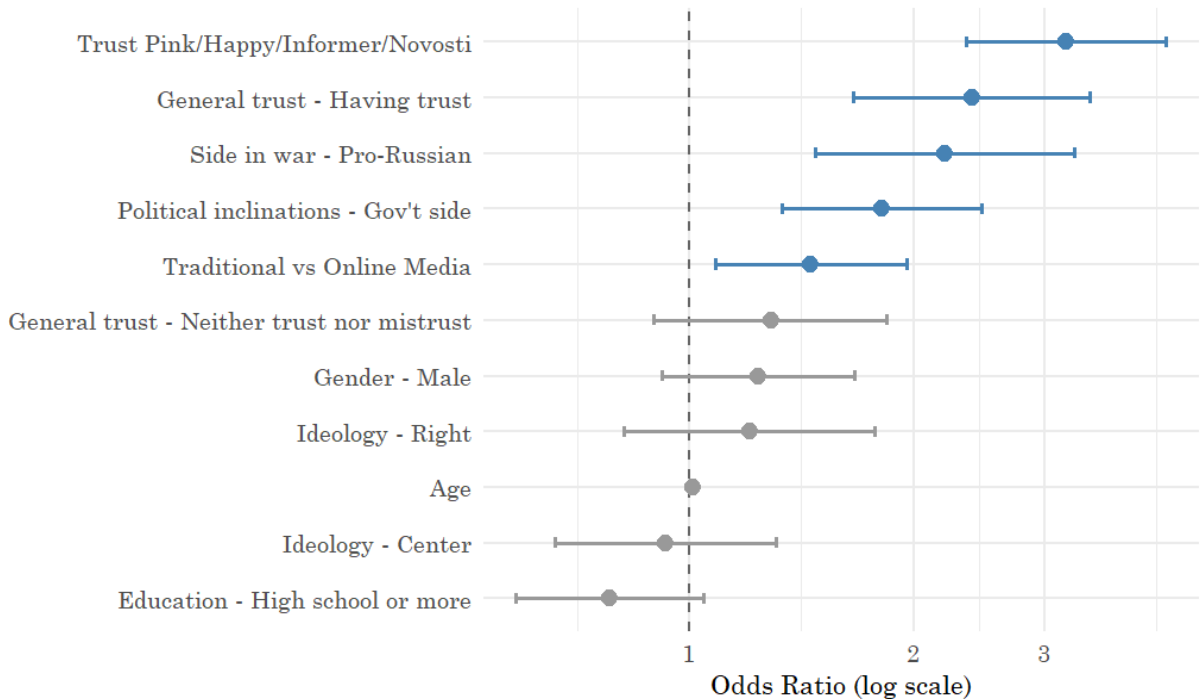
good job explaining the broader implications of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, compared to those who do not think so, or are undecided.

The independent variables included the same media variables as in Model 1: general trust in news, trust in pro-Russian outlets, and traditional versus online media use. We added siding with Russia from the previous model to the other political variables (inclination to government or opposition, and ideological identification). Finally, we kept the same socio-demographic variables in the model (age, gender, and education). The main results of Model 2 are presented in Figure 5 and Table 2, following the same pattern as with Model 1.

Media consumption patterns heavily influenced the odds of satisfaction with reporting about the war in Ukraine, compared to dissatisfaction or being undecided. Trust in pro-Russian media was associated with 3.21 times higher odds of being satisfied with war reporting than those who do not trust these outlets, controlling for other factors. Those using traditional media had 1.45 times higher odds of being satisfied with war reporting than online media users. Unlike in the previous model, general trust in news was positively associated with satisfaction; those who trust news had 2.39 times higher odds of being satisfied with war reporting than those who do not trust them.

Political affiliation also influenced perceptions. Respondents who sided with Russia had 2.2 times higher odds of being satisfied with war reporting, controlling for other factors. Those inclined toward government parties had 1.81 times higher odds of being satisfied than opposition supporters or the undecided. Ideological identification did not significantly contribute to the model. Socio-demographic factors (age, gender, education) were also not significant predictors of satisfaction.

Figure 5: Model 2 – Satisfaction with war reporting



Source: Authors' analysis of survey data.

Table 2: Model 2 – Reporting about the war

	Coefficient (SE)	Odds ratio	Significance
Traditional or online media (reference: online media)	0.37 (0.15)	1.45	0.013
General trust in news (reference: no trust)			
General trust in news - neither trust nor mistrust	0.25 (0.18)	1.29	0.171
General trust in news - having trust	0.87 (0.19)	2.39	<0.001
Trust Pink, Happy, Informer, or Novosti (reference: no trust & neither)	1.17 (0.16)	3.21	<0.001
Side in war (reference: Ukrainian)	0.79 (0.20)	2.2	<0.001
Political inclinations (reference: opposition & neither)	0.59 (0.16)	1.81	<0.001
Ideological identification (reference: left)			
Ideological identification - center	-0.07 (0.17)	0.93	0.674
Ideological identification - right	0.19 (0.20)	1.2	0.346
Gender (reference: female)	0.21 (0.15)	1.24	0.160
Age	0.01 (0.01)	1.01	0.123
Education (reference: primary & middle)	-0.25 (0.15)	0.78	0.094
Constant	-3.08 (0.37)	0.05	<0.001

Source: Authors' analysis of survey data.

Discussion

The variable with the highest explanatory power of siding with the Russian position is political identification with the ruling party. The findings suggest that political inclination is more relevant than ideological identification when taking sides in this war. The ideological categorisation in the left-right spectrum does not resonate with the population in Serbia in such a clear and firm manner as political orientation. However, since the ruling party's supporters are ideologically closer to the right/centre position, the ideology is also a relevant predictor for attitudes towards war.

Although Serbian officials made inconsistent political decisions trying to please both Russia and the EU, in public addresses, they often emphasised the importance of Russia (as a supporter of Serbian policy towards Kosovo and Republika Srpska, and a cheap gas provider), mutual understanding, and connections between the two countries. The narrative about the brotherhood of two Slavic people is widely spread and especially strong among the right-wing population. All this can help us understand why supporters of the ruling party and those who place themselves at the right or centre on the ideological spectrum are more likely to side with Russia.

Our research suggests that media consumption patterns correspond with political preferences, and that trust in specific government-aligned pro-Russian media, favouring the pro-Russian geopolitical frame, significantly increased the likelihood of siding with Russia. We assume that these media outlets attract partisan news audiences (as defined by Vihalemm and Juzefovičs)⁵⁷ with a strong anti-western ideological position, who then use media reports about the war to re-establish and fortify their position. The assumption is based on the findings that people who are pro-regime and position themselves right on the ideological spectrum are more inclined to prefer news with which they share viewpoints than

⁵⁷ Vihalemm, and Juzefovičs, *Navigating conflicts through the media*.

average citizens.⁵⁸ However, our findings indicate that it is not media use, but trust that makes an impact. The trust in specific media is associated with the correspondence of editorial policy with citizens' attitudes and beliefs.⁵⁹ Although the survey shows these four government-aligned pro-Russian media are not seen as trustworthy in general, people who trust them are inclined to accept their perspective on the Ukraine war. It makes sense if we know that right and pro-regime citizens are more likely to trust these media. This result is consistent with the findings pointing to an association between media consumption patterns and political alignment with the ruling party, a linkage that is especially strong in countries with an illiberal public sphere like Serbia.⁶⁰

The congruence that exists between media representations of conflicts,⁶¹ especially those with which people do not have direct experience, and knowledge, understanding, and attitudes towards them, is additionally enhanced if people trust these media. The similarity between perspectives offered by consumed media and people's attitudes is partly a result of selection bias, meaning that people follow and trust media that share their worldview, but it can also be partly a result of the framing effect, meaning that people adopt explanations of cause, moral evaluation, and consequences of events that trusted media publish. However, our research does not provide sufficient data to elaborate further on the relative importance of these processes and the direction of causality.

Although *general trust* has been in decline in recent years, most notably in countries with illiberal public spheres,⁶² our study indicates that some citizens, in a politically restricted or polarised environment, *trust specific media outlets*, especially those whose editorial policy aligns with their attitudes and values. We applied this distinction, between general and specific media trust, in our analysis. While trust in specific news media was relevant for both models and contributed to the understanding of siding with Russia and evaluating war-related reporting in a way we predicted, the general trust in the news was puzzling. Contrary to our expectations, general trust was not significant for explaining citizens taking sides with Russia, although it was, as we hypothesized, relevant for understanding the satisfaction with war-related reporting. In this instance, general trust in the news did not correlate with attitude toward one specific issue, such as the war in Ukraine. We assume this to be the case due to general trust being based on people's perception of the journalistic profession, media independence, and reporting approach to national politics. Therefore, there is no overlapping of attitudes towards media work and attitudes toward specific geopolitical issues, such as the war. Nevertheless, the general perception of the media, including trust in them, affects satisfaction with the reporting about the war in Ukraine. Here, we observe the connection between the general perception of media (including trust) and the perception of the quality of reporting about specific issues; therefore, people who generally trust the news are likely to be satisfied with war reporting.

In the state where public media are captured and most traditional media are government-aligned, social media are often used as a counter-sphere for expressing anti-regime or non-mainstream opinions. Thus, division in the consumption of traditional or online media (including social media) in

⁵⁸ Kleut, Jelena / Ninković Slavnić, Danka / Ilić, Vujo and Igor Išpanović. 2023. *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

⁵⁹ Štětka, Václav and Sabina Mihelj. 2024. *The illiberal public sphere*.

Tóth, Fanni / Mihelj, Sabina / Štětka, Václav and Katherine Kondor. 2023. A media repertoires approach to selective exposure

⁶⁰ Štětka, Václav and Sabina Mihelj. 2024. *The illiberal public sphere*; Jakšić, Gajić, and Vljajnić, *How partisan media exposure shaped party evaluations*.

⁶¹ Lynch, McGoldrick, and Heathers, *Psychophysiological audience responses to war*.

Philo, Greg 2002. Television News and Audience Understanding of War, Conflict and Disaster

Philo, Greg and Mike Berry. 2011. *More Bad News from Israel*. London: Pluto Press.

⁶² Štětka, Václav and Sabina Mihelj. 2024. *The illiberal public sphere*.

Serbia is not only a matter of generational cohorts but is also a consequence of media polarisation.⁶³ Not only is Serbia's media sphere polarised, but it is also "heavily asymmetrical" in its leaning towards the government, as the most influential anti-government, liberal, and pro-EU televisions (N1, Nova S) have limited access to offline audiences.⁶⁴ Consequently, media outlets reporting critically on the regime are more available and frequently used among online audiences. This polarisation is more or less observable in public discourse about all issues, and we found it to be a case for war in Ukraine. There is a higher chance of siding with Russia among traditional media audiences than among online media users.

The evaluation of media coverage of war can be roughly divided into three parts: one-third of people mark it as good, one as poor, and one as neither good nor bad. Those who are more satisfied with reporting differ from the rest in a few important aspects. There are higher odds among those siding with Russia, who trust in selected government-aligned pro-Russian media, who generally trust news, use more traditional media, and are oriented more towards the ruling party, to be satisfied with how Serbian media reported about the conflict.

These findings about satisfaction with media reporting and how they are interwoven with media consumption patterns, political preferences, and trust are coherent with existing knowledge about a highly asymmetrical, polarised society.⁶⁵ Broadly speaking, since most mainstream media are pro-regime, people who use and trust them are less critical of these interpretations and more inclined to find the reporting style satisfying. We assume that a transfer of satisfaction is taking place. Thus, people who are generally pleased with the media are more inclined to be satisfied with reporting about the war in Ukraine. It is reasonable to expect that people having a dominant conservative pro-government media repertoire will be satisfied when an important geopolitical topic, such as war, is covered in that manner.

In sum, our assumption that the support for the government, trust in government-aligned pro-Russian media outlets, and reliance on traditional media will be positively associated with siding with Russia proved correct. Contrary to our expectations, the general trust in news didn't play a significant role in people's alignment with Russia, although it did for the satisfaction with the way news media in Serbia reported about the Ukraine war. However, it is worth noting that our models give insight into the behaviours of people siding with Russia and satisfaction with media reporting. However, they do not help us understand the others – undecided, those who support Ukraine, or who are unsatisfied with news media reporting about the conflict. There are two reasons for this situation. First, our research goal was to explain why Serbia diverges from the rest of European countries regarding their attitudes towards war. The second is the fact that the behaviour of people with moderate or non-attitudes, or news sceptics, dynamic audiences, and people with open media repertoire is complex, full of contradiction and non-consistency, and demands to be put in the centre of the research design in order to grasp meaningful relations and findings.

Conclusion

The findings provide a consistent picture, with a similar set of variables being relevant for siding with Russia and satisfaction with media reporting. This is unsurprising considering Serbia is an asymmetrically polarised society with a highly divisive political and media sphere, and its position

⁶³ Kleut, Niković Slavnić, Ilić, and Išpanović, *Report on digital news in Serbia*.

⁶⁴ Štětka, and Mihelj, *The illiberal public sphere*, 64.

⁶⁵ Štětka, and Mihelj, *The illiberal public sphere*.

between East and West is vague. The duality and asymmetrical polarisation shape attitudes towards numerous political issues, including this one about the war in Ukraine.

The purpose of the paper was to shed light on why there are significant differences between Serbia and most European countries regarding public attitudes towards war in Ukraine, focusing on media habits and trust, and the population's socio-political and demographic characteristics. The research shows that the affiliation with the ruling regime, ideological inclination towards the right and centre, and trust in specific media that strongly favoured the Russian perspective, argumentation, and narrative about the conflict increases the likelihood for people to side with Russia. All this shows that not only are people with stronger anti-Western sentiment more inclined to side with Russia, but also that existing media narratives that support this stance reassure them of the validity of their worldview.

Disclosure Statement

This article was realised with the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realisation and financing of scientific research 451-03-136/2025-03/ 200025.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to the OSCE Mission in Serbia, which funded data collection. The first version of this article was presented at the conference “Bridges of Media Education”, held in Novi Sad, May 2023, where it received useful feedback. We are also grateful to Marija Branković and anonymous reviewers for valuable comments.

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