

((f)) Fake News and Disinformation

February 2022

SERBIAN TABLOIDS ON WAR IN UKRAINE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as expected, is the topic that has caused the most media attention in the past few weeks. The tabloid media in Serbia are no exception, in which the course of the war, since its beginning, on February 24, 2022, has been regularly broadcast on the front pages. What sets them apart from the leading media in Europe, however, are the openly supportive headlines in favour of Russia in the first days of the invasion, as well as the consistent interpretation that the West and Ukraine are to blame for the conflict.

Pro-Russian reporting in the largest tabloids in Serbia (*Informer*, *Alo*, *Srpski Telegraf*, *Kurir*, *Objektiv*, *Večernje Novosti*), which are also the most widely read print media in the country, has been a constant trend for years. According to available research, public opinion in Serbia is distinctly pro-Russian compared to the rest of the region, and Russian President Vladimir Putin was the most [popular foreign politician in 2021](#). Researchers attribute these results in part to tabloid reporting.

At the same time, these media have been strongly in favour of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party since it came to power in 2012, and are the source of a significant part of media attacks on the opposition and critics of the government. There are indications, such as ["data leaks"](#) from state institutions to tabloids, but also the fact that they are regular winners in state competitions, [which are considered politicized](#), that the ruling party has an influence on the editorial policy of these media.



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"Ukraine attacked Russia": On the eve of the conflict

One of the front pages of the tabloid *Informer*, which caused the most controversy, was published on February 22, 2022, two days before the Russian aggression. The main headline said "Ukraine invaded Russia", while the headline informed readers that "America is pushing the world into chaos". Only at the very bottom of the page was the news that was the main one in most of the world's media - that Russian President Vladimir Putin had announced the recognition of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk the night before.

"Ukraine attacked Russia yesterday! Russia's military has killed five Ukrainian soldiers trying to cross the border in two armoured vehicles. ... At the same time, Kiev launched a huge offensive on Donbass, targeting civilian targets, including schools and hospitals, but also the main water supply, electricity networks, and other infrastructure targets. ", the *Informer* reported in this issue.

This story was also mentioned in the BBC's report on the events the day before as an example of Russian disinformation.

"There is no evidence to suggest that any of these things happened, but officials are forced to deny any claim, no matter how absurd or unlikely," BBC correspondent Paul Adams wrote on February 21.

Towards the end of the article, the *Informer* also published brief information that the Ukrainian government denied the attacks on Russia and called the reports fabricated.

The first version of the front page of *Večernje Novosti*, another pro-government newspaper, from February 22, also published information about the murder of five Ukrainian soldiers. That information was removed from the printed version that was available in Belgrade that day, probably after it was marked as fake news.

A day later, on February 23, the front page of *Informer* reported that "Putin's check mate for Ukraine", and that, the day after Russia recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukrainians are decreasing tensions and "saying there will be no war."

A day later, military operations began with an attack by the Russian army on the entire territory of Ukraine from several directions.

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The first days of the war: Cheering for Russia's "blitzkrieg"

The first days of the war, especially February 25 and 26, were marked by headlines in an extremely supportive tone, in favour of Russia, which was predicted to win quickly.

"Even with tons of weapons, ammunition and equipment delivered by Western allies to Ukraine in just the last few weeks, the Ukrainian army has been overpowered by larger, more technologically advanced Russian forces that have launched multiple invasions, the New York Times writes." was republished by *Republika* from the website *Srpski telegraf*, in [the text](#) entitled "Russians tramples Ukraine like a shallow stream".

On Friday, February 25, the *Informer* published the following headline: "Putin's lightning strike - Russians came to Kiev in a day", informing readers that "all Ukrainian air defences were destroyed in a few hours", which was obviously false information, considering that Ukraine [continued](#) to use anti-aircraft defense systems in the coming days.

The front pages of the same day had a similar tone: "The awoken Bear is furious: the Russians overran Ukraine in a day," *Objektiv* reported, while *Alo* said that "Putin reached Kiev in a day" and that "A Russian hurricane hits Ukraine."

In the next two days, the tabloids reported that Ukraine was about to surrender, which also turned out to be incorrect.

"Russians in Kiev: Zelensky only choice: Capitulation" (*Objektiv*, February 26), "Russians in Kiev: Ukraine begs for mercy", "Putin tramples everything in front of him" (*Informer*, February 26), "Putin walks into Ukraine and dictates terms of negotiations" (*Alo*, February 26) - are some of the headlines in this tone.

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Estimates of the success of Russia's progress still differ depending on analysts, but one thing is certain - Russia's victory was not "lightning fast" nor is the Russian side, in the third week of the conflict, able to fully dictate the terms of negotiations.

At the time of publishing these titles, official Serbia had just formulated its position on the event, which it came out with on the evening of February 25, 36 hours after the war began, which was criticized by part of the public. The conclusions adopted by the National Security Council expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and indicated that its violation was "wrong", but also took the position that Serbia would not impose sanctions on Russia "at this time".

And over the next few days, pro-government tabloid reporting was markedly pro-Russian. On March 1, the Informer reported the Russian agency Sputnik, which quoted the statement of the Ministry of Defense of Russia that the Ukrainian army "massively uses ammunition filled with phosphorus, which is prohibited." This information was accompanied by the following headline: "UKRAINIANS CROSS THE THRESHOLD OF PUTIN'S TOLERANCE USING FORBIDDEN WEAPONS ?! If Moscow answers identically, it NOTHING WILL REMAIN (out of Ukraine)!"

Later, the Ukrainian official, [as reported](#) by the London Times, accused Russia of using the same weapon.

The tabloid *A/o*, on the other hand, published several impressive headlines against the West on its website, namely the European Union and the United States. Some of them were "THE TRUE FACE OF FASCISM: The West started an economic and political war aimed at the complete destruction of Russia's identity", from March 1., which stated that the West, through planned sanctions, decided to "stifle the only voice of human freedom".

Another headline, published the same day, read: "EMPIRE OF LIES" Here is how the West reports on the Ukrainian crisis - the dead wake up when the cameras go off, photomontage is new weapon! ". The trend of anti-Western reporting has already begun, which, despite changes in some other aspects of reporting, continues.

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A shift?

Serbia, together with 140 other countries, voted for a resolution at the session of the United Nations General Assembly on March 2, which unequivocally condemns Russian aggression, and as of this day, reporting on the war has received somewhat different tones. However, it is questionable whether we can talk about a complete reversal.

On the day of the vote, the ambassadors of the EU member states published the author's text in the tabloid *Kurir*, in which they called on Serbia to support this vote in the United Nations. At the same time, *Kurir* published an article on the front page of that issue condemning the "hypocrisy of the West" that bombed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 and now condemns Russian aggression.

After the adoption of the resolution, the *Informer's* website announced that it was asking Russia to suspend the "special operation", a term used by the Russian authorities for war. The very text of the UN resolution condemns Russia's aggression and asks it to stop "using force".

However, some commentators, such as Balkan expert [Florian Bieber](#), wondered if there was a turnaround in reporting when the same media called the Russian army "occupiers" in front of the city of Mariupol.

In the next two weeks, tabloid reporting really stopped to openly support Russia's aggression and took a more neutral stance towards the conflict, which the *Informer* called the "fratricidal war" on March 7, although the headlines remained sensationalistic. The focus is on the consequences that the war will have on the world and Serbia, with titles such as "New Chernobyl Threatened" (*Kurir*, March 5) and "Economic End of the World" (*Informer*, March 6).

The suffering of the population in Ukraine was also highlighted.

"A VIDEO THAT BREAKS THE HARDEST HEARTS!" A boy crosses the Ukrainian border: EXODUS, FAMILIES ARE DIVIDED!" published the portal *Republika* on March 9, in a text about a boy who crosses the Polish-Ukrainian border with his mother, fleeing the war.



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In the meantime, the *Informer's* website reported on March 10 that the situation in besieged Mariupol was dramatic, and that a large number of people had no food. A day later, the same media reported that "more than 954,000 Ukrainians do not currently have electricity due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine", qualifying Russia's military action much harsher than a week ago.

The exception is *Večernje Novosti*, a majority state-owned newspaper, which continues to portray the war as justified and emphasizes neo-Nazi elements in the Ukrainian army. Thus, on March 8, this paper printed a "historical supplement" about "two decades of indulgence for neo-Nazis in Ukraine." The withdrawal of the Ukrainian army was reported a few days earlier under the headline "Nazis are fleeing and destroying everything in front of them", while on March 13, an article from the *Pečat* newspaper entitled "Why Russia is right" was published.

Constant in reporting: The main culprit is the West

If a somewhat more neutral position has been taken towards the direct parties to the conflict since the beginning of March, all the tabloids have kept a clear message that the West is to blame for the conflict. This narrative builds on the long-standing trend of anti-Western reporting by these media.

On March 9, the *Republika* portal published the results of its poll, in which, as stated, over 2,000 people voted, answering the question "Who is to blame for the war in Ukraine?". The results were: 8.72% Ukraine; 9.58% Russia and 81.7% Western countries. These findings fit into the interpretation of the causes of the war in the pro-government tabloids.

The website of *Informer* announced on March 10 that "the report of the former US ambassador to Moscow from 2008, which was published by Wikileaks, shows that the US knew very well what consequences Ukraine's membership in NATO could cause." Warnings from Henry Kissinger, Noam Chomsky and American politician Tulsi Gabbard about provoking Russia by expanding NATO were also conveyed, along with headlines such as "Catastrophe on the Soul of the West".

Ukraine was not close to NATO membership at the time of the war. However, the member countries of the Alliance did not offer guarantees that that membership would never happen, which, among other things, Russia used to justify its aggression.

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Also on March 10, the *Informer* announced that "Americans are pushing Poland into war with Russia", due to disagreements over the delivery of MiG-29 fighter planes to Ukraine. This is how Washington's attitude towards Kiev was interpreted before the start of the war - to "push" it into the war against Russia.

Information reported in a number of media outlets also focused on alleged weapons - nuclear and biological - that Ukraine received from the United States with the intention of using it against Russia in the future. In this way, it was suggested that the West and Ukraine were responsible for the war, which was preventive.

"Ukraine once received plutonium of the required quality from abroad for the production of nuclear weapons, and there is reason to believe that this did not happen without the participation of the United States," said a representative of one of Russia's

competent departments" tabloid *Alo* published Sputnik's report on March 6.

Earlier, the same media reported that former Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, who held that position during the mandate of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, said that NATO planned to start World War III by using nuclear weapons against Russia, and Kiev would play a key role in its launch.

No concrete evidence in support of these claims was presented with the articles. *Večernje Novosti* also announced on March 6 that Ukraine was on its way to make atomic weapons in the near future, and that Russian agencies and media published extensive articles about it on Sunday, citing "one competent source".

On the same day, *Večernje Novosti* reported that the spokesman of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Igor Konashenkov, "explained that the Pentagon was seriously concerned after the start of the Russian operation to protect civilians in Donbas because of the possibility of disclosing secret biological experiments in Ukraine."

"We received documentation from the employees of the Ukrainian bio-laboratories on the urgent destruction of especially dangerous causes of plague, anthrax, tularemia, cholera and other deadly diseases on February 24." The documents are now being analysed by Russian experts from the corps of radiation, chemical and biological protection," Konashenkov said.

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A few days later, the newspaper *Alo* reported the allegations of the Russian Ministry of Defense about the UP-4 project, which was allegedly realized with the participation of laboratories in Kiev, Kharkov and Odessa with the aim of spreading pathogens with birds, which was conducted in cooperation with the United States.

According to the Russian military department, as reported by Serbian tabloids, the Americans have already managed to transfer most of the documentation on this and similar projects, including databases, biomaterials and equipment, to the Lviv Research Institute of Epidemiology and Hygiene and the US Consulate in Lviv with possibility that part of the collection will be moved to Poland. It was later announced that the details of the project were also on the website of the US Embassy in Ukraine, but that they were removed from there.

The BBC subsequently published [a text](#) stating that there was no evidence for any of these claims. On March 9, the Serbian daily *Politika* also published an article alleging that Ukraine was preparing biological weapons along with the United States, and that the United States had supported the reconstruction of Soviet laboratories since 1998. However, the article maintained that biological weapons "could" have been developed in these laboratories, and that this was definitely not the case.