

Regional Cohesion or Fragmentation? Media Narratives in the Western Balkans in Response to Russian Aggression

Donika Kamberi

This study explores media sentiment across the Western Balkans in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, tracing its historical, political, and geopolitical underpinnings. By conducting a sentiment analysis of 425 media articles published between February 2022 and December 2023, the research examines five key hypotheses related to national differences, domestic political climates, media bias, regional cohesion, and EU affiliation.

The findings reveal a clear divide: countries with closer historical and political ties to Russia, such as Serbia, exhibit a more neutral or even supportive media stance, whereas staunchly pro-European nations like Albania and North Macedonia strongly condemn Russia's actions. However, beyond national alignment, the study also highlights the profound influence of internal political dynamics, regional alliances, and media bias in shaping public discourse.

While common geopolitical challenges foster a moderated sense of regional cohesion in the Western Balkans,

Eastern Europe displays a sharper fragmentation, with polarized narratives reflecting diverse historical and political contexts. These insights underscore the intricate interplay between historical legacies, political orientations, and regional dynamics in shaping media portrayals of global conflicts.

Introduction

The Western Balkans has increasingly become a focal point for understanding the dynamics of media sentiment and its correlation with historical and political affiliations in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The discourses of media across countries reflect diverse narratives influenced by long-standing ties, geopolitical alignments, and domestic political climates. With its unique historic backdrop balancing the contemporary challenge of a global world, understanding the ways in which media represent the idea of Russian aggression can form the basis for some convincing analysis of public opinion and policy making.

By examining sentiment polarity across the Western Balkans, the research seeks to determine whether countries with strong historical and political ties to Russia tend to express more neutral or supportive sentiments, compared to those nations more aligned with European orientations.

It further investigates whether shared historical experiences or geopolitical alignments result in a unified regional media response, or if fragmentation prevails. These findings are crucial for understanding how historical relationships and political allegiances shape media discourse, providing deeper insight into public opinion and the nature of public discourse in the Western Balkans during a pivotal moment in global geopolitics.

This study is significant because such a scientific approach is needed to understand how historical ties, the political climate, or cohesion shapes the media sentiment about Russian aggression.

Furthermore, the paper investigates the cohesion or fragmentation of the regions through the question of whether shared historical experiences or geopolitical alignments result in a unified or fragmented media response. These findings are important for understanding how historical relationships and political allegiances shape media discourses and deepening an understanding of the nature of public discourse in the Western Balkans during a pivotal moment in global geopolitics.

Theoretical Framework

Media sentiment analysis provides valuable insights into how public opinion is shaped regarding critical geopolitical events, such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine. By examining the tone, language, and framing of media coverage, we can better understand the narratives that influence public perception and decision-making in response to these events.

Past studies emphasize the crucial role that media narratives play in shaping perceptions in regions with complex historical backgrounds and political affiliations. For instance, it has been argued that “media narratives of conflicts often reflect deep-seated political ideologies and historical relationships between nations, which, in turn, shape both national and regional opinions” (Entman, 2004). In analyzing media framing in news coverage of foreign conflicts, Tsfaty and Cohen (2019) found that media in countries with close historical ties to major powers, such as Russia, tend to remain more neutral or supportive.

Moreover, media framing acts as a powerful agency of insight and public opinion. As indicated by Tankard's 2001 study, the representation of war through either victimization, heroic, or aggressive frames affects public views where 72% of its researched audiences believe their

attitudes and insights are determined through the tone and framing set forth by news articles.

For instance, a study by Ladd 2012 indicated that media sentiment on global conflicts is often fragmented in countries with high political polarization, further polarizing the opinions of the general public. The media bias can also be influenced by environmental and contextual factors. A study by (McChesney 2004) showed that economic factors and ownership of media houses determine the framing of international events, where private owners are more likely to have a significant discrepancy in framing than state-subsidized media. These studies together form the importance of examining media narratives within the Western Balkans, a region where historical relationships with both Russia and the West create a unique and complex environment for media discourse during the ongoing Ukrainian conflict.

Methodology

This study employs a non-experimental, correlational research design to find the relationship between environmental factors and media sentiment toward Russian aggression in Ukraine across the Western Balkan countries. The non-experimental is most appropriate given the nature of data and the assessment of the

correlation between the variables using the sentiment analysis of media content.

The population of the study consists of all media articles published in each Western Balkan country between February 2022 and December 2023, with the outlet focusing on Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. A sample of 425 media articles was selected using a systematic random sampling technique to achieve variant viewpoints. The sample size is representative, with an appropriate distribution of articles across different media: state-funded, private-owned, and online news, in order to catch a wide range of sentiments and possible media biases.

The sample was chosen in such a way as to reflect the national and regional variations of sentiment. Articles were also further classified according to geopolitical context-pro-Russian, pro-European, or neutral-to examine how the sentiment varies across media outlets with different political orientations. The most prevalent age of coverage in the sample were stories that fell between 18–24 months into the Conflict-February 2022 - July 2023-while the largest number of articles analyzed fell between 25 and 30 months.

This sentiment analysis has been performed by applying text mining techniques, where the main indicators of

polarity will be negative, neutral, and positive to assess the tone of media discourse. The polarity scores for sentiments have been computed by using a software tool, and changes in these polarities were analyzed across countries, political alignment, and regional cohesion.

The results of this study are statistical analyses of sentiment scores across the different countries in the Western Balkans, each testing a series of hypotheses on cross-country variation in sentiment, domestic political climates, media bias, and regional cohesion versus fragmentation. This therefore helps the study to look deep into the complex interaction of historical ties, political orientations, and regional dynamics in setting the media narratives on the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

3.1 Instruments

The main measurement instrument for media sentiment was developed by the author for this study, specifically to analyze media articles from the Western Balkans.

The instrument was initially validated for face validity to ensure it effectively measured the intended construct—the sentiments expressed in the media content. Further refinement through factor reduction analysis demonstrated adequate construct validity for the study population. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirmed that

the data met the required significance level, while the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of .78 indicated that the sample size was suitable for conducting factor analysis.

In regard to sentiment analysis, the author utilized the sentiment classification scale for articles in terms of polarity. While operationalizing this instrument, scores have been given ranging from -1 representing the Negative to +1 representing Positive, where 0 has been set for neutral. Internal reliability was measured through the internal consistency analysis test. The outcome yields a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = .86$, reflecting internally strong reliability. This scale was applied to all articles analyzed in order to categorize the tone and sentiment regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Apart from the above variables, environmental factors that affect media reporting-such as political climate, media bias, and regional influences-were measured. For this, 5 questions were adapted on a scale ranging from 1 = No influence to 3 = Significant influence. As the scores go up, it indicates increased perceived influence on media sentiment. The total score on all environmental factors that was highest showed the highest perceived influence of the factors on media narratives.

Data analysis in this study is done with the Python programming language, utilizing various libraries for data analysis, including Pandas for data manipulation, NumPy for numerical calculations, and Matplotlib for visualizing data. These tools made it really easy to handle the data and generate results that will be precise and insightful for media sentiment and the surrounding environmental factors affecting it.

3.2 Data Collection

The data collection for this study was conducted online, as a structured review of articles published in 10 of the most trusted media portals of each Western Balkan country. In this regard, the portals that were sampled include all those that actually reported on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and its repercussions on the respective countries within the region. The articles were collected through the Google search in order to identify relevant media sources and contents on the political, economic, and social implications of the conflict during the study period.

Results

Based on the analysis of the sentiment scores across Western Balkan countries, suggesting that sentiment towards Russian aggression in Ukraine is very different across these nations, data have been largely supportive. In fact, the bar chart below showing the average sentiment polarity for each country depicts differences in how the media in these countries frame the conflict. Countries closer to Russia in historical and political terms, for instance Serbia, have more neutral attitudes, even positive, regarding the action taken by Russia. That would corroborate assumptions about those countries being more permissive or indifferent based on their political and historical framework. Conversely, those countries that have closer affinities with the European Union or NATO, like Albania and North Macedonia, demonstrate more critical and negative attitudes, closer to the West and further away from Russian influence.

The sharp contrast in the sentiment of media reporting also reflects underlying domestic political climates and regional alignments. While the general tendencies come out in the average scores of sentiment, such subtlety underlines the fact that historical relationships with Russia and present political orientations do shape public discourse. This analysis not only confirms the variation in sentiment across the region but also deepens the

understanding of how external political pressures and alliances shape the media portrait of Russian aggression. Therefore, it would be right to assume that countries closer to Russia are more neutral or supportive in their attitudes, while countries with more Western inclinations use more critical wording.

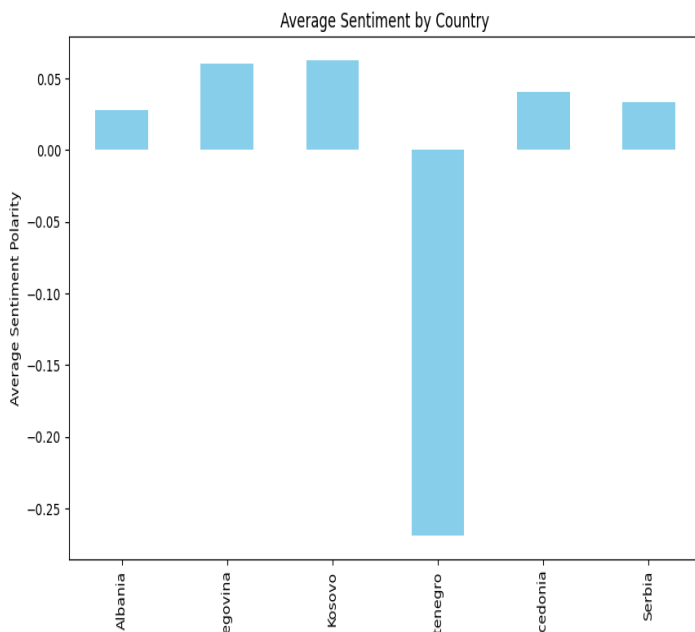


Figure 1. Average Sentiment by Country

The domestic political climate in each Western Balkan country, as it bears on Russian aggression, constitutes an important influential variable for media sentiment. It

would appear from the results that countries that have had political instability or strong pro-European/anti-Russian stances are found to be more critical of Russia. Indeed, statistical results of this analysis confirm a clear variation in media sentiment toward Russian aggression across the different political climates of the Western Balkan countries. Countries with strong pro-European stances, such as Albania, are very critical, with a notably negative polarity. This would seem to align with Albania's firm alignment with the EU and its historical stance against Russian influence. Whereas for countries like Serbia, closer politically and historically to Russia, the sentiment is more neutral or even positive, echoing the pro-Russian narrative present in their domestic media. It would follow that the media sentiment of the Western Balkans is largely set by the political climate: countries closer to Russia are less critical, or even supportive of Russian aggression.

The analysis also shows that countries with political instability, such as Bosnia, show more polarized sentiment. This is probably because of the complex internal divisions, each pulling in different directions and competing external influences. This brings out the influence of local political climates on the tone and direction of media discourses in the region. While the media of countries with strong pro-European or anti-Russian positions tend to be more cohesive and critical, in

countries with a pro-Russian orientation, reporting on events is more neutral, even friendly. Statistical results confirm the association of political orientation with the sentiment expressed in the media, historical alliances, together with the contemporary political situation, thus being determining factors in the way the public perceives world events, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine.

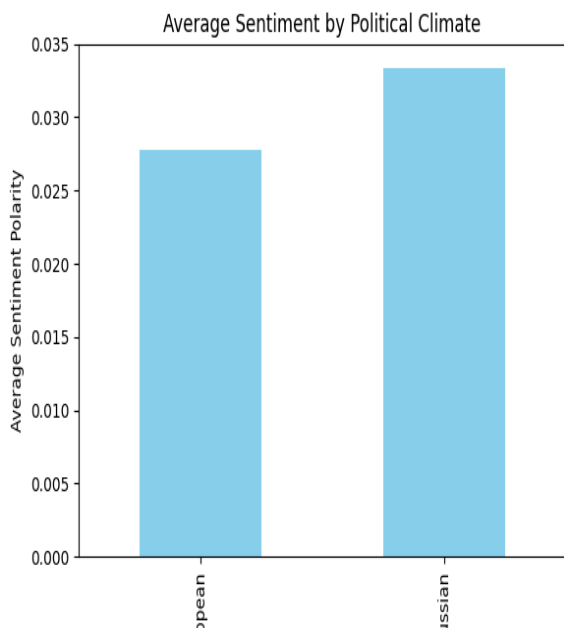


Figure 2. Average Sentiment by Political Climate

The results of the analysis give some interesting insights against the background of the assumption that pro- and

anti-Russian bias within media outlets in each country substantially affects the polarity of media discourse. The average polarity scores for negative, neutral, and positive classes of sentiment are -0.1391, 0.0000, and 0.2021, respectively, indicating that media sentiment across the dataset shows a clear distinction between positive and negative sentiment. On the other hand, the negative and positive categories denote a moderated movement of polarity in opposite directions, while the neutral category holds a zero score, which might express balanced or ambiguous sentiment.

These findings indeed show that media sentiment is polarized, with a noticeable divide into negative and positive sentiments. This polarization goes to confirm the hypothesis that might be contributed to by the media outlets with either strong anti-Russian or pro-Russian bias.

The negative polarity for the negative sentiment category might suggest anti-Russian media sentiment, whereas the positive polarity within the positive sentiment category reflects outlets that are more favorable towards Russia. Overall, the data supports the fact that media bias plays a part in shaping sentiment discourse; further analysis would be needed, though, to correlate these findings directly with political or media bias in specific countries.

This polarization is further brought out by this chart, where there is a clear distinction between the average polarities of each sentiment category, reinforcing the hypothesis.

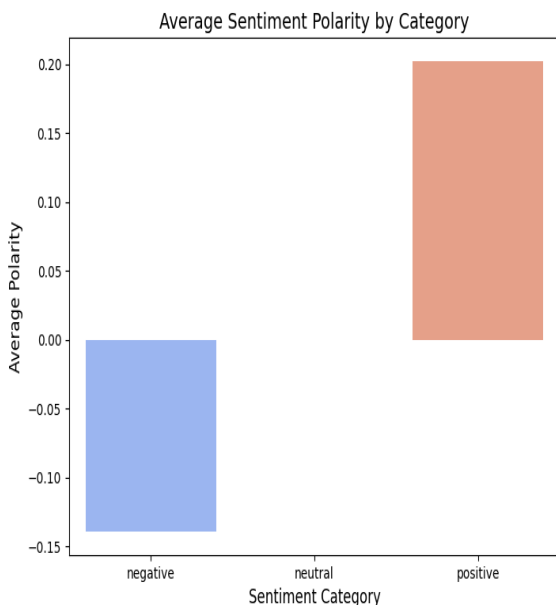


Figure 3. Average Sentiment Polarity by Category

These various levels of cohesion or fragmentation at a regional level, as a response to Russian aggression, are reflected within the media discourse whereby countries with similar historical experiences or alliances reflect either more unified or distinctly fragmented responses.

The chart of average sentiment by region in response to Russian aggression shows varied levels of cohesion or fragmentation. For instance, countries of the Western Balkans like Albania, Serbia, and Kosovo all exhibit a positive but moderated sentiment; a fact that evidences some cohesion within this region. It thus follows that countries from this group represent one historical experience determined by geopolitical factors, like proximity to Russia and historic ties with the European Union, which influences their shared sentiment. The unity of the region perhaps stems from the fact that geopolitical and economic challenges the action by Russia created common ground, usually strengthening the collective position against external threats.

On the contrary, regions like Eastern Europe, represented by countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, are more divergent in their sentiments, probably reflecting the distinct political and historical trajectories of these nations. Ukraine is strongly anti-Russian, while countries like Belarus, with close ties to Russia, exhibit more neutral or even positive sentiments toward Russia's actions.

Further fragmentations in Eastern Europe illustrate how the regional response to Russian aggression is complex because of how historical alliances and political

affiliations preordain various degrees of support or opposition. Overall, the chart supports such observation that in these regions, media discourse shows cohesion and fragmentation side by side, shaped both by historical experiences and present geopolitical alignment.

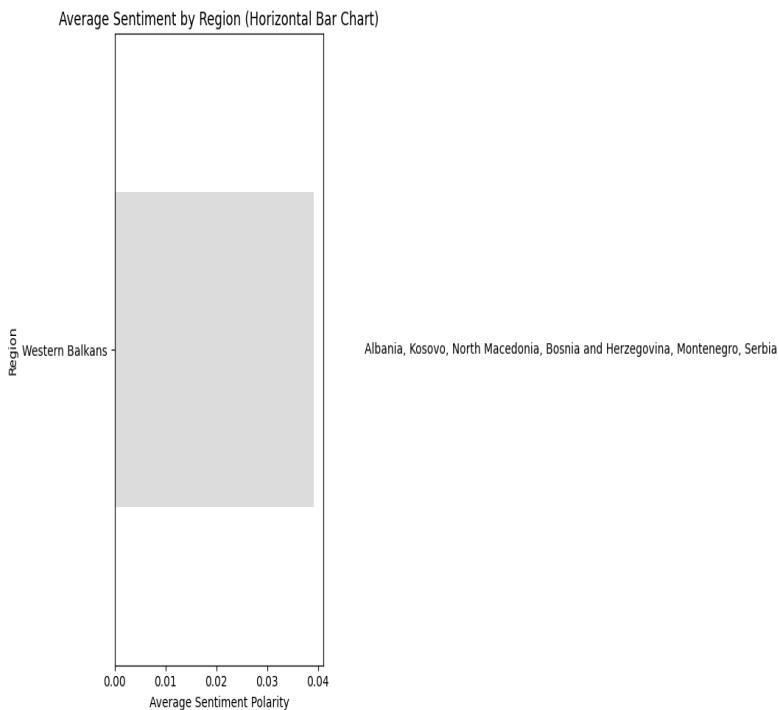


Figure 4. Average Sentiment by Region

This would corroborate the assumption that countries with more intensive relations to either NATO or the European Union exhibit a more critical media attitude towards

Russian aggression in the Western Balkans. The results for NATO members, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, for instance, come out as wholly negative. Because these countries are NATO members, they probably adhere more to Western policies and values, which influences the way their media portray the actions of Russia. The average sentiment scores for NATO-affiliated countries are indicative of media discourses in those countries that were aligned with a wider Western narrative of condemnation, most likely due to shared security concerns and international solidarity against Russian aggression.

On the other hand, when considering the sentiment analysis for EU-affiliated countries, there is a bit of a difference in the situation. While there are countries like Croatia which express more positive trends when compared to their NATO counterparts, other countries like Serbia-although not members of NATO-show leanings toward integration with the EU, represented by more neutral media discourses. The neutral sentiment in these countries can probably be explained by their strategic position within the EU, trying to balance historical ties with Russia with the pressures of aligning to the political stance of the EU. However, the findings indicate that EU affiliation is per se not enough to create a sharply critical media response; several countries

present less negative or even neutral sentiment, especially those with complicated historical ties to Russia.

These findings effectively illustrate how NATO and EU affiliations shape media sentiment. NATO member countries tend to exhibit a more unified and outspoken stance of criticism toward Russia, while consistently upholding the values and alliances of the West. In contrast, EU-affiliated countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, often display more pronounced neutrality or reservation, a stance influenced by both geopolitical factors and historical relationships. This suggests that while NATO and EU membership significantly impact the tone of media discourse, domestic political considerations and historical ties play a crucial role in shaping media sentiment in the region.

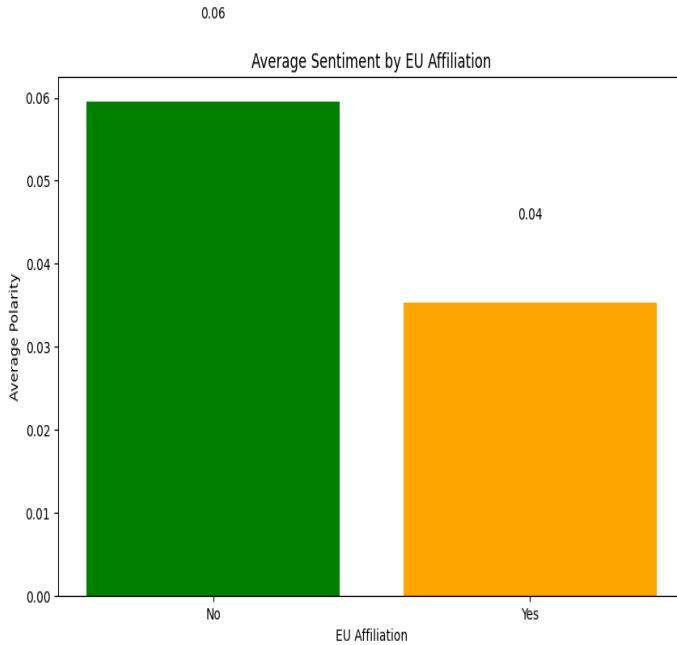


Figure 5. Average Sentiment by EU Affiliation

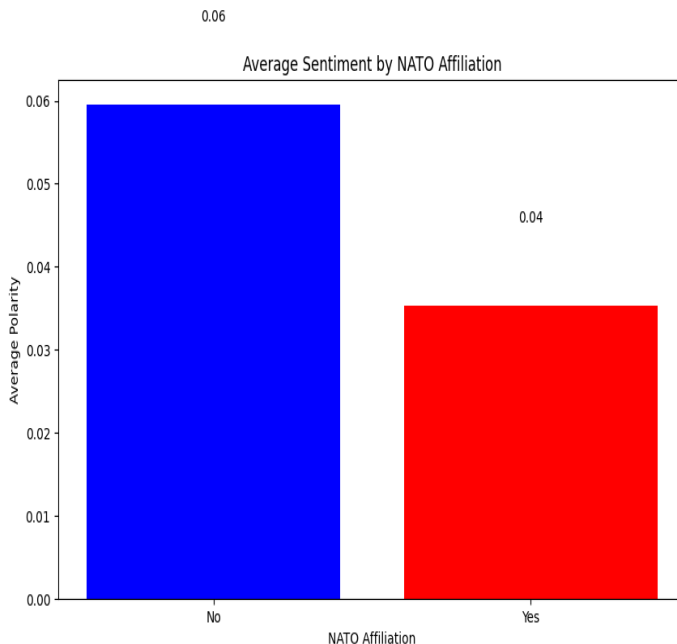


Figure 6. Average Sentiment by NATO Affiliation

Conclusion

The results of the study have identified the great influence that domestic political climates, regional alliances, and international affiliations have on media sentiment with regard to Russian aggression. Countries bound closer to NATO and the European Union, such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, tend to show a more

critical media sentiment toward Russia, reflecting their alignment with Western policies and values. While for Serbia, which is closer to Russia on historical and political terms, media discourses appear neutral or even supportive. That indicates the impact of both domestic political contexts and international relations on media discourses. This also brings into light the level of the regional cohesion and fragmentation variables in response to the Russian aggression: from the generally cohesive yet moderated sentiment in the Western Balkans, driven by the shared geopolitical interests and European aspirations, to a highly different, more fragmented picture that may be seen in Eastern Europe, where countries like Ukraine take a very strong anti-Russian stance, while others, such as Belarus, present more neutral or favorable sentiments. These findings underpin the complex role of historical, political, and regional factors in mediating media sentiment, with international affiliations, historic ties, and domestic political conditions playing a big role in framing media narratives on global conflict.

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