



Adria Digital Media
Observatory

ZOMBIE IDEA IN CROATIAN ONLINE MEDIA DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF MEETING IN KARAOĐORĐEVO AND DIVISION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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SUMMARY

This report is part of the research activities carried out within the project “Adria Digital Media Observatory” funded by the Digital Europe Programme. The aim was to determine the frequency of occurrence and sentiment in Croatian online media regarding the claim, identified within the framework of *zombie idea*, about the agreement on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina between the Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and the Croatian President Franjo Tuđman in March 1991 in Karadžorđevo.

Key findings:

- The frequency of occurrence of the topic since 2002 shows growth and continuity, suggesting that issues related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia remain important in contemporary media and political discourse.
- The claim is identified within the framework of the *zombie idea*
- From January 2002 to June 2023, the topic appeared in 22 Croatian online media outlets in a total of 329 articles.
- The highest number of articles was published in the centre-right Večernji list (66), centre-left Jutarnji list (35), and right-wing Narod.hr (31).
- Sentiment analysis shows a polarization regarding support or denial of the agreement on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Karadžorđevo – an equal number of articles have a positive (126) and negative (126) tone of the narrative, while 76 are coded as neutral.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the media in the breakup of Yugoslavia has been analysed from various perspectives. In relatively numerous works, the propaganda activities of domestic media have been clearly shown, which followed national divisions and homogenizations (Pauković, Roško 2023; Kolstø 2016; Pauković 2008; Thompson 1999).

During and after the war, certain topics were utilized in various narratives that are either unverifiable or difficult to prove. Reproduction of such topics in certain narratives at different frequencies has continued

to the present day. The use of these topics and their acceptance or rejection in arguing certain narratives is present in various discourses. In this report, we analyse the meeting between Slobodan Milošević, President of Serbia, and Franjo Tuđman, President of Croatia, which took place in March 1991 in Karadžorđevo. Even during the 1990s, some claimed that during this meeting Milošević and Tuđman agreed or were discussing the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ultimately arguing the thesis of an agreed-upon war. Debates about the content of the Karadžorđevo meeting persist to this day, and support or challenge of the claim about the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina often depends on the political positions of the actors. Identifying the claim within the framework of the *zombie idea*, which is something “largely unproven in practice, but tends to survive and to be adopted again and again” (Krugman 2013, in Peters and Nagel, 2020), this research analyses the frequency of occurrence and sentiment in Croatian online media regarding the claim about the agreement on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Karadžorđevo. Different interpretations of this meeting are also present in historiography (Lučić 2013; Goldstein 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This research includes the content analysis of 329 different articles found through the search platform for Croatian online media called Take Lab Retriever. The search was conducted using the phrases: “dogovor u Karadžorđevu”, “dogovoreni rat Bosna”, “mit o Karadžorđevu”, “teza o podjeli BIH”, “Tuđman Milošević sastanak”, “Karadžorđevo Tuđman Milošević”, “podjela BIH” and “podjela Bosne “. While there were 33 media outlets considered in the study, the topic was addressed in a total of 22. These include: 24 sata, Direktno, Dnevnik, Dnevno, Glas Slavonije, Alter, Hop, N1, HRT, Index, Jutarnji, Lupiga, Narod, NET, Novilist, Plusportal, Priznajem, Slobodna Dalmacija, Telegram, Teleskop, Tportal, and Večernji list. Articles cover the period from January 2002 to June 2023.

Sentiment analysis was set to determine the tone of the narrative. In a positive tone, the claim that President Tuđman and President Milošević divided BIH was considered valid. Keywords frequently used in such texts included: “the divide happened,” “the idea of the divide,”

“the goal was to divide,” and “there was a plan of the divide.” On the other hand, the negative tone portrayed the claim as false, often characterized by keywords such as: “disinformation about the divide,” “myth of the divide,” “not truth,” “lie,” and “without evidence.” Neutral tone was assigned to texts presenting the topic without any context or positive or negative connotation and texts that include passing reference only, without exploring into detailed discussion.

Some examples of a negative tone can be found in sentences like this one in Glas Slavonije: *Certainly, among numerous pieces of disinformation disseminated to the public, one of the most mentioned fabrications is the claim that in March 1991, an agreement was reached in Karađorđevo with Slobodan Milošević about the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Gregorović, 2019) or *The story of the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Tuđman and Milošević is so absurd that it is completely indefensible* (Direktno, 2016) and from the article in Večernji list: *It’s miraculous how this myth is used as a fact even though there is absolutely nothing that could turn it into a fact. There is no video, audio, or documentary material whatsoever that would confirm it* (Ivanković, 2017).

Examples of positive tone can be found in the sentences like the one in news portal Index:

“Exactly 52 years later, according to the testimonies of several witnesses, a similar agreement was reached in March 1991 in Karađorđevo between Croatian President Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević, then the most powerful man in Yugoslavia, agreeing on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina.” (Agencija Anadoluja, 2013).

or news portal 24 sata:

“This is a continuation of the games without borders. It always starts with drawing maps, and it ends very badly. I will remind you that Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman were drawing maps and borders in Karađorđevo, and we know how it all ended.” (Express, 2017)

and

“The spirit of Karađorđevo, unfortunately, is still alive, as the followers of the politics and morbid cult of Tuđman and Milošević remain in power in Belgrade and Zagreb. Karađorđevo is the dark legacy of Franjo Tuđman 23 years after his death.” (Dnevno, 2022)

Neutral tone includes texts like the one in an article in Večernji list: *“In Karađorđevo about the division of BiH. He said he had ‘heard something from colleagues’ about it, but ‘there was never an official confirmation for that.’”* (Anon., 2016)

and in news portal Index.hr

“When asked about the meeting between Milošević and Tuđman in Karađorđevo and the agreement on the division of BiH, Jović said he could not speak about it because the accused never informed him about it.” (HINA, 2003).

or

“Milošević pursued Tuđman because he was certain that he represented the interests of the people. And when he found out, he started the action of contacting and sought a meeting in Karađorđevo and with us.” (Direktno, 2015).

RESULTS

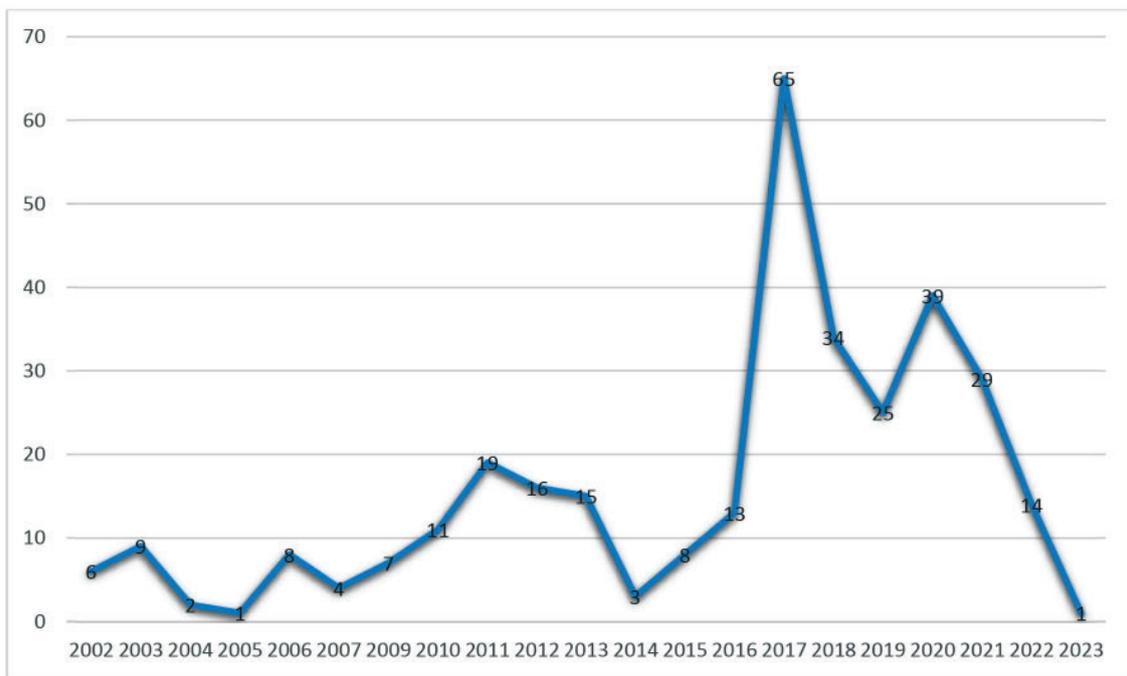


Chart 1: Frequency

Chart 1 illustrates the frequency of coverage on the topic spanning from January 2002 to June 2023. The chart indicates a significant spike in 2017, during which 65 articles were published concerning Karadžorđevo and the division of Bosnia. This surge can be attributed to several factors. One notable event was the suicide of Slobodan Praljak, a former Bosnian Croat general. Additionally, the publication of books addressing the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina contributed to the increased interest in the topic. Moreover, interviews conducted with individuals connected to Tuđman, Milošević, and Izetbegović during that period continued to influence interest in the topic, not only in 2017 but also in the following years.

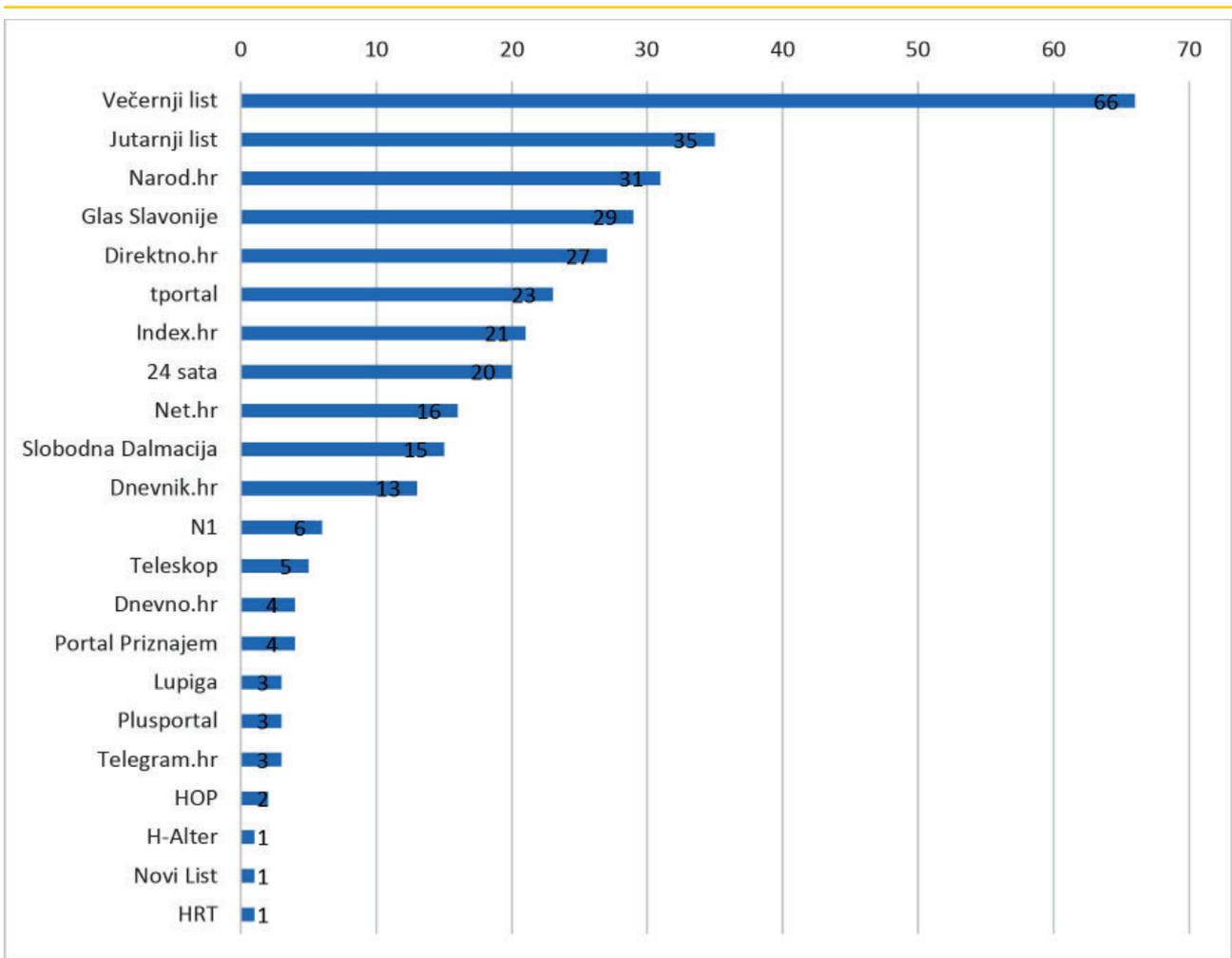


Chart 2: Number of articles by online media

Chart 2 illustrates the number of articles published in online media. The data reveals that the topic was predominantly covered by Večernji list, leading centre-right daily newspaper, totalling 66 articles. In second place, Jutarnji list, leading centre-left daily newspaper, covered the topic with a total of 35 articles. Both of these online media outlets rank among the top ten most read in Croatia, according to the Reuters Digital report in 2023.

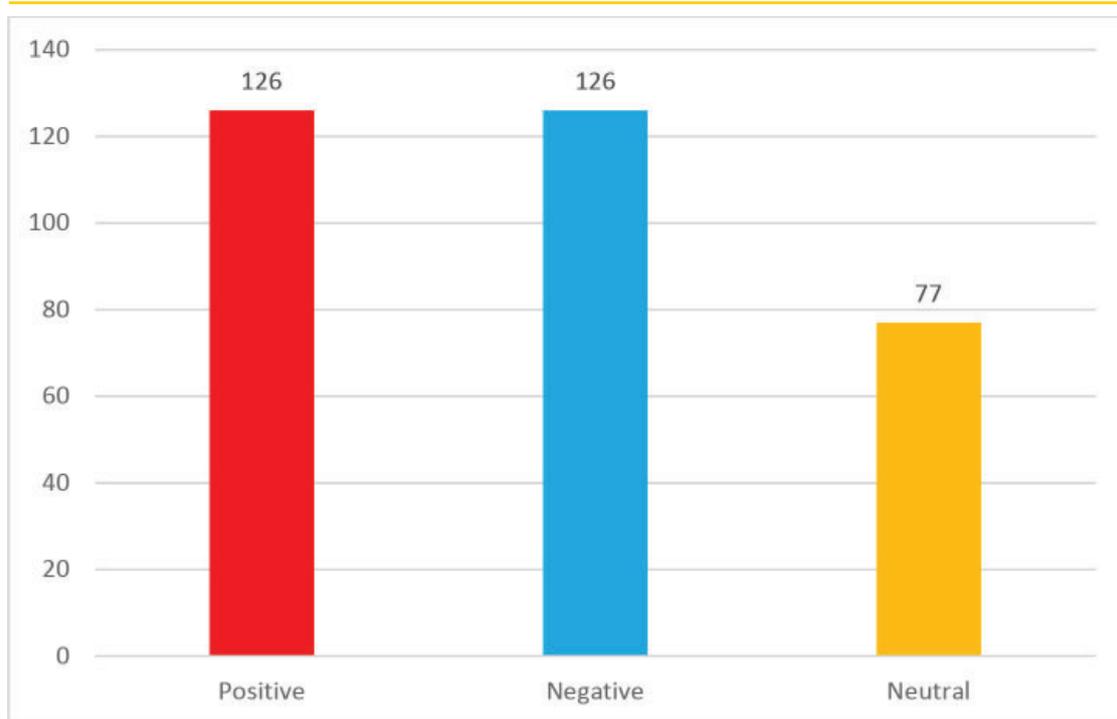


Chart 3: Tone of the narrative

Chart 3 illustrates the tone of the narrative: 126 articles exhibit both negative and positive tones, while 77 articles maintain a neutral tone. This indicates the polarization within Croatian society. Similar to other topics related to confronting the controversial legacy of contemporary history, there is a pronounced polarization. Within this context, historical disputes are used to legitimize one's position and delegitimize political and ideological opponents.

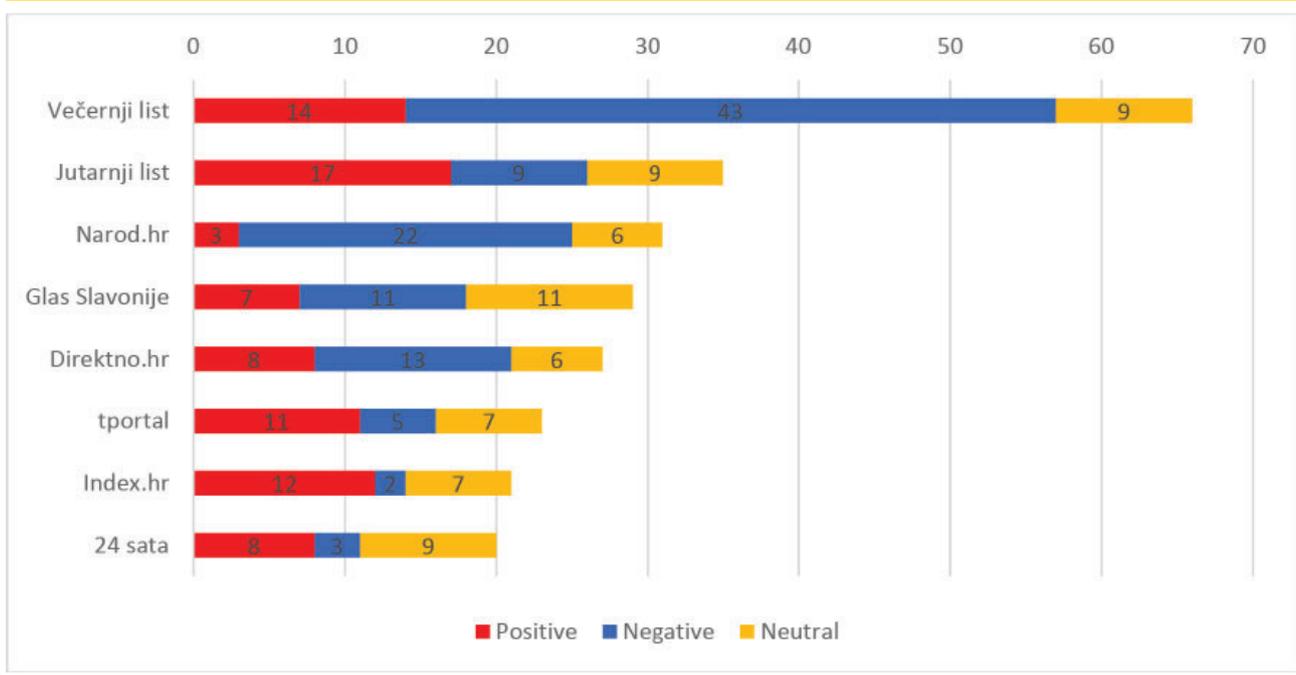


Chart 4: Tone of the narrative by online media.

Chart 4 illustrates the tone of the narrative presented by online media outlets. It indicates that media outlets with a right-centre editorial stance mostly conveyed a negative narrative regarding the topic of the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Karađorđevo meeting, as evidenced by examples from Večernji list and Narod.hr. On the other hand, media outlets with a left-centre editorial stance tended to present a positive narrative, as demonstrated by examples from Jutarnji list and Index.hr.

CONCLUSION

The claim about the agreement between Tuđman and Milošević on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Karađorđevo in March 1991 is one of the important topics used in confronting narratives about the wars during dissolution of Yugoslavia. This research demonstrates how such controversial topics cause divisions in the Croatian media discourse. The topic appeared in 329 articles across 22 Croatian online media outlets during the covered period. Sentiment analysis shows a significant polarization, with an equal number of articles having a

positive (126) and negative (126) tone of the narrative, while 76 are coded as neutral. The position of media on the ideological spectrum significantly influences the sentiment towards this topic. Media leaning towards the right have a more negative sentiment (Večernji list, Narod. hr), denying the agreement in Karadžorđevo, while those leaning towards the left have a more pronounced positive sentiment (Jutarnji list, Index. hr). The frequency of the coverage of the topic shows that the claim of the alleged division of Bosnia in Karadžorđevo persists as a *zombie idea* due to its controversial nature and lack of concrete evidence, yet it continues to resurface in political discourse and historical narratives despite being widely disputed and unverified.

LIMITATIONS

There are two limitations in this study that should be addressed. Firstly, the use of TakeLab Retriever (<https://retriever.takelab.fer.hr/explorer>) was restricted to only 33 online media sources, which may not fully capture the diversity of Croatia's media landscape. Secondly, the sentiment analysis method that we used in this study relies on subjective interpretation. However, we've attempted to address this concern by utilizing specific keywords and employing double coding to ensure consistent data interpretation.

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ADMO

Project Adria Digital Media Observatory (ADMO) ensures the establishment and continuation of the Croatian and Slovenian hub operation for tackling disinformation and cooperation with EDMO on multiple levels by a multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach. As an effective response to the challenges for democracy and society, the project sees a combination of different expertise and methods - attacking sources/actors, networks, reasoning, and disinformation narratives from different spheres and combining techniques. The implemented activities will contribute to the general objective - creating and ensuring the long-term development of a broader Croatian/Slovenian hub on digital media composed of a multidisciplinary community of academic researchers, fact-checkers and media practitioners, journalists and civil society advocates capable of detecting and analyzing disinformation campaigns; and supporting the government and regulator in strengthening the collective response to disinformation threat to democracy.

The project comprehensively approaches the social, political, and health problem of spreading disinformation campaigns through research, awareness-raising, and capacity-building methods. The key projects' outcomes/deliverables are: the project's website and its integration with the EDMO platform, production of the continuous flow of fact-checks, publication of analytic reports on disinformation content, disinformation sources, origins of disinformation narratives, the role of international actors in spreading disinformation, disinformation acceptance and debunking, on the reasoning behind conspiracist and anti-conspiracist behavior, training for journalists and student of journalism, media literacy education activities for citizens, reports on Code of Practice on Disinformation in Croatia and on the financial viability of the Croatian and Slovenian news media sector.



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