

# Do We Not Learn Anything from the Journalistic History? Media Coverage of Adopting the EU New Financial Perspective in Slovenia

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## SUMMARY

*This paper builds on previous media and journalism studies of media coverage of topics concerning the European Union (EU) and adopts more culturalist, bottom-up approach to media and journalism studies of the EU topics coverage and presents analysis of coverage of a new EU financial perspective discussion by Slovenian media. A textually oriented critical discourse analysis was used in order to find the inclusion/exclusion of meanings of this topic and to understand the selection of sources by specific Slovenian news media. In-depth interviews with journalists and their main sources were carried out in order to explain why journalists had covered this topic in a specific way(s). The study reveals differences in the EU coverage between elite and tabloid, and pro-government and opposition news media. Pro-government news media rely on government sources and exclude critical sources, background information and interpretations. Additional source-centred analyses, unlike previous studies in this area, show that this discourse is not based only on journalistic practices, but is also a reflection of government and party communication strategies. Domestication of EU topics is used to promote government and party politics; this leads to a further democratic deficit in the EU.*

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## Introduction

There are many researches in the field of media and journalism studies (e.g. De Vreese, 2002; Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000) that have been looking for an answer to the question whether news media and journalistic practices within the European Union (EU) live up to the ideals of the EU-public sphere in the content of national elite news media. The answer that is offered is more or less uniform: national elite news media contribute negatively to the democratic deficit in the EU. This answer is also expected. Do we not learn anything from the history of journalism? Namely, journalistic scholars have known already for decades that while the globalization and transnationalism of news discourse has led to a limited cultural diversification of content, the audience maintains an important part of its national particularity through which is selectively interprets the internalized messages to which it is exposed. The news, both in the national press and on TV news bulletin, maintains its national orientation, even in the selection of international news that is presented (see for example, Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). Media and journalistic scholars (e.g. McCombs et al., 1991; Gagnon, 1997; Lake & Rotchchilds, 1997; McLead et al., 1992) also claim that regardless of the internationalization of the media or globalization of the economy and news discourse, the ethnocentric standpoint remains in majority cases the main way of collecting, assessing, and presenting.

According to the institutional relations that already exist at the national level between news media and political institutions, we should, more or less, continue to expect all national elite news media in the EU to focus dominantly on their national representatives and EU-related political bodies at the national level and on the issues that particularly seem to be relevant to their national audiences (Slaatta, 2006: 20–21). However, since there might be several different opinions about actual politics and reforms that are suggested by the EU, we can expect significant differences in the way different national (elite and popular) news media and regional/local news media cover EU topics.

Therefore, this study's objective is to show how Slovenian news media covered an important EU topic: the adoption of the EU New Financial Perspective (NFP) by the European Council on 17 December 2005. This topic is relevant (a) because the adoption establishes the framework for a multi-annual budget for all EU policies, (b) because it can be altered by any member state, (c) because it can affect all member states, and (d) because it reflects relationships among EU member states and chances to implement agreed common and national substantive priorities in practice.

Critical discourse analysis is used in order to find the inclusion or exclusion of specific meanings about the NFP and the selection of sources by individual Slovenian news media. To explain why journalists covered this topic in a specific

way(s), an analysis of journalistic and source production practices with semi-structured in-depth interviews with journalists and their main sources is employed. This paper tests the usefulness of culturalist, bottom-up approach to media and journalism studies of the EU topics coverage that attempts to uncover the role of news media as agents of or an explanation for social conflict and change. Our main thesis is that elite news media focus dominantly on the national relevance of EU topics and use national elite sources. Our goal is to confirm the thesis that there are differences in EU coverage between, on one hand, elite and tabloid news media, and pro-government and opposition news media on the other hand. Pro-government news media rely on government sources and exclude critical ones, background information and interpretations. Additionally, we want to find causes for biased and incomplete coverage of EU topics in news media. We assume that this discourse is not based only on journalistic practices, but is also a reflection of government and party communication strategies of informing the public about the NFP.

The first chapter is a literature review of previous studies of media coverage of EU topics. We call for a more culturalist approach to media and journalism studies of coverage of EU topics. The next chapter discusses a political background of the NFP adoption process; it is followed by a presentation of two methods: critical discourse analysis (an analysis of macroproposition and selection of sources) and interview studies of journalistic and source practices. Results are presented in four different sets: the analysis of results concerning an inclusion/exclusion of information about the NFP, the analysis of source selection, and the analysis of journalistic and PR practices. In the end, this study's results are assessed in relation to previous studies.

## **Theoretical Background**

There is a long-running theoretical debate about the existence of the European identity and European public sphere. The starting point of this debate is an expectation that news media ought to function as a democratic communication system for mediating information and public debate between political institutions of the EU and citizens of Europe.

Many authors have been trying to apply Habermas's model of public sphere (1962/1989; 1996) to European contexts (e.g. Schlesinger, 1991, 1999; Trenz & Eder, 2004; Downey & Koenig, 2006) only to find that the European public sphere does not exist (e.g. Sievert, 1998; Gerhards, 2000; Machill et al., 2006). Many authors (see Baerns & Raupp, 2000; Meyer, 2000; Gerhards, 2002) speak of a European public deficit: which exists when political decisions are taken increasingly frequently not by nation states, but by the EU institutions, while the media reporting to the public remains bound to the nation-state and only considers to a small extend the European decisions and the decision-makers there: the consequence is that the citizens are not sufficiently informed about the decisions and discussions that affect them directly. Since neither a common European language (Kantner, 2002) nor the mass media with an EU-wide reach and uniform journalistic and media culture in the EU countries exist (Sievert, 1998), the most impor-

tant preconditions for the existence of a pan-European public sphere (Schlesinger, 1991) are absent and the European public sphere that emerges is a result of the Europeanization of national publics (Machill et al., 2006: 60).

According to Gerhards, the Europeanization will take place precisely when “in the national public sphere, over time, reporting increasingly focuses on the European decisions and the elites making the decisions” (Gerhards, 2002: 142). He also claims that the Europeanization is indicated by an increase in the reporting of European topics in national media. Central questions in this kind of research design are concerned with scopes and types of diversity that exist in news media coverage. Several different studies about EU journalism agree that EU topics account for an extremely small proportion of reporting in national media with a strong national orientation (e.g. De Vreese, 2002; Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000). Machill and his colleagues (2006) applied the meta-analysis of 17 studies that had investigated media reporting related to the topic of the European public sphere via a content analysis in a national comparison and that had been published between 1994 and 2003. They concluded that the much-discussed deficit in terms of democracy and the public in the EU runs in parallel to “a deficit in European media reporting” (ibid: 80). Norris (2000) observes that the EU is represented in a negative tone in the European TV news. She raises a concern that a strong trend in reporting negatively about EU issues “could contribute towards a growing disconnect between European leaders and its public” (Norris, 2000: 184).

The presumption that the news media ought to function as a democratic communication system for mediating information and public debate between political institutions of the EU and the citizens of Europe has been met with criticism. Statta (2006: 21) claims that a natural consensus on what Europe is and how the EU is representing European interests and societies does not exist. Thus, the media should not be expected to be so neutral, mediating a platform for an information debate. The media themselves are structured according to political and economic structures in society and are consciously or unconsciously participating in the constant negotiation and contestation of what kind of the EU we might be asked to imagine. Therefore, Statta calls for a more culturalist, bottom-up approach to media and journalism studies. We have to learn from the history of journalism and develop a new journalism and media research approach to journalistic or broader media coverage of EU topics. News media will also in the foreseeable future continue to provide opportunities for national rather than EU institutions because they are “national”. And instead of being a problem, this is the basic understanding of how news media work. Stata’s suggestion is that journalism and media researchers should be interested in understanding how their societies reflect the European structure of transnational governance, rather than look into how news media are currently domesticating externally defined, EU-related news. Thus, it is of journalism and media scholars’ interest within the cultural approach to study how discursive representations and meanings are linked to the reproduction of social structures. It could be possible to observe, for instance, in what ways national and EU institutions and their officials are enhanced with different symbolic powers: how they are given access, in which way news coverage is open or closed for

critical voices, how much specific national discourses on strategies and bargaining positions within the EU are connected to the news discourse.

Further, the most pronounced division that is currently emerging within the European media order is probably not between different national audiences, but between elite and lay audiences across Europe. Statta (*ibid.*: 22) proposes that media and journalism scholars have to go beyond the immediate level of news content in major privileged, elite news media in different countries, and study also popular, more local and field-specific, professional news media. There is a constant possibility, that what is seen as “important” news in general elite newspapers is a type of discourse that is already structured and is already systematically excluding an important aspect of social life. In addition to uncovering the dominant voice of power, researchers must also engage in finding marginal and marginalised discourses on the European society; i.e. discourses that must be fed back into the political system and the dominant news media discourses.

### **Adopting the NFP – Background information**

The EU’s New Financial Perspective NFP is defined by the interinstitutional agreement between the European Commission, Council and Parliament and defines the framework for the Union’s budget priorities for the period of six years. It describes different budget headings the maximum amounts (ceilings) of commitment appropriations (financial commitments) for each year (Begg, 2005). The last NFP was to expire in 2006, hence, the then president of the Commission presented a proposal of the NFP to the plenary session of the European Parliament on February 10, 2004 (European Commission, 2004).

The Commission proposed re-arranging the structure of the current financial perspective into five budgetary headings: 1) sustainable growth – including two sub-headings: 1a) competition for growth and employment (the Lisbon Agenda); and 1b) cohesion for growth and employment; 2) conservation and management of natural resources (including agriculture, fisheries and environment); 3) citizenship, freedom, security and justice; 4) the EU as a global partner; and 5) administration. In order to have the financial means to reach these political goals, the Commission called for an average spending level of 1.14 per cent over the seven-year period. In order to give a fair treatment to all Member States, the Commission proposed a generalised correction mechanism, which should correct a budgetary burden deemed excessive in relation to individual country’s relative prosperity.

During the European Council meeting on June 16–17 2005, the EU leaders failed to reach an agreement because of a stubborn position by the Netherlands and the UK’s refusal to have its yearly rebate frozen (in 1984, the financial rebate was secured by Margaret Thatcher; at the time the UK was the third poorest EC member state and it could not draw the EC agricultural allocations because the UK’s agriculture was poorly developed) and phased out later became the stumbling blocks of this dossier. The UK Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted that his country would be unwilling to give up the rebate as long as other countries (especially France) oppose any further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, for which expenditures account for about 40 per cent of the EU budget, and as long as they did not

refocus the funding onto the EU's economic competitiveness and growth. However, the negotiators had to follow the already passed agreements, such as the Agreement on Funding the Agriculture, passed in 2002; it will remain in force until 2013 (Begg & Heinemann, 2006; Mrak & Rant, 2007).

During the negotiations, two country groups with different interests were formed. "Cohesion states" constituted one group; all new member states and some less developed old member states were part of the first group. These countries favoured cohesion funds – they are allocated on the "national key" principle, at the end of negotiations each country knows, how much money it will get from the EU budget, unlike funds related to the Lisbon Strategy that are allocated on the "excellence" principle. Net contributors to the EU budget constituted the second group. Their request was to limit the total amount of outgoings to 1 per cent of gross national income. In order to achieve this goal they were ready to sacrifice part of the Lisbon Strategy; their argument was that it can be financed mostly from national budgets. The presiding UK drafted a negotiating proposal that was positively oriented towards net contributors' demands to reduce the budget which would reduce the funds aimed at the majority of new member states needed for the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy and cohesion. According to the agreement, reached at the European Council on December 17 2005 (European Council, 2005), the UK agreed to the reduction of rebate, however, they did not change the agricultural policy that is in force until 2013 (Begg & Heinemann, 2006).

According to the political economy analysis, the NFP's key problem is an exceptionally small EU budget, thus, in practice it cannot significantly affect the implementation of the EU priorities (Mrak & Rant, 2007). Another NFP's key problem is its process of financing; mostly it is financed with contributions by the member states, however, during the negotiations each country is more focused on how much money it will contribute into the common EU fund and how much money it will get from it, rather than on substantive priorities (Begg & Heinemann, 2006). The overall budget deal, reached in the early hours of December 17, raised the 2007–2013 budget to 862.3 billion euros or 1.045 per cent of the EU GNI. The European Council coordinated the agreement also with the European Parliament and the Commission. The final interinstitutional agreement was signed on May 17 2006; it did not differ much from the agreement between the member states of December 2005 (Interinstitutional Agreement, 2006).

The government of the Republic of Slovenia represented Slovenia in negotiations for the next financial perspective 2007–2013; its mandate was to accept only an agreement that for Slovenia would mean at least twice bigger net budgetary position towards the EU budget than in 2004–2006 (GOEA, 2005). According to the final agreement, the Slovenian government fulfilled its mandate, however, this success was not due to negotiating skills of Slovenia's negotiators, rather to basic computation of contributions for a cohesion policy: financial computations were performed based on statistical data from 2000–2002, which were favourable to Slovenia (GOEA, 2005). In addition, the reduction of cohesion funds favoured the criteria of old and more developed members that, based on development criteria, are similar to Slovenia.

## Research Methods and Empirical Data

In order to answer the questions, what, how and why did journalists of different news media report about the NFP, a combination of research methods is necessary. This study draws upon two methods: critical discourse analysis and an interview study. All were conducted during and soon after the EU Council meeting on the NFP.

The first phase of this study is critical discourse analysis of the inclusion or exclusion of specific meanings of the NFP published by Slovenian news media. The semantics of discourse deals with meanings in terms of “propositions” (Brown & Yule, 1983), which are the smallest independent constructs of language and thought, typically expressed by a single sentence or clause (Van Dijk, 1988). On the basis of propositions, Van Dijk (1980, 1988) works out the thematic structure of a news story in the form of topics (generalized from macropropositions) in a hierarchical structure and argues that the societal structure is related to a discourse structure through ideology. The semantic macrostructure is derived from local meanings of words by macro-rules, such as deletion, generalization and construction. Such rules have omitted irrelevant details, connecting the essence on a higher level into abstract meanings or constructing different meaning constituents in higher-level events or social concepts (Van Dijk, 1980). In this study, a macroproposition is defined as the “main idea unit” in the form of several sentences, a paragraph or an entire news story, depending on similarities or differences between meanings. A macroproposition is a unit only for the convenience of comparison (Pan, 2002). The close study of the macropropositions made in the whole text may enable us to look at the news discourse as a whole and thus have a comprehensive view of the NFP as reported by the media. Not aiming at investigating the thematic structure of the news discourse, we investigate the inclusion or exclusion of specific macro-meanings by particular news media coverage of the NFP. The news discourse on the right-of-abode issue from Slovenia media will be segmented into macropropositions, according to their original sentences order. The most relevant piece of information in the articles are be defined by using the abovementioned macro-rules. We intended to find the macropropositions, which are conveyed or are missing in news items about the same phenomenon, i.e. the adoption of the NFP by the European Council, around the same similar date. We hypothesise that the inclusion or exclusion of some major information (realised in macropropositions) is not random, rather it is purposeful and, hence, ideological; in the process of news-making, the media/journalists construct reality in accordance with their underlying ideological and political positions (Van Dijk, 1988; Pan, 2002).

Further, we analyse the role of sources in media’s “agenda-building” and construction of the hard news discourse. Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1978) claimed that official sources have the ability to establish the “initial definition or *primary interpretation* of the topic in question” (1978: 58; emphasis in original). Schlesinger takes this thesis to task for not taking account of: (1) the contention between official sources; (2) the behind the scenes manoeuvrings of sources, rendered methodologically invisible by culturalist readings of texts; (3) the competi-

tive and shifting nature of key sources within privileged elites; (4) the longer-term shifts in the structure of access; and (5) for assuming an uni-directional flow of definitions from power centres to media (1990: 66–7). Cottle's meta-analysis of source studies (2007) reveals that many recent studies have shown that complexity and contingency are found where once social dominance alone was assumed sufficient to guarantee a successful news entry. There is an unequal weighting of resources, social credibility or legitimacy distributed across source fields, but the multiple factors and political contingencies that unfold through time and that, therefore, cannot be easily predicted nor better understood without recourse to empirical examination. The analysis of sources is conducted at a textual level and with in-depth interviews of journalists and their sources; a text-based critical discourse analysis has troubles showing the origins of competing discourses and the impact of external factors on the manner in which the discourses are represented (Erjavec, 2005; Philo, 2007).

Our analysis covers 11 news items published between December 17–19, 2005 by all Slovenian daily newspapers<sup>1</sup> and all national television programmes: a national daily *Delo* (3) and a regional daily *Večer* (1), and a regional daily *Dnevnik* (2), a tabloid daily *Slovenske novice* (1) and 2 news items broadcast by a public service television channel *TV SLO* on a daily news programme *TV dnevnik* and 2 news items broadcast by a private television station *POP TV* in a tabloid daily news programme *24 ur*<sup>2</sup> (for the list of the headlines, see Appendix). Why these news media? They were selected in order to present media coverage of the analysed EU topics as comprehensively as possible; for this reason all daily news media that had reported the NFP agreement in the period of December 17–20, 2005 at different levels (national (*Delo*, *Slovenske novice*, *TV SLO*, *POP TV*) and regional (*Dnevnik*, *Večer*) news media, quality (*Delo*, *Dnevnik*, *Večer*, *TV SLO*) and tabloid (*Slovenske novice*, *POP TV*) news media, pro-government (*Delo*, *Večer*, *TV SLO*, *POP TV*) and opposition (*Dnevnik*)) were included in the study (Juraničič, 2007).

The second phase of this study involved interviews conducted during and after the adoption of the NFP by the European Council (from December 2005 to February 2006) with eight journalists who produced analysed news items about the NFP and with government and party PR practitioners. We took into consideration Gandy's (1982) and Schlesinger's (1990) suggestion that researchers need to go beyond agenda-setting to determine how sources and their strategic activities organised within competitive fields set the media agenda, for what purpose it is set, and with what impact on the distribution of power and values in society. The usefulness of ethnographic methods like interviews has clearly been shown by different news source analyses (e.g. Gans, 1979; Miller, 1993, 1994; Davis, 2003). Thus, this research technique was used to gather data on the informants' perceptions beyond the official declarations of the leaders as reported in the media, and thus offer more in-depth information on perceptions that survey generally show. Journalists were asked about the news production practices of analysed news items, especially in the relation to the selection of sources. All interviewed journalists came from one analysed news medium, only two from public television; the coverage of the NFP had also been performed by a foreign correspondent from Brussels<sup>3</sup>. Interviewed journalists covered domestic (3) or foreign policy (5) topics, none of them,



save the correspondent from Brussels, covers only the EU topics. The journalists' interviewees were between 27 and 45 years old, all of them, except for two journalists, were women. All interviews were carried out in the interviewees' offices. Journalists' key sources of information were (1) a PR practitioner for the Government Office for European Affairs (GOEA), one of the key actors in Slovenia which collects, selects information on the EU and distributes them to the media and other social institutions, (2) PR practitioners for the governing political party SDS and for opposition parties SD and LDS. All four of them are women between 27 and 38 years old, apart from one man, a PR practitioner for the GOEA. Sources were asked, what strategies they had employed when communicating with journalists regarding the NFP and other EU topics.

## Results

### Inclusion/Exclusion of the Information about the EU Financial Perspective

The comparison of macropropositions of the analysed news items enables us to discover that the macroproposition, "The senior Slovenian politicians believe that the adoption of the NFP for the period of 2007–2013 is good for the EU, it enables the EU to operate normally, that it means a success for Slovenia, because its net budgetary position will be better than the current one, whereas the president of the opposition political party LDS feels that Slovenia could have obtained more in the negotiations," was included by every analysed news media, save the tabloid daily. The same pattern is repeated in the following macroproposition, "The agreement was passed mainly because of the British delegation that consented to the reduction of the budget rebate and preservation of existing agricultural subsidies." The same applies to a macroproposition that summarises the opinions of several EU politicians about the financial perspective agreement, "EU politicians believe that the NFP agreement is good for the EU because it ended the EU crisis and enabled it to operate normally. However, the president of the European Commission feels that the agreement does not consist of everything that was proposed by the Commission, on the other hand, funds for new members are secured."

All news media, save the tabloid daily, also gave an identical, detailed and comprehensive account of the financial breakdown of the entire NFP and of the proceeds for Slovenia. It is a case of comprehensive referencing of details that are irrelevant to laic readers, that we cannot and do not know how to generalise, hence, we do not list them here. Public television also includes a macroproposition: "British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is chairing the Council of the EU, has presented the NFP Agreement by the EU summit by pointing out that the agreement is the optimum in current conditions, however, the European Parliament has critically asked for some corrections, such as additional funds for culture, education, foreign policy and EU expansion."

Unlike other media, both tabloids (*Slovenske novice*, *POP TV*) published/broadcasted the following macroproposition, "The NFP Agreement is not fair to the majority of farmers; according to the NGO Oxfam, the majority of agricultural subsidies will continue to be paid to the minority, among who are also the

Dutch and Slovak ministers of agriculture, the British Royal Family and Albert, Prince of Monaco.”

The only critical macroproposition towards the NFP can be found in the regional opposition daily *Dnevnik*, “An EU financial expert says that the NFP Agreement from the standpoint of the EU strategic development is not good for Europe because it does not support the Lisbon Strategy, agreed by all member states.” *Dnevnik* also included the macroproposition of the Slovene proceeds from the NFP Agreement, “An EU financial expert says that Slovenia’s success is chiefly based on the negotiating position, favourable to Slovenia.”

To sum up, the majority of pro-government news media published/broadcast numerous more or less identical positive views on the NFP by mainly Slovene government officials. The aim was to confirm that the NFP Agreement was successful. The opinions represent extremely *simplified positive vs. negative assessment* of how complex the process of adopting the NFP was; it does not include *background information* and *interpretations*. The only interpretation available is a one-sided positive assessment of the UK as the one that made the agreement possible. Public television also broadcast a spare piece of news about the development in the European Parliament without any background information and interpretations. On the other hand, the most widely read Slovene daily newspaper (as well as the tabloid TV, which broadcast also other information) published exceptionally negative piece of information with typical tabloid features (MacDonald, 1998): personalisation – it exposed individual elite personalities – and sensationalism – it focussed on exposing an unfair allocation of agricultural subsidies to the minority, especially to political and royal European elite. The aim of the latter was to stir up emotions. Only the regional opposition daily published a critical voice that at least partially interpreted the outcomes and motives of the NFP Agreement.

All analysed news media ignored to explain the key aforementioned terms that the audience need in order to understand the meaning of the news, e.g. what is the NFP, the net financial position, the British rebate, etc. In addition, all analysed news lack background information that would explain the context of what was going on, such as why are the agricultural subsidies such an issue, why are all cited politicians satisfied with the deal, etc. There is also a lack of interpretations, for instance, what do numbers, which are quoted in a mixed manner – regarding time (for the period of 6 and 1 year) and currency (in euros and tolar) – why is the NFP relevant to Slovenia, other EU members and the EU as a whole, what strategies does it support, and especially what are the structural power relations among member states and what interests do individual countries represent. In sum, there is a lack of basic information about the NFP and of references to how and why the NFP Agreement was accepted.

#### **Choice of Sources: Domestic Government Officials Predominate**

At first glance, the analysed news media, save the tabloid, used multiple sources, however, government officials predominate. All news media, apart from the tabloid daily, published opinions of eight national politicians, among them five Slovenian government officials (the prime minister, the ministers of finance and

foreign affairs, a secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the EU Affairs Department, the president of the Committee on Foreign Policy, and the president of the Committee on EU Affairs), two members of opposition parties (the president of the Social Democrats and the president of Liberal Democracy, both are also European MPs) and the EU Commissioner for Science and Research who is from Slovenia. All news media, except for the tabloid newspaper, quoted the president of the European Commission, whereas the public TV channel and the national daily *Delo* also quoted the French president and the prime minister of Luxembourg; all of them more or less unanimously agreed that the Agreement is good for the EU. On the other hand, the tabloids (*Slovenske novice*, *POP TV*) and *Dnevnik* also cited critical sources: the former quoted the NGO Oxfam and the latter an expert on the EU finance.

### **Journalistic Source Strategies: Domestication, Passivity and Blaming the Sources**

The lack of background information and interpretations and a predominance of government and party sources compel a researcher to ask how and why the journalists included mostly aforementioned information and sources. Specific questions were asked, such as: a) how and why was the published information produced, b) why were specific sources quoted and c) is there an editorial policy concerning coverage of EU topics.

There is no explicit editorial policy – save at the tabloid – regarding EU coverage, even less with regard to the selection of sources; however, we can identify the policy based on our interviewees' answers. We divided them into two groups that refer to answers by (A) a journalist from the tabloid daily and (B) others. The editorial policy of the tabloid daily is not to cover EU topics because their readers do not care about them unless they focus on crises, catastrophes and scandals involving well-known personalities like in the analysed example. Other journalists' answers indicate EU topic coverage strategies and the selection of sources, as follows:

*Domestication of the EU topics and giving preference to domestic sources.* All interviewed journalists confirm conclusions of the majority of studies on media coverage of EU topics (e.g. AIM Research Consortium, 2006; De Vreese, 2002; Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000) that national news media cover EU topics with a predominantly national orientation. According to them, editors implicitly prefer national politics to international politics, especially to non-transparent, complex and depersonalized EU politics; their argument is that the audience is not interested in EU topics. A typical statement is, "The editor doesn't tell me clearly that he doesn't want me to cover EU stories, rather he assigns to me a different event; he explains that the EU story is not clear enough, that it is too complicated and it lacks known persons, thus, the readers wouldn't care about it. International politics is ignored anyway" (Journalist of *Delo*). Interviewed journalists claim that they mainly report EU news stories when they are relevant to Slovenia. For example, "We're interested in those EU issues that directly affect Slovenia and that our ... politicians and entrepreneurs ... are

involved in ... and that is why we quote them," (Journalist of *POP TV*) or, "When I was writing about the perspective and other EU stories, my starting point was what was in this and that story relevant to Slovenia and/or its citizens. This point of view I can get only from Slovenian sources" (Journalist of *Dnevnik*). Therefore, journalists selected domestic sources, i.e. Slovenian politicians, in order to obtain a national view of the NFP.

*Passivity of journalists.* The majority of journalists think of themselves as "information messengers", thus, they feel they do not need to seek and interpret facts; rather they expect to get them directly from interested actors and/or sources. According to them, the analysed news items are based on a direct contact with the prime minister, foreign and financial ministers and Slovenian EU Commissioner at a press conference that was organised by the PR of the Government Office for European Affairs (GOEA); other statements made by Slovenian politicians are based on press releases of political parties' PRs, the NFP financial data provided in the GOEA's press releases, foreign politicians' statements on news agencies' reports, such as Slovenian STA and international Reuters and the AP. The public television's correspondent from Brussels was the only one who personally obtained a statement from the presiding prime minister.

The broadcasters also used channels like Europe by Satellite and European Broadcasting Services as sources for visual material. Interviewed journalists attend all government press conferences; they perceive the government and other government agencies as representing social reality and see them as a primary source of information. For instance, "I always attend a government press conference, where I can obtain key information about what is happening in Slovenia /.../ and about high-level politics, of course; all this is given to us from key actors. I couldn't do my work without them." (Journalist of *TV Slovenia*) The journalists justify their own inactivity by arguing there is an abundance of events and information that they do not know well the EU topics especially that they are ignorant of the NFP.

Two journalists also remark that "reporting about the speeches given by government officials is much safer than adopting an interpretative frame; the former doesn't cause any unnecessary conflicts because politicians don't have a reason to reproach us." (Journalist of *Večer*) Only a journalist of *Dnevnik* says that she sees herself in a 'watchdog' role; hence she sought an independent and critical source. She also says that the practices of seeking nongovernmental and critical sources of information pertain to "political and ideological inclination of a medium; the majority of Slovenian mass media support the coalition politics, thus, journalists are not required to seek additional sources of information that are critical of the state."

*Blaming the sources for published facts.* Journalists agree that PR practitioners and politicians failed to communicate their policy positions on the NFP and to translate the numbers and the position of Slovenia and the EU during and after the negotiations into understandable set of information that can be recognisable to the audiences. A typical statement is, "It's in the sources' interest to produce true, clear and to reader understandable information. Look, the report on the perspective that includes true and accurate quotations allows readers to judge for themselves what politicians said and what kind of information their PR practitioners sent to the public" (Journalist of *TV Slovenia*). Thus, according to journalists a lack of

presentation of background information and interpretation is political and PR sources' fault; journalists disclaim any responsibility by quoting aforementioned sources. They agree that this kind of transmission of information by sources is taking place because PR officers are not able to provide in-depth interpretation of the NFP adoption; a journalist from *Dnevnik* adds that "PR practitioners conceal facts and provide only positive information in order to achieve a positive view of the government in relation to the NFP."

### **PR Communication Strategies: Domestication, Simplification of Assessment and Parties' Competition**

Owing to the fact that the interviewed journalists mainly constructed news from a structured pattern of sources, we interviewed those PR practitioners who had provided journalists (save those who write for tabloids) with the majority of information at organised press conferences and/or press releases: a PR practitioner for the GOEA, governing political party SDS, and for opposition parties SD and LDS. The key question we asked was what their strategies had been when communicating with journalists with regard to the NFP adoption process.

GOEA's PR practitioner claims that their key communication strategy was "to make the NFP a domestic matter and integrate it as part of national process because only domestication of EU topics attracts journalists and the public." He understands the presentation of numbers as a "hard fact", "neutral" and "objective" act, as something external to and independent of them, which needs simplified value orientation.

He defines *simplification of the agreement assessment* as "a provision of a clear key message that journalists need for purposes of value orientation; they are interested in clear evaluation of whether Slovenia successfully ended the negotiations". Due to the complexity of the EU topics journalists, in his opinion, "need and even ask for a clear positive or negative message".

*Lack of background information and interpretation* as "the non-disclosure of negotiating positions of Slovenia that defended Slovenian national interests". The government PR practitioner did not provide journalists with information that might have opposed "Slovenian national interest" or "uncovered our negotiation positions". Syntagma "national interest" or "our negotiation position" was particularly hiding a party interest; background information might have uncovered that the government party was not mainly responsible for successful negotiations. A PR practitioner acts as an EU expert, nevertheless, he understands communication with the media and the general public as "a tool for the promotion of government's and governing political party's achievements" legitimised as "a regular, publicly unacknowledged tool of every government". Mixing promotional and expert roles give a PR practitioner power and an option to select how to represent EU topics (Asanin Gole, Vercic, 2000), in our case non-disclosure and abundance of specific information about the NFP adoption process.

Even a PR practitioner of the biggest government coalition party SDS stresses the promotion of his own party as his strategy. He says that "their objective was to present their party's achievements in press releases to journalists and the public,

the achievements of the party, which succeeded in getting twice as much money as the preceding government”.

Moreover, PR practitioners of opposition parties also emphasise the strategy of promoting the governing political party. SD's PR practitioner argues that “the governing party is abusing the NFP Agreement for its own party interests; it is presenting the agreement as exclusively its own victory, however, we have supported it because it represents an EU common value that every Slovenian has to support it”. LDS's PR practitioner is even more radical in his opinion and states that “it is a battle among political parties for a positive presentation of EU topics for exclusively party objectives. Owing to the fact that the government subjected most media, the majority of journalists are reproducing information of the governing party, whereas the opposition LDS doesn't have an access to the media to critically talk about the NFP Agreement”. She adds that the government had to win the battle for the NFP negotiations results interpretation, because it is not so effective in other areas.

Thus, despite a consensus among Slovenian political parties on the EU, we can conclude, based on the interviews with PR consultants, that government and party PR practitioners usurped the right to represent the NFP Agreement for party purposes. This thesis stems mainly from answers given by the GOEA's PR practitioner. If we take his answers as being representative of general practices in the field, then we can conclude that the coordinating European body of the government of Slovenia concealed background information and interpretations and it shared an abundance of numerical and meaning-wise irrelevant data in conjunction with extremely simplified positive assessments in order to represent the NFP Agreement as a success of the government coalition. The government PR practitioner constrained potential plurality of interpretations; rather he provided the media with one simplified interpretation that consequently constructed a preferred meaning of the NFP Agreement. All the preceding was done on behalf of the imagined tastes of journalists and audiences and of national interests. This kind of strategy is not surprising, PR practitioners' willingness to reveal this strategy, however, is.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper analyses media coverage of EU topics, specifically Slovenian news media coverage of the NFP, a relevant and general EU topic. This study shows that it is useful to teach from the history of journalism and base on more the culturalist, bottom-up approach to media and journalism to coverage of EU topics. The paper confirms previous studies that the quality media maintain their national orientation in the selection of international news that is presented and that the mass media are not neutral transmitters of EU topics, rather they report about them by following specific ideological/political and journalistic professional guidelines. There are significant differences between elite and tabloid news media as well as between pro-government and opposition news media. The research, thus, confirms conclusions of past studies about elite news media coverage of EU topics (e.g. AIM Research Consortium, 2006; De Vreese, 2002; Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000); i.e. according to the institutional

relations that already exist at the national level between elite news media and political institutions, all national elite news media in the EU focus primarily on their national representatives and EU-related political bodies at the national level. This study also shows that tabloid dailies do not write about EU topics, save in cases when their news values are sensational and personalised, as in the analysed case. An interesting case is Slovenian only national tabloid television channel *POP TV*; due to their competition with the national public TV they covered the NFP Agreement similarly as TV Slovenia and in a tabloid way at the same time as well. Our research reveals that key differences in covering EU topics occur because of different political/ideological orientations of the mass media and journalistic self-perception. In addition, we show that pro-government news media relied on government sources and exclude critical voices, background information and interpretations of structural relations during the NFP adoption process. The media support for the government stems from (1) changes in the ownership structure of mainstream daily newspapers in 2005 – they are in the hands of pro-government companies (except for the regional daily newspaper *Dnevnik*, which is majority-owned by Austrian Styria) – and (2) from a new RTV Slovenija Act, which enables the government to exercise its power over editorial politics; the majority of MPs elects members of TV Slovenia's highest body – Council of RTV Slovenia (Jurančič, 2007). Political affiliations of the media are relevant with regard to journalists' self-perception; journalists who work in pro-government media perceive themselves as information messengers, whereas an opposition journalist sees him/herself as a watchdog. We cannot argue either way whether this is a common practice or just the case regarding the NFP Agreement, although the journalists themselves revealed and generalised the practice of how other EU topics are covered.

On the national level, EU topics are rarely accompanied by investigative journalistic practices. This observation is based on our observation that only one of the cases in our research has traces of investigative journalistic practices that provide journalists with available facts, documents and critical sources that enable him/her to interpret a situation in an in-depth analysis sense.

Journalists pass responsibility for published facts on the EU to their sources of information. This is in accordance with a recent analysis of journalistic practices regarding EU coverage in European news media (see AIM Research Consortium, 2006): there is no explicit editorial policy, there is a lack of journalists' knowledge about and interest in EU topics, and main characteristics are journalists' passivity and domestication of EU stories. Our study additionally reveals these features.

Elite political sources primarily define the representation of EU topics in news media. This observation is our key contribution to existing studies on media coverage of EU topics; this study, by employing a combination of various methods, shows that government and party officials and their PR sources are those who chiefly define the representation of the NFP and not only media/journalistic practices, as argued by preceding media-centred studies (e.g. De Vreese, 2002; Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000). Our analysis confirms Hall's (1978) conclusions that official sources have the ability to establish an initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question be-

cause dominant PR sources set the media agenda for the NFP and in general for EU topics. The interviewees give credit not merely to journalists responsible for the "EU beat", but also to national elite political sources. Furthermore, according to the analysis, the NFP coverage, based mainly on statements and press releases of institutionalised and elite political sources, does not leave much space to overlooked, complex interpretations of EU issues, such as the discussed NFP. Here we do not suggest that journalists would include their own opinions about EU issues within the hard news discourse, rather they would represent information on structural power relations in the EU based on facts, documents and a variety of sources. In this way they could explain why the European Council had passed such NFP. This study also confirms Schlesinger's (1990) observations on the competitive and shifting nature of key sources within privileged elites; between PRs of the government and political parties there is a competing field for dominating access to the media and the interpretation of events. Elite political sources understand the strategy of communicating with the media and the public about EU topics as a promotion of their own government coalition or political party. This is confirmed by answers by government as well as party sources on the NFP. They implicitly and even explicitly talk about the situation as a competitive battlefield between government and party sources for the news entry and representation of their own interpretation of the NFP and other EU topics as the only legitimate one.

To sum up, the NFP coverage is not a consequence only of the media negative attitude towards EU topics and media domestication of EU topics, as suggested by the majority of research, but also of a variety of factors, such as an initial definition and primary interpretation of a topic by national government and party PR sources, who already provide domesticated information and who appropriate EU topics for the promotion of their party, and such as journalistic practices that are passive and that pass the responsibility for information to the sources, and such as political/ideological inclinations of the media. Sources, journalistic practices and political/ideological orientation of the media construct a discourse, which excludes an important aspect of the EU reality, i.e. the modus operandi of and power relations in the EU.

The analysis confirms some already accepted theses. However, it also reveals the strategies employed by the sources when they communicate with the media and the public about EU topics, relationships between journalists and sources, and political/ideological and elite/tabloid differentiated EU topics coverage. However, we cannot fully argue that this kind of "non-critical" and "non-analytical" media treatment is a result of the facts that Slovenia only recently joined the EU and that it still has elements of a country in transition. In any case, we suggest a test of some of the theses by an international comparative analysis, including testing our conclusions with other EU topics.



### **Appendix: a list of the news headlines from analysed news items**

#### *Delo*

17 December 2005      Oddahnila si je tudi Slovenija  
19 December 2005      Pozitivno za Slovenijo in EU  
19 December 2005      Slovenija je lahko zadovoljna

#### *Dnevnik*

17 December 2005      Vrh EU sprejel perspektivo  
18 December 2005      Proračun kot kolateralna sreča

#### *Slovenske novice*

18 December 2005      Kmetijsko podpore za bogataše

#### *Večer*

18 December 2005      Vlada zadovoljna s pogajanjmi

#### *24 ur (POP TV)*

17 December 2005      Eni zadovoljni, drugi kritični  
18 December 2005      Koalicija je zadovoljna, opozicija malo manj

#### *TV dnevnik (TV SLO)*

17 December 2005      Voditelji so sprejeli perspektivo  
20 December 2005      Blair brani dogovor

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> According to 2005 *Report on National Reading Levels* (2006), *Delo*'s reach is 12.4% (212 000), *Dnevnik*'s 10.6% (180 000), and *Večer*'s 11.2% (191 000).

<sup>2</sup> According to AGB Nielsen Media Service (2006), *24 ur (POP TV)* ratings are 46%, *TV dnevnik (TV SLO)* 43%.

<sup>3</sup> *Delo*, *Dnevnik*, *Večer* and *TV Slovenija* have a correspondent in Brussels.

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## **Nismo li ništa naučili iz novinarske povijesti? Medijsko izvještavanje usvajanja nove financijske perspektive Europske unije u Sloveniji**

**Karmen Erjavec  
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### **SAŽETAK**

Ovaj rad temelji se na prijašnjim medijskim i novinarskim studijama izvještavanja medija o temama koje se tiču Europske unije (EU) i donosi društveniji pristup medijskim i novinarskim studijama izvještavanja o temama vezanim uz EU te prezentira analizu izvještavanja slovenskih medija o novim financijskim perspektivama EU. Korišten je tekstualno orijentiran kritički diskurs analize kako bi se prošlo uključivanje ili isključivanje značenja ovih tema i kako bi se razumio izbor izvora pojedinih slovenskih medija. Ciljani intervjui s novinarima i njihovim najvažnijim izvorima su izvršeni kako bi se pojasnilo zašto su novinari izvještavali o pojedinim temama na određeni način. Studija otkriva razlike između izvještavanja EU između elite i tabloida, kao i između medija naklonjenih vladi i medija naklonjenih oporbi. Oni mediji koji su naklonjeni vladi oslanjaju se na vladine izvore i isključuju kritične izvore, informacije iz izvora u pozadini i interpretacije. Dodatne analize koje se temelje na izvorima, za razliku od prijašnjih studija ovog područja, pokazuju da se ovaj diskurs ne temelji samo na novinarskoj praksi, nego je odraz i komunikacijske strategije vlade. Predstavljanje tema o EU kao domaćih koristi se kako bi se promovirala vladina i stranačka politika što vodi daljnjem deficitu demokracije u EU.

Ključne riječi: novinarska povijest, europska unija, analiza kritičnog diskursa, mediji, odnosi s javnošću, slovenija, politički diskurs