



## FRAMING MEDIA IMAGINARIES OF NATO'S POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS NATO IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the framing of NATO's political-geographic imaginations in the Western Balkans. The focus of the research is on the media portrayal of NATO, i.e. it includes a media analysis of 190 articles on NATO's enlargement to Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The selected articles were researched over three time periods from 2008 to 2021. The results show that over the period of three NATO enlargements, the number of articles framed negatively in today's non-members nor the number of articles framed positively in today's NATO members of the Western Balkans has not increased. In fact, the opposite processes have occurred; a decrease in negative articles in members and an increase in positive articles in non-members. The research confirmed that the choice of photographs and keywords in members is consistent with NATO's professional political-geographic imagination. The results confirm that the media, by choosing the mentioned countries and the mentioned politicians, emphasize Euro-Atlantic integration. In the end, it turned out that Serbia and Russia are presented as "enemy" states with the aim of opposing the leading Euro-Atlantic narrative.

### Key words

NATO, Western Balkans, media analysis, imaginary geography, political geography

## INTRODUCTION

One of the purposes of domestic media is to shape the universal perception of citizens without excessive influence from foreign media. By creating perceptions, an imaginary geography is also created, which shapes people's understanding of the space around them (Balogh et al., 2022). Imagination plays a special role in political geography, within which different views on states, wars, conflicts, international relations, etc. often manifest (Al-Mahfedi, 2011). The development



of international organizations further complicates the situation because their perception is created through all members. Specifically, the focus of this paper is the political-geographical imagination of NATO, an alliance that has 32 members and is currently the largest military alliance.

This paper analyses the political-geographical imagination of NATO in the so-called Western Balkans, which includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. The Western Balkans is a "product" of the European Union from 1997, listed in the document "The Role of the Union in the World" (Slukan Altić, 2009). Initially, Croatia was also included in it, but since 2013 and its accession to the European Union, it is no longer considered a Western Balkan country (Kolstø, 2016). For this reason, it is listed separately from the other countries in this research. The European Union brought these six (seven) countries together under one name so that they could work together on the Euro-Atlantic integration process (Milardović, 2009). However, 28 years later, it is evident that the idea of a common regional approach has not led to the much-desired integration.

## OBJECTIVES

The main research goal of this paper is to gain insights into NATO's political-geographic imagination in the Western Balkans through the analysis of media articles. Accordingly, the presentation of positivity (the number of stated advantages of NATO membership) and negativity (the number of stated negatives of NATO membership) in members and non-members, as well as the imagination of NATO through photographs and keywords, is comparatively investigated. Furthermore, the presentation of Euro-Atlanticism through the mentioned countries and the mentioned politicians (presidents, prime ministers, NATO secretaries general and others) in the articles is research. The last research objective relates to the analysis of the formation of the presentation of "enemy" states. The chosen media articles from internet portals relate to three events refer to the region, namely the NATO expansion to Croatia and Albania, then to the Montenegrin accession and finally to the North Macedonian enlargement. The paper also includes Croatian articles, given that Croatia was, after all, the part of the research area, and was included in the first media-analysed event of NATO enlargement. In this research, Croatia is used as a case study, but the results related to it do not enter into the testing of hypotheses and the main conclusions. In accordance with the selected events, the time frame of this research is from 2008 to 2021. Ultimately, based on the research questions, the following hypotheses were formed:

H1: Over the period of three NATO enlargements, the number of articles framed negatively in today's non-members and the number of articles framed positively in today's NATO members of the Western Balkans increases.



- H2: The choice of photographs and keywords is consistent with NATO's professional political-geographic imagination.
- H3: By choosing the Western Balkans countries and politicians, the media emphasizes Euro-Atlantic integration.
- H4: Serbia and Russia present themselves as "enemy" states with the aim of opposing the leading Euro-Atlantic narrative.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Edward Said (1978) first introduced the idea of imagination into geography through his book *Orientalism*. In the book, he explains how the Orient is presented as a discursive construction that serves political power. Said called this way of perceiving space imaginary geography. The idea of imagination enters political geography in the 1990s under the influence of geographers Derek Gregory (1994), Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996), Simon Dalby (1991), etc. They emphasize how maps, regions, travelogues, etc., are produced through discourses, imaginations and narratives of power. Entering into the 2000s, there has been a more intensive development of the study of imagination in political geography; in particular, imaginations in security strategies, media, culture, migrations, etc. are beginning to be investigated (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). In the context of this paper, the role of media imaginations is important because the focus of the research is on the media representation of NATO. Already in the 19th century, the media played a key role in shaping colonial imaginations, and during the first half of the 20th century they were often at the service of ruling political structures, promoting their ideas of political geography (Said, 1978). Through the selection of images, narratives and metaphors, the media shape the perception of the space of "us" and "them", "safe" and "dangerous", "civilized" and "barbaric", etc. (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). Visual and textual representations in the media often reproduce the geopolitics of threat. It is also known as the "CNN effect", which shows how televised images of war (e.g., Gulf War 1991) can shape the foreign policy and public opinion of a particular country (Livingston, 1991). After September 11, 2001, the "war" against terrorism was significantly portrayed in the media, and a significant globalization of the media was also noticeable (Reese and Lewis, 2009). Media imagination is further complicated by the development of the Internet and social networks, which leads to the fragmentation of media representations (Pratap and Pathak, 2025). From a geographical point of view, the approach to media as maps is interesting. Maps serve orientation in physical space, and media serve orientation in informational and political-geographical space. People rely on the media to know "where they are" in relation to social processes, crises or global events (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Just as geographic maps simplify and depict space, media also simplify and depict social, political-geographic and cultural processes (Monmonier, 1996).



Recent work in human geography points to a broader metamodern turn that blends material analysis with reflexive, semiotic approaches. Matlovič and Matlovičová (2025) frame this shift as an oscillatory, post-disciplinary mode of thinking that treats geopolitical representations as both symbolic constructions and material interventions. Building on this, we approach media imaginaries of NATO in the Western Balkans as hybrid “hylosemiotic” assemblages: images, narratives, and strategic deployments that co-produce political space through a constant back-and-forth between certainty and skepticism. This metamodern stance supports a method that reads NATO’s visual and textual messaging alongside its on-the-ground practices, allowing a more nuanced account of how political geography is staged, circulated, and contested.

It is also necessary to mention imagination in the geography of propaganda. Spatial dimensions of propaganda have been present since the time of the Great War, and peaked during the Second World War (Monmonier, 1996). The explicit notion of the geography of propaganda appears in the military and political literature of the USA in the 1950s with the aim of practical application within different regions. The so-called “blue-red” maps that symbolize the division of the world into NATO members and Soviet republics (Tyner, 2007). The geography of propaganda was not discussed after the end of the Cold War because its role was mostly taken over by critical geopolitics and media geography (Ó Tuathail, 1996). However, in the last ten years, various propaganda maps have come to the fore again, which involve very strong imagination. For example, the map of the terrorist group ISIS is well-known, which represented all the territories that the group wants to conquer (Bixler, 2015). The last theoretical concept of this paper concerns the imagination of “enemy” states. This process starts from the theoretical definition of the chosen space as “Other”, that is, distant, exotic, but also dangerous (Couldry, 2017). Following this, the imagination of “enemy” states arises for the purpose of legitimizing a particular conflict (creating a moral framework for war or sanctions), for the purpose of mobilizing the public (us = good, them = evil) and for the sake of geographical forces (enemy space as threatening, expanding, etc.) (Vuorinen, 2012). It rarely happens that a certain international organization is characterized as an “enemy state”, but there are also such cases, for example, NATO in Serbia in 1999 (Moskovičević and Lazović, 2024).

For the full theoretical context of this paper, it is necessary to look at the imagination of NATO and the Western Balkans. In political geography, NATO has always had the symbolism of a military connection of the West, or an opponent of the Warsaw Pact (Gheciu, 2019). At the end of the Cold War, it was expected that NATO would be dissolved but this did not happen. The exact opposite happened, NATO carried out its first military action in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then in other neighbouring countries; Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia (Tereziev et al., 2018). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, NATO membership



became extremely desirable among the former Eastern European countries and symbolized joining the political West. Military operations in the Balkans “opened the door” to NATO interventions around the world; Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, etc. (Newman, 2024). NATO’s imagination turned it into a “world policeman”. The last NATO intervention on which all major powers agreed was in Libya in 2011 (Gheciu, 2019). After that, NATO’s imagination begins to acquire a negative component, especially emphasized in Russia. With the almost constant expansion towards Eastern Europe, the membership of these countries in NATO is a serious point of contention in American-Russian relations, which culminates on February 24, 2022 with open Russian aggression against Ukraine (Zhurzhenko, 2024). NATO’s imagination is mostly depicted through collective defence, that is, in the event of an attack on one member, the others must defend it (Blease, 2010).

If the imagination of NATO could conditionally be called positive, the imagination of the Western Balkans is negative in most of the world. This area is often synonymous with war conflicts, riots, political instability, corruption, underdevelopment, etc. (Todorova, 1997). The initial positive idea of Euro-Atlantic integration was replaced by exhaustive accession negotiations and numerous blockades, and full integration seems almost unattainable for some countries of the Western Balkans (Tereziev et al., 2018). NATO’s imagination in the Western Balkans is a complex phenomenon, which differs from country to country. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are members of NATO, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia is member of the Partnership for Peace (Fig. 1) (NATO, 2023). Kosovo officially does not have an army, that is, the Kosovo Security Forces should turn into an official army by 2028. For this reason, Kosovo is not a member of the Partnership, but it is the location of the largest NATO military base (Bondsteel base) in this part of Southeast Europe (Blumi, 2019). NATO plays the role of a factor of stability in the Western Balkans, that is, the Alliance is still politically and militarily present after more than 30 years since the beginning of the first conflicts (Mulchinock, 2017).

Building on this theoretical foundation, it is essential to embed the study within the specific media–political landscape of the Western Balkans, where imaginative geographies are both produced and amplified through structurally constrained media systems. Research shows that many states in the region experience varying degrees of media capture, in which political and economic elites exert influence over editorial agendas and news framing (MCIC, 2022). In such environments, photographs and keywords related to NATO do not merely illustrate events they become symbolic instruments through which geopolitical identities and threat perceptions are constructed. Studies of disinformation and media narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate that visual elements such as images of military interventions, ruins, or NATO soldiers are systematically mobilised to evoke historical memories and cultivate negative imaginaries of Western security actors



(Agović et al., 2019). A similar dynamic is evident in Serbia, where mainstream media frequently reproduce a dual geopolitical narrative: pragmatic cooperation with NATO at the institutional level, contrasted with overwhelmingly negative visual and textual portrayals in news coverage, often centred on the 1999 bombing or on idealised representations of Russian military power (Anastasijević, 2017). Comparable processes occur in North Macedonia, where political communication and media framing commonly revolve around questions of nationalism, security, and Euro-Atlantic integration, often reflecting broader political contestations (Trpevska and Micevski, 2017). Croatia exhibits its own pattern, with media outlets periodically mobilising security-related narratives to shape public attitudes toward NATO, particularly in moments of regional tension or global crises (Šalaj, 2013). In Montenegro, the media landscape often reflects the country's oscillation between strong pro-NATO governmental narratives surrounding the 2017 accession and persistent domestic contestation linked to identity politics and external influence (Džankić, 2019). In Albania, where NATO membership is widely supported, media



**Fig. 1** Years of joining NATO and the Partnership for Peace

Source: NATO (2023)



representations tend to frame the Alliance as a guarantor of security, modernisation and international legitimacy, often invoking narratives of Euro-Atlantic belonging (IDM, 2019). Kosovo presents yet another configuration: although not an official NATO member, NATO is symbolically central due to KFOR's security role and the political significance of international protection, which strongly shapes predominantly positive or aspirational media imaginaries of the Alliance (KCSS, 2020). Regional assessments of media freedom also highlight how weakened journalistic standards, clientelism, and politicised newsrooms create fertile ground for such affective geopolitical framings (Brogi et al., 2014). From a geopolitical perspective, the Western Balkans continue to be discursively represented as a space of instability, contested identities and external influence, a narrative reproduced in academic and policy literature (Belgrade School of Security Studies, 2007).

## DATA AND METHODS

Geographers, but also political scientists, sociologists, experts in international relations, wrote about political-geographic imaginations through the media. Liben-Nowell et al. (2005) explored the concept of geographic focus, which is important for understanding how ideas and propaganda narratives spread through social networks. Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2005) compared how the leading digital media in the USA and the United Kingdom and in Egypt and Qatar portrayed the war in Iraq. They proved that the imaginary geography of that war was significantly different: the media from the United Kingdom and the USA pointed to the reconstruction of Iraq and "liberation", while the Arab media emphasized violence and civilian casualties. O'Loughlin et al. (2010) studied over 5,000 violent events in Afghanistan and Pakistan, mapping their spatial and temporal dynamics using the media. In the research of media imagination, the analysis of then Twitter (today X) announcements are particularly popular; such researches are provided by Takhteyev et al. (2012), Gabel et al. (2020), Kobilke et al. (2023) and Nisch (2024), etc. Through a narrative (content) analysis of a large number of posts on Twitter, they examine the conflict in Ukraine, the conflict in Kashmir, geographical connectivity, but also Finland's entry into NATO. Vukasovich and Dejanovic-Vukasovich (2016) bring comparative media representations of humanitarian interventions, which were justified through narratives about the humanitarian crisis, war crimes and regime responsibility. Thematically close to this research is the research of Lakić (2018), who investigated discursive patterns in the British media during the NATO air strikes in 1999. He argues that NATO's actions were legitimized through the construction of the "Other" and the humanitarian dimension. Similar research is also provided by Purcell and Rogelj (2025), who describe the imagination of the USA in Slovenia through media investigation of articles.



In this paper, media articles on the most widely read internet portals of the Western Balkan countries were searched. In accordance with the three NATO enlargements, three time periods of research were determined; I. from 15. 3. to 15. 4. 2009, II. from 15. 5. 2017. to 15. 6. 2017. and III. period from 15. 3. 2020. to 15. 4. 2020. The plan was to explore ten articles from each country for a defined period, from the two most read portals in each country. This is a total of 70 articles for a certain period of time, or a total of 210 articles. However, three challenges were identified during the research. In the first research period, the planned 70 articles, or ten per country, were not found. A total of 50 articles were identified, as many of today's most widely read portals did not yet have digital editions in 2009. Internet portals were selected based on two rankings of the most visited websites for each country; Semrush.com and Similarweb.com. Accordingly, the second problem related to the selection of articles on portals that are not among the two most read (Tab. 1) in order to collect a sufficient number of them. Articles were searched in order of readability (visitation) of each portal. The third problem related to the publication of articles within the planned time periods, namely, a certain number of articles related to the topic were not published exclusively within the planned periods. The principle of thematic relevance in media analysis was applied, which is more important than strict chronological precision when events have a premature or prolonged media impact in public discourse (Purcell and Rogelj, 2025). Therefore, articles were searched in the following order: 1. most visited portals, 2. time of publication and 3. topic. The content analysis of media articles on internet portals was conducted in July and August 2025. They were studied in terms of content, keywords, selected photographs, mentioned countries, mentioned politicians, positivity and negativity in the member states, and presentations of "hostile" countries. The following programs were used when processing qualitative data: QDAcity and NVivo. The aforementioned programs were used in the process of coding quotes from politicians and in the process of coding the "hostile" state narrative.

To address copyright considerations, all photographs analysed in the study were sourced exclusively from publicly accessible news portals, and no copyrighted material outside the published articles was downloaded or reproduced. The availability and stability of online archives were verified at the time of data collection, and for earlier years with limited digital records this limitation is explicitly acknowledged as a structural constraint of the sample. Furthermore, the selection of media portals and the potential biases arising from uneven digital accessibility were carefully evaluated, and these factors are transparently discussed as methodological limitations of the study.



**Tab. 1** Most visited and analysed internet portals by country

Country	Most visited portals	Analysed online portals and number of articles
Albania	Shqiptarja.com, Balkanweb.al	Shqiptarja.com (10), TV Klan.al (9), Balkanweb.al (5), Top Channel Albania.al (4), Gazeta.al (2)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Klix.ba, Avaz.ba	Klix.ba (15), Avaz.ba (8), Nezavisne novine.ba (2)
Montenegro	Vijesti.me, CdM.me	Vijesti.me (10), CdM.me (9), Analitika.me (4), RTCG.me (2)
Kosovo	Telegrafi.com, Klan Kosova.com	Telegrafi.com (10), Klan Kosova.com (7), Gazeta.com (6)
North Macedonia	Točka.mk, Makfax.com.mk	Točka.mk (10), Slobodna Europa.mk (5), Utrinski.mk (4), Slobodenpoečat.mk (3), Makfax.com.mk (3), Lokalno.mk (2), Tvm.mk (1)
Serbia	Blic.rs, Kurir.rs	Blic.rs (15), Kurir.rs (10), Mondo.rs (5)
Croatia	Indeks.hr, Jutarnji.hr	Indeks.hr (13), Jutarnji.hr (13), Dnevnik.hr (1), Net.hr (1), Tportal.hr (1)

Source: Authors based on analysed articles, *Similarweb.com* and *Semrush.com* (2025)

## RESULTS

### Positive and negative imagination of NATO

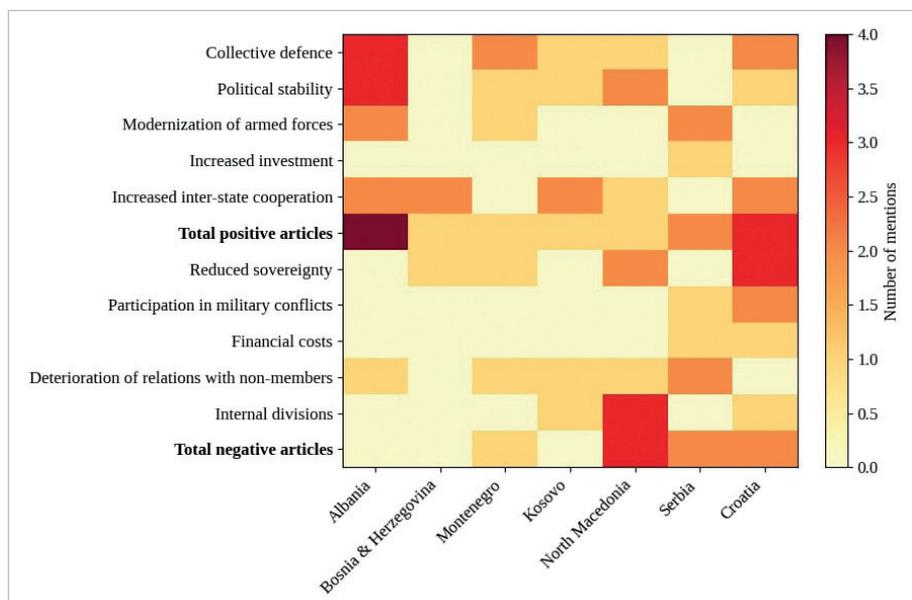
Positivity can generally be defined as presenting a particular topic from a favourable perspective – emphasizing benefits, progress, praise or support. On the other hand, negativity is defined as the occurrence of criticism, expressing concerns, highlighting problems, conflicts or harmful consequences in articles (Kamel et al., 2018). Analysing positivity and negativity contributes to understanding media bias, monitoring public discourse and imagination, detecting disinformation or propaganda, assessing the impact on readers, etc. (Hamborg et al., 2021). There are already established patterns of words used in positive articles in the media: important step, success, progress, praise, support, approved, opportunity, benefits, etc. (Kim, 2023). On the other hand, in negative connotations, the following are used: danger, imposition, threat, unnecessary, unacceptable, distrust, failure, insufficiently clarified, division, etc. (Kim, 2023). With the beginning of the 1990s, advanced forms of content analysis began to develop, and the term “tone of coverage” was introduced.

In this research, the positivity and negativity of the articles is determined by the number of mentions of the advantages and disadvantages of NATO membership. When more than 50% of the text of the article is related to advantages or disadvantages, the articles are classified as positive or negatively connoted. The presentation of positivity and negativity through articles on NATO news is written by Rozado et al. (2022), while the main advantages and disadvantages of NATO



membership are written by Le Jeune (2010), Tomz et al. (2023) and Rockwell (2024). Based on these works, five main advantages of NATO membership were selected: collective defence, political stability, modernization of the armed forces, more investments and more state cooperation. Five main disadvantages were also selected: reduced sovereignty, participation in military conflicts, financial costs, deterioration of relations with non-members and internal divisions.

In the time period related to the Albanian and Croatian accession into NATO, the most articles (Fig. 2) refer to the advantage of collective defence and more state cooperation, and the least to more investments. Albanian articles mention the most advantages, and Bosnian and Herzegovina the least. A total of 13 articles were recorded, with more than 50% of the text focused on the advantages. The positive tone of the articles does not necessarily correlate with the number of benefits, but the more important focus is on how much the article is directed at them. On the other hand, the reduction of sovereignty is mentioned as the main disadvantage of NATO membership the most (Fig. 5), while the financial costs are the least mentioned. Most of the shortcomings were mentioned in the Croatian and Macedonian articles, which shows a certain paradox because Croatia had just become a member of NATO in that period. The media clearly state what Croatia expects in NATO, which is why the negative side of membership is also shown.



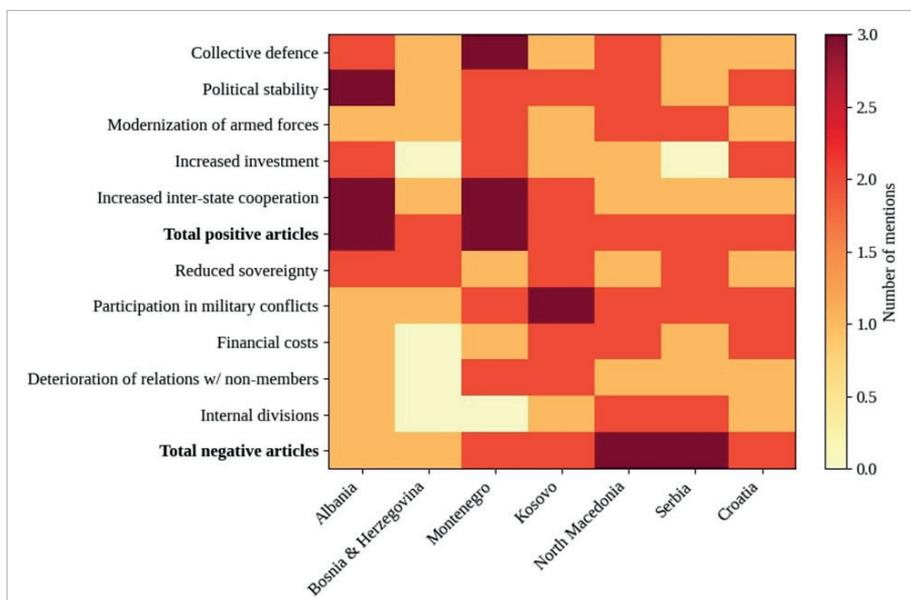
**Fig. 2** Quantitative analysis of positive and negative articles related to Albanian and Croatian membership

Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2009)



In the Macedonian case, the media express their regret for not joining due to the dispute over the name by stating the lack of membership. The total number of articles with negative connotations is eight. Here it is important to mention that 29 articles are not classified in either the positive or the negative category, because in their texts they do not refer mostly to benefits or disadvantages. They mostly represent shorter media reports on the entry of Albania and Croatia into NATO.

In the case of media reporting on Montenegro's accession to NATO, an increase in the number of articles with positive connotations to 16 is visible (Fig. 3). The advantage of political stability is mentioned the most, and the greater number of investments the least. In general, the advantages are mentioned the most in Montenegrin, and the least in Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian articles. In terms of disadvantages, the deterioration of relations with non-NATO member states is mentioned 18 times (Fig. 3), with Russia and Serbia being the primary focus. Internal divisions and the reduction of sovereignty are also strongly emphasized. Three Serbian articles have a negative review, but most of the disadvantages are mentioned in Montenegrin articles. The same paradox was observed in Croatian articles in 2009, but here too, they are inquiring into what awaits Montenegro as a NATO member. It is noticeable that not a single article from Bosnia and



**Fig. 3** Quantitative analysis of positivity and negativity of articles related to Montenegrin membership

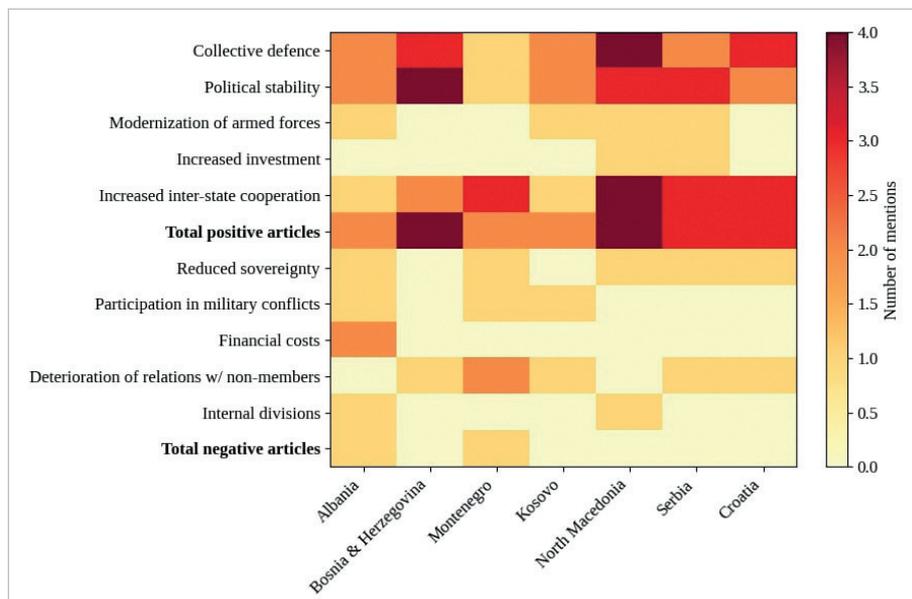
Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2016-2017)



Herzegovina is negative. Compared to the first period, the analysis included more articles, but no significant increase in positivity or negativity in them was found.

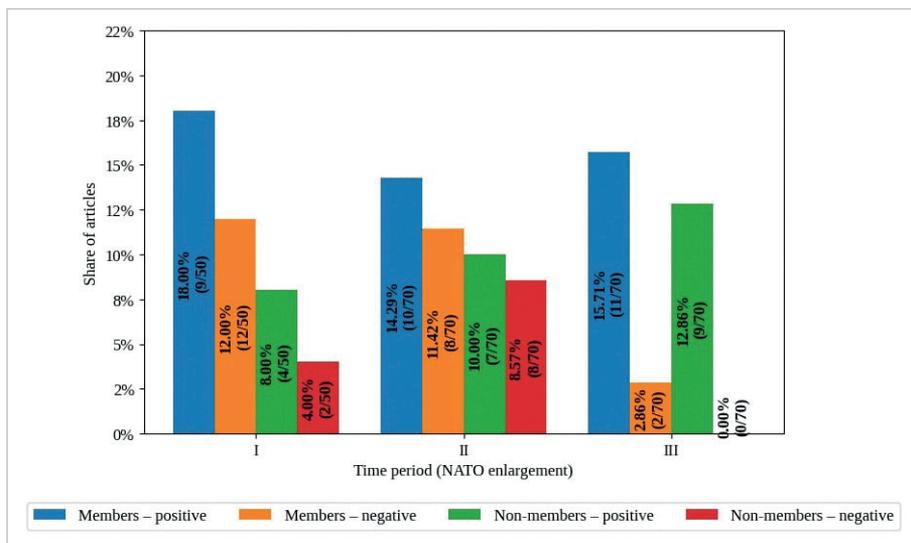
In the last, third period, there is a visible increase in the number of positively oriented articles (Fig. 4), 20 of them. Most positive were written in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is part of a noticeable trend in these countries. To the same extent, collective defence, political stability and a greater number of state cooperation are written about, while the increase in investments is least mentioned. Macedonian media are most positive about the benefits of membership, and it is surprising that in Serbian articles a total of ten benefits is mentioned, which North Macedonia will feel when it becomes a member of NATO. Only two of them (Fig. 4) stand out with more than 50% connection with membership deficiencies. It is mostly stated that membership can contribute to the deterioration of relations with non-members, while internal divisions are mentioned twice. The Albanian media point out the most shortcomings, while the Bosnian only points out one. It is obvious that the negativity about the membership of North Macedonia is reduced to a minimum.

Processing the overall trend in the number of positive and negative media articles, certain trends can be observed (Fig. 5). In today's member states (Albania, Montenegro, Croatia and North Macedonia), there is a continuous decrease in



**Fig. 4** Quantitative analysis of positive and negative articles related to Macedonian membership

Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2018-2021)



**Fig. 5** The difference in the number of positively and negatively connoted articles between NATO members and non-members

Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2021)

negatively oriented articles, while there is no clear trend in positive articles. In the case of non-members (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia), an increase in positively connoted articles is visible. A continuous trend pattern of decreased negatively connoted articles is not visible. In the case when Croatian articles are excluded from the total results, the trends are the same.

### NATO's Imagination through Photos and Keywords

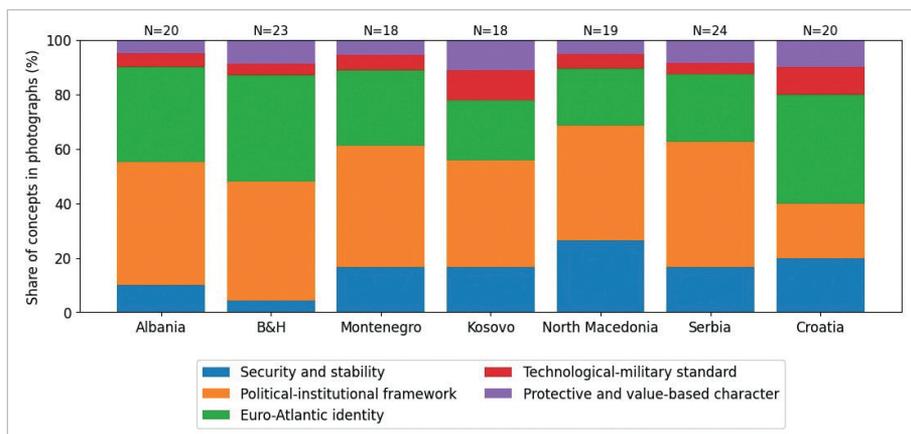
Most of the examined articles, out of 190, include at least one photo that is thematically related to the text of the article. In the 1990s, critical analysis of photographs developed, which primarily manifested itself through visual representations of wars, poverty, deprivation, etc. With the development of digital media in the 2000s, the social significance of photographs increased, and the focus of research expanded to include gender and racial presentation, integration with the text, aesthetics, etc. (Tran, 2017). On the other hand, keywords can be defined as selected terms or phrases that represent the basic concepts, themes, methods, or spatial determinants that an individual article addresses. In media articles, they are used for searching within the portal, for search engine optimization (improving the visibility), and for linking similar content (thematic articles, the same people, events, etc.) (Kim, 2021).

To understand the professional political-geographic imagination, the NATO Public Diplomacy Handbook 2020 (ACO/ACT, 2020) was used. Based on



this booklet, five concepts were selected that NATO emphasizes as key in its professional political-geographic imagination. These are: 1. security and stability - NATO as the protector of collective security, 2. political-institutional framework - alliance, integration, democratic values, 3. Euro-Atlantic identity - NATO as a symbol of the transatlantic community, 4. technological-military standard - modernization, interoperability, military standard and 5. protective and value character - humanitarian missions, protection of the civilian population. According to these five concepts, five keywords were selected, which will be comparatively searched for in the examined articles: security, integration, Euro-Atlanticism, modernization and protection. When investigating the photographs, a classification is made according to the five selected concepts based on what they depict. For example, for the fourth concept "Technological and military standard" it is necessary to have a certain modern weapon depicted in the photograph.

In all countries, the most common political-institutional depictions in the photographs (Fig. 6), which include various handshakes, flags, meetings, signings, etc. This concept closely overlaps with the concept of Euro-Atlantic identity, which is marked by the EU and NATO flags, the cooperation of diplomats within Euro-Atlanticism, NATO maps, etc. The concept "Technological-military standard" is depicted in the fewest photographs. Based on this, it can be seen that NATO is primarily portrayed in the media as a political and diplomatic organization, and less as a military force. In all countries, the number of photographs in the articles is approximately the same, and in some articles, it is noticeable that the photographs were once present, but have since been removed. It can be concluded that the



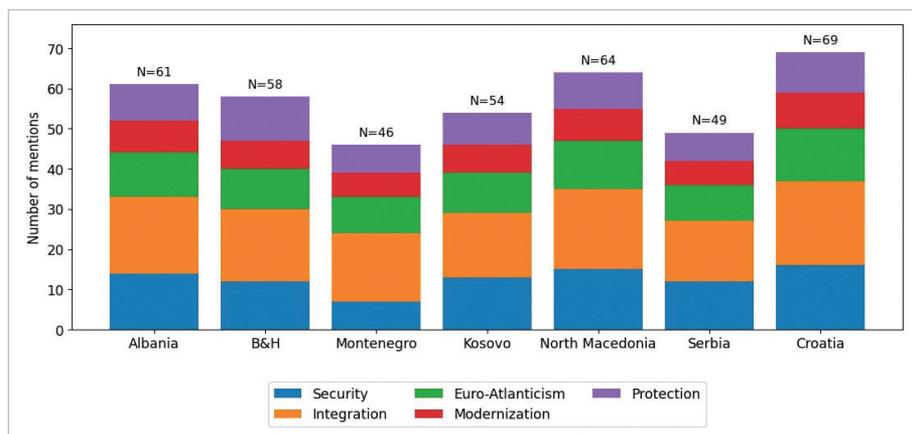
**Fig. 6** Quantitative analysis of photographs of articles according to NATO's professional political-geographical imagination

Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2021)



photographs are significantly in line with NATO's own professional political and geographical imaginations. Also, if photographs from Croatia are excluded, the overall results do not change, i.e. the Croatian media select photographs according to the same principle as the Western Balkan media.

In the case of keywords (Fig. 7), the most frequently mentioned word is "integration" (which also includes the word "membership"). The words "security" and "Euro-Atlanticism" also stand out in terms of the number of mentions (within which linguistic variants were also considered). Words related to the military component of NATO are used in the smallest number. This leads to the conclusion that the media, even though keywords, emphasize the institutional and integration imagination more than all others. The highest number of selected keywords was recorded in texts on portals in Croatia and the lowest number in Serbia. For a complete understanding of the relationship of the selected keywords to other keywords; five additional keywords were selected (ratification, membership fee, opposition, summit and invitation). These selected words were used to compare their occurrence with words consistent with NATO's professional political-geographic imaginations. The occurrence of these other words is as follows: ratification – 39, membership fee – 23, opposition – 43, summit – 35, invitation – 27). In comparison, other keywords appear less frequently, on average 44% less, meaning that there is a significant alignment of primary keywords with professional NATO imaginations. When those mentioned in Croatian articles are excluded from the keywords, the overall results again do not change. Croatian media select keywords in line with the rest of the other media.



**Fig. 7** Quantitative analysis of key words in articles according to NATO's political-geographic imagination

*Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2021)*



Overall, the examination of photographs and keywords in media articles in the Western Balkan countries clearly shows that the media largely reproduce NATO's professional political-geographical imagination. Visual and textual analysis show a degree of homogeneity in the way NATO is represented, despite differences between countries in terms of membership and political positions. Omitting photographs and keywords from Croatian articles does not lead to significant changes in the results.

### **The role of politicians and states in the media imagination about NATO**

Hamborg et al. (2021) states that politicians are individuals who participate in the process of making and implementing collective decisions through formal positions within political institutions. As in the case of keywords and photographs, the appearance of politicians was first investigated quantitatively until the 1970s. A significant shift was recorded with the development of television, after which the focus on personalizing politicians in the media began (Miller and McKerrow, 2010). In the 1990s and 2000s, political rhetoric in the media has been increasingly addressed in detail; the content and target audience of political messages are explored. On the other hand, the countries mentioned in the media can provide insight into who the media try to perceive as key influential forces or problematic factors. The mentioned countries to a certain extent maintain the current political-geographical trends in the countries of the Internet portals (Segev and Blondheim, 2012).

As already mentioned, in this paper, certain politicians are considered: the president, the prime minister and the secretary general of NATO (Tab. 3). For the sake of clarity and simplicity of the research, it was decided that other officials will be classified in the category of "others". The aim is to discover the existence of Euro-Atlanticism through the mentioned political functions, i.e. whether the mentioned politicians are in line with Euro-Atlantic integration and whether they personally see a Euro-Atlantic perspective. The emphasis on Euro-Atlanticism is reflected in the number of mentions of politicians from the European Union and the USA and through selected quotes from politicians, which clearly show support for these integrations. Although there are politicians within the USA and the EU who are not supporters of Euro-Atlanticism, in this case their mention was used as a reference to the countries that are one of the main creators of the Euro-Atlantic political geography of the Western Balkans and Croatia. Domestic politicians are not included in the analysis of highlighting Euro-Atlantic integration, since their mention primarily reflects media subjectivity and does not provide a clear insight into the Euro-Atlantic orientation itself. In total, when the mentioned EU and US politicians are added, the number we get is 73 politicians (61.3%), while on the other hand, the sum of Russian and other politicians (European outside the EU



and Asian) gives a number of 46 (38.7%). In the case of quotations, a total of 89 out of 109 quotations (81.7%) emphasized Euro-Atlantic integration. Emphasis was “crystallized” through five selected codes (Tab. 2). A coding process was carried out in order to get a clear insight into the politicians’ narratives. Overall, it is visible how the mentioned politicians, according to their nationality and quoted quotes, present themselves in accordance with Euro-Atlantic integration. From the attached results (Tab. 2), it is evident that the Croatian media have the same reporting pattern, as they mention politicians in the way as other countries of the Western Balkans. Croatian articles recorded the largest number of citations directed towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

**Tab. 2** Quantitative analysis of politicians and Euro-Atlantic orientations in media articles

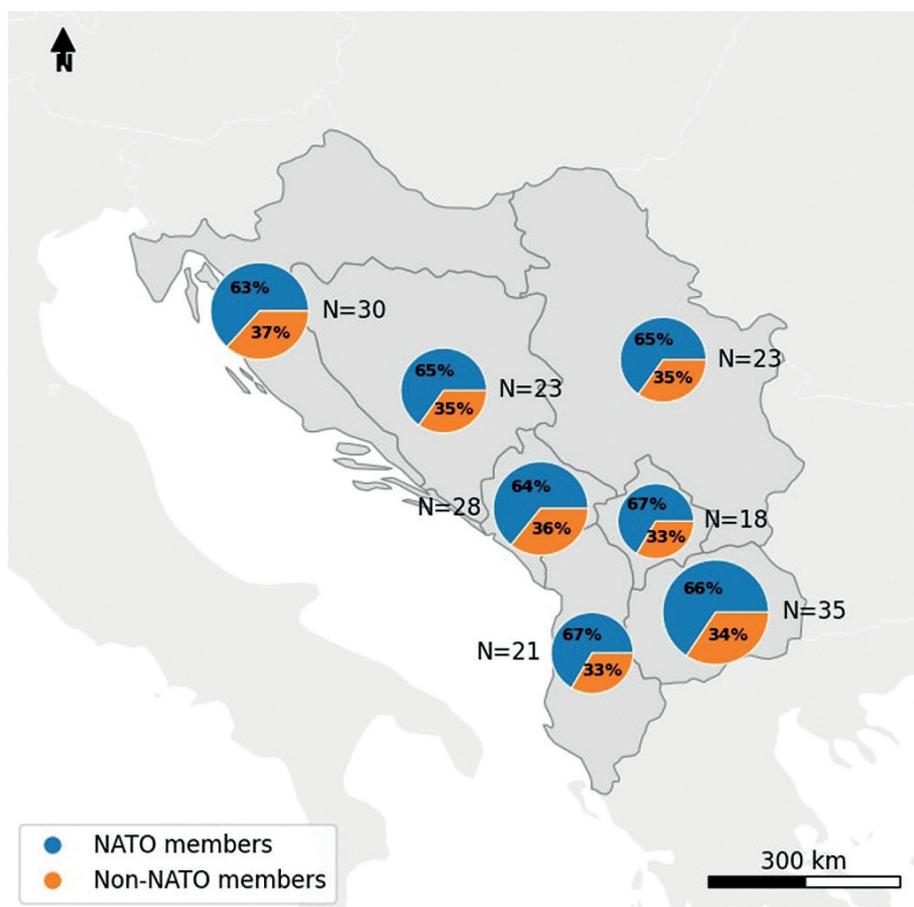
Category of Politicians		Number of politicians mentioned in articles by country of origin						
		Albania	B&H	Montenegro	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Serbia	Croatia
Prime Minister		4	4	4	4	6	4	7
President		6	4	5	6	4	2	9
NATO Secretary General		3	3	3	2	3	3	4
Others		10	7	21	8	9	12	18
Nationality of Politicians	Domestic	2	3	17	7	10	9	8
	EU	4	3	5	5	6	8	7
	USA	6	4	6	5	6	3	5
	Russia	0	0	2	0	0	2	2
	Others	4	6	5	4	7	9	5
Euro-Atlantic oriented citations		87,5 % (14/16)	90 % (9/10)	80,1 (17/21)	80 % (8/10)	81,12 % (13/16)	73,3 % (9/15)	90,1 (19/21)
Codes used for the analysis of politicians' citations		1 - Support for NATO membership, 2 - European path / EU integration, 3 - Security through alliances, 4 - Partnership with the USA and EU, 5 - Shared values and standards						

Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2021)

In order to gain an additional insight into the perception of Euro-Atlantic integration in member states, the mention of NATO member states and non-member states was additionally analysed. NATO members were mentioned 116 times, and other countries 62 times (Fig. 8). This means that NATO members are referred almost twice as often - 65.2% of all mentions refer to them. It is important



to mention here that membership in NATO is a variable item, which means that in the analysis of the articles before 2020, North Macedonia was counted as a non-member, until it joined NATO in the same year. The smallest difference between the number of members and non-members was recorded in Kosovo, which stems from the frequent mention of Serbia and its concerns about expansion. The overall analysis of the aforementioned politicians and countries clearly shows that the discourse on security and international relations in the Western Balkans is still strongly linked to NATO. The aforementioned politicians and states are significantly connected with Euro-Atlantic integration, and their choice further emphasizes Euro-Atlantic values. In Croatia, there is no deviation from general patterns of media reporting in this case too.



**Fig. 8** Quantitative analysis of the mentioned members and non-members of NATO  
*Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2021)*



## THE IMAGINATION OF “ENEMY” STATES

Every alliance strives to establish the strongest possible cohesion between its members, and this is especially strong if there is a common “enemy”. Tajfel’s theory of social identity explains how collective identity is most strongly strengthened through the process of differentiation from the “Other”, i.e., through a clearly defined external threat (Tajfel, 1981). At the level of international alliances, Snyder (1997) argues that the “external enemy” is historically the most effective factor in maintaining the cohesion of military-political alliances. In the Western Balkans, there was a complex network of “hostility” between states, which dates back to the 19th century. Relations with NATO have further complicated the situation, but despite this, the Alliance has developed relations with all states and encourages mutual cooperation. However, the examined articles showed that two states regularly stand out as “hostile” in relation to NATO’s activities in the Western Balkans.

Looking at the “hostile” portrayal of Serbia and Russia, it is evident that the largest country in the world is portrayed more negatively by 7.3% (Tab. 3). It is important to point out that not all mentions of Serbia and Russia are included in the analysis, since some of them refer only to the incidental mention of the country’s name, without any meaningful context. The coding process began with expressions that can be described as “hostile” and a total of seven codes were selected. In Montenegro, Russia is most often characterized as “enemy”, while Serbia is the biggest “enemy” in the Albanian member states, which is related to the issue

**Tab. 3** Analysis of the “hostile” portrayal of Serbia and Russia

Country	Codes of the “hostile” state narrative	% and number of references to Serbia within the „hostile“ narrative	% and number of references to Russia within the „hostile“ narrative
Albania	1, 3, 4, 6	78 % (7/9)	82 % (9/11)
BiH	2, 3, 5, 6	70 % (5/7)	75 % (6/8)
Montenegro	1, 2, 4, 5, 7	76 % (10/13)	85 % (11/13)
Kosovo	1, 3, 6	72 % (8/11)	80 % (8/10)
North Macedonia	2, 3, 4, 6, 7	68 % (9/13)	79 % (11/14)
Croatia	2, 3, 4, 5, 6	74 % (11/15)	81 % (13/16)

1 - Threat to security and stability, 2 - Destabilization of the region, 3 - Opposition to NATO/EU integration, 4 - Expansion of Russian influence/pro-Russian policy of Serbia, 5 - Misinterpretation of history & conflicts, 6 – Disinformation & propaganda, 7 - Isolation and rejection of international norms

Source: Authors according to analysed articles (2008-2021)



of Kosovo's independence (Tab. 3). The most common codes are related to threats to security and stability, opposition to NATO/EU integration, and disinformation and propaganda. This indicates that the narrative about the "enemy" is based on the security and informational threat, and less on the "total" threat that leads to the questioning of statehood. It is clearly visible from the results that the imagination of the legitimization of NATO and the Euro-Atlantic path is supported by the construction of Serbia and Russia as "enemies". In the case of Croatia, the results are the same as for the rest of the Western Balkans, i.e., Serbia and Russia are largely mentioned as "hostile".

## DISCUSSION

The first research objective sought to investigate the positivity and negativity of NATO portrayals among members and non-members. For this purpose, the first hypothesis is tested: Over the period of three NATO enlargements, the number of articles framed negatively in today's non-members and the number of articles framed positively in today's NATO members of the Western Balkans have increased. Descriptive insight leads to the realization that there is no clear linear growth of positive articles in members (12.0% → 11.4% → 11.4%), but there is a significant decrease in negative (20.0% → 8.6% → 2.9%) articles. Such a strong decrease in negative articles can have several explanations; increasing media focus on the advantages of membership, increasing NATO's influence on the media and their striving for more homogeneous reporting (especially after 2014), shortening the "depth" of the articles themselves, the COVID-19 pandemic as a focus for the media in 2020, etc. In the case of non-members, there is a visible increase in positive articles (8.0% → 10.0% → 12.9%), while negative ones do not grow but fall (4% → 8.6% → 0%). More precise statistical calculations in SPSS Statistics showed that the differences between positivity and negativity were not ( $p > 0.05$ ) statistically significant ( $p = 0.458$ ,  $p = 0.847$ ,  $p = 0.503$ ). Descriptive statistics can be used to conclude that the first hypothesis was rejected, or rather, it was neither confirmed nor refuted by precise calculations, because no overall conclusions can be drawn about the overall tone of articles about NATO through the three selected time points. The results of the first research objective are consistent with the findings of Vukasovich and Dejanovic-Vukasovich (2016), who discuss of the contradictions in narratives related to NATO. Some media legitimize NATO through a humanitarian framework, while others emphasize violence and losses, which coincides with the obtained research findings on oscillations of positivity and negativity. Lakić (2018) states that in the case of the British media, positive and negative perceptions coexisted during the NATO intervention, which is also visible in the chosen member states. Rozado et al. (2022) showed through their longitudinal analysis how positive and negative sentiment in the news oscillates depending on the context



and political moment, which is also the case in this research, visible most when reporting on the accession of North Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the case of the second research objective, NATO's political-geographic imagination was analysed through the selection of photographs and keywords. The second hypothesis was set and tested: The selection of photographs and keywords is consistent with NATO's professional political-geographic imagination. From the 121 photographs, it was concluded that only three photographs are not consistent with the selected concepts of professional NATO political-geographic imagination. In the case of keywords, five conceptually selected keywords are mentioned as many as 336 times. For comparison, keywords that are not consistent with NATO's concepts of imagination were selected and they appear 167 times. Descriptively, it is clear that the selected photographs and words are consistent with NATO's professional imagination, and this is confirmed by the statistical binomial test for photographs ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the test for keywords ( $= 57.6, p < 0.001$ ). These insights build on research on the importance of visual and discursive representations in the construction of security imaginaries. Schlag (2025) indicates that visual representations of NATO over time systematically shape the perception of NATO as a political-institutional and identity actor. Tran (2017) and Moldez and Gomez (2022) point out that visual elements in the media convey connotations and myths that often go beyond the event, which in this case is reflected in the dominance of political-institutional and Euro-Atlantic symbols. The results are consistent with NATO's professional public diplomacy, ACO/ACT (2020) emphasizes security, integration and Euro-Atlantic values, all of which were also highlighted in this research.

The third research goal refers to the understanding of Euro-Atlanticism through the selected countries, as well as the mentioned politicians. Therefore, the third hypothesis is tested: By choosing the mentioned countries and politicians, the media emphasizes Euro-Atlantic integration. A total of 61 politicians from the EU and the US were mentioned in the chosen countries, which is 22% more than the mention of Russian and other politicians. Also, 70 out of 88 (79.5%) quotes from politicians are directed towards Euro-Atlanticism. On the other hand, of the mentioned countries, 97 (65.5%) times NATO members were mentioned, and 51 (34.5%) times non-members. The test results show that EU and US politicians are referred significantly more often than Russian and other countries ( $p < 0.05$ ), that most of the quotes are directed towards the Euro-Atlantic framework ( $= 30.2, p < 0.001$ ) and that NATO members are referred significantly more than non-members ( $= 15.1, p < 0.001$ ), thus confirming the third hypothesis. Bialasiewicz et al. (2007) have demonstrated how imaginative geographies of security, especially in American and Euro-Atlantic strategies, are produced and reinforced by perceptions of alliances and threats. This is clearly reflected in the emphasized presence of Euro-Atlantic politicians and states in the studied documents, and here



in the examined articles. Furthermore, Miller and McKerrow (2010) researched the development of political communication through increasing personalization. This coincides with the findings in this paper, as a significant mention of politicians (presidents, prime ministers, chief secretaries and others) was observed, which is one of the key elements of the articles. Gheciu (2019) emphasizes that NATO acts as a "security community" in a political and symbolic sense. This ensures that the media highlighting of politicians and countries with a Euro-Atlantic orientation is not accidental.

The last research goal relates to the formation of the representation of "enemy" states. Accordingly, the hypothesis was set: Serbia and Russia are presented as "enemy" states with the aim of opposing the leading Euro-Atlantic narrative. Out of the total mentions of Serbia on 53 occasions, 39 times (73.5%) it was described as an "enemy" state according to the codes selected. Russia was referred a total of 56 times, or "hostile" 45 times (80.3%). It is evident that these two states are presented "hostile" in the articles in order to provide a kind of contrast to the Euro-Atlantic narrative. So, the last hypothesis is also confirmed. These results are consistent with the findings of Vuorinen (2012), who emphasizes that the imagination of the "enemy" represents a key instrument of propaganda rhetoric. Bartoszewicz and Prucková (2023) also show in their work how Russia is systematically constructed as a hostile state in the security documents of European countries. Moskovljević and Lazović (2024) emphasize the role of the media in creating narratives about NATO and its enemies, which further confirms the importance of understanding political-media frameworks. In a broader context, the results are also consistent with the concepts of "imaginative geographies" developed by Ó Tuathail (1996) and Gregory (1994), which explain how spatial and political imaginaries produce categories of "ours" and "theirs". In total, the research led to a frequent imagination of NATO as a symbol of the "West" (positive imagination among members, spreading also among non-members), while Serbia and Russia are constructed as the concept of the "Other" (negative imagination). Tomz et al. (2023) pointed out how membership in NATO transforms the public perception of war, which is visible through very similar results of media portrayal of NATO as a symbol of security and stability, regardless of the very different state relations with the Alliance in the 1990s.

Although Croatia has not been part of the Western Balkans since 2013, there is still similar media coverage of NATO as in other countries. Such findings coincide with the claims of Bieber and Tzifakis (2019) about the existence of a "regional security community" in Southeast Europe, where common narratives about NATO are formed and transmitted independently of the state. Mulchinock (2017) emphasizes that Euro-Atlantic discourses are shaped transregionally, which explains the similarity of the Croatian media portrayal of NATO with that in neighbouring countries. In conclusion, it can be said that there are some



specificities of the Western Balkans in relation to broader NATO imaginaries. The regional component of the “hostile” portrayal of Serbia is noticeable, the almost non-existence of differences in media reporting between members and non-members, the homogeneity of visual and discursive imaginations, etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research was focused on a media analysis of 190 articles on NATO expansion to Albania and Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The articles are divided into three time periods from 2008 to 2021, and the results show that during the period of three NATO enlargements, the number of articles framed negatively in today's non-members and the number of articles framed positively in today's NATO members of the Western Balkans did not increase. In fact, the opposite happened: a decrease in negative articles in members and an increase in positive in non-members. Furthermore, the research confirmed that the choice of photographs and keywords in the articles is consistent with NATO's professional political-geographic imagination. The results of the research confirm that the media, by choosing the certain countries and the politicians, emphasize Euro-Atlantic integration. Ultimately, it was shown that Serbia and Russia are presented as “hostile” states with the aim of opposing the leading Euro-Atlantic narrative. The research also included articles from Croatian media, but it turned out that they report on NATO enlargement in almost the same way as other Western Balkan media. Overall, the imagination of NATO's political geography in the Western Balkans has a high level of homogeneity across all six (seven) countries. The results indicate that imagination is not just a theoretical concept, but that the media practically use it to shape the public perception of NATO in the Western Balkans.

While the results provide a coherent empirical basis for the study's conclusions, they should also be viewed in light of several structural conditions that shape media production in the region. Differences in portal ownership, political influence, market competition and the uneven digital archiving of older articles—especially in the 2008–2009 period—may have influenced both the availability and the tone of coverage. These factors do not undermine the validity of the results, but highlight that media imaginaries of NATO are embedded in broader systemic conditions that future research should examine more explicitly. Expanding the dataset, incorporating ownership and audience metrics, or comparing printed and online media could further clarify the causal mechanisms behind the observed trends. By acknowledging these contextual constraints, the study provides a more nuanced and transparent foundation for understanding how NATO's political-geographical imagination is constructed and circulated in the Western Balkans.

The scientific contribution of this paper is reflected in the research of imagination in the Western Balkans, which strives for full Euro-Atlantic integration



and currently represents a “bridge” between past conflicts and future integrations. The research showed that imagination is not an abstract concept, but is concretely manifested in media discourse across as many as six Western Balkan countries and through Croatian media. The contribution is manifested through a systematic approach to different media, which enables comparisons between the countries. The methods combine quantitative media analysis and qualitative interpretation, which shows how imagination can be operationalized and measured. Therefore, the results of this paper can contribute to further research on imagination, especially through a larger media sample and through more, but also wider time periods. Also, the paper contributes to the interdisciplinary nature of political geography because it combines scientific knowledge from the fields of political science, communication science, sociology, etc.

Ultimately, this paper has clear implications, which are manifested towards the media, NATO and the general public perception in the Western Balkans. The results clearly show that the media do not only transmit news but also actively produce imagination, which indicates the power of the media. Furthermore, the results indicate that NATO's policy is successful because its key messages (security, integration, Euro-Atlantic identity) are recognized through the analysed articles. In the case of the general public, the homogeneity of the imaginations produced through the researched media is visible, i.e. a general public impression of the importance of stability and security provided by NATO is created.

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