



Universität für Bodenkultur Wien
Department für Wirtschafts- und
Sozialwissenschaften

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF EU REPORTING: THE CASE OF ADOPTING THE EUROPEAN UNION NEW FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVE IN SLOVENIA

Karmen Erjavec
Emil Erjavec

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Karmen Erjavec¹, Emil Erjavec²

Abstract

This paper analyses communication strategies of coverage of topics concerning the European Union (EU), specifically coverage of a new EU financial perspective discussion by Slovenian media. A textually oriented critical discourse analysis was used in order to find the journalistic strategies of news texts 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 used these strategies. 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.

Key words: European Union, Slovenia, political communication, communication strategies, media

¹ **Dr. Karmen Erjavec** is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, where she teaches mass communication, media and minorities, and media education. Her main research interests are the media and minorities, children's and youth's media consumption, and the quality of journalism.

² **Dr. Emil Erjavec** is professor for Agricultural Economics and Policy at the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana. He is also Visiting Professor for Agricultural and Food Policy at the Institute for Sustainable Economic Development, Department of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences Vienna

Introduction

Majority of the researches in the field of media and journalism studies (e.g. De Vreese, 2002; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000) 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. They have been neglected other communication actors, such as sources and public relations practitioners, which co-construct journalistic reporting. They also have neglected non-elite media. 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 different communication actors 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.

To identify communication strategies of different communication actors, a combination of research methods is necessary. Critical discourse analysis is used in order to find journalistic strategies of news texts about the NFP and the selection of sources by individual Slovenian news media. To explain why journalists used specific strategies, 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 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.

The first chapter is a literature review of previous studies of media coverage of EU topics. The next chapter discusses a political economic 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 and Eder 2004; Downey and 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 and 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 extent 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 important 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 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 and 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: p. 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. Statta calls for a more culturalist, bottom-up approach to media and journalism studies and claims that 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. His suggestion is that 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 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.*: p. 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 – Political Economy Background

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 and Heinemman, 2006; Mrak and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 intend 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). The inclusion and exclusion of some key information will enable us to identify journalistic strategies, which are identified in terms of ‘planned social (in our case, discursive) activities, of the political or socio-psychological aims or functions of these activities, and of (linguistic) means designed to help realise these aims’ (Wodak et al., 1999: 34).

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 competitive 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 newspapers¹ 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*² (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 (Jurančič, 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 perspective 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). Journalists were asked about the news production strategies of practices of analysed news items, especially in the relation to the selection of sources. Sources were asked, what strategies they had employed when communicating with journalists regarding the NFP and other EU topics. 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 Brussels³. Interviewed journalists covered domestic (3) or foreign policy (5) topics, none of them, save the correspondent from Brussels, covers only the EU topics. The interviewees were between 27 and 45 years old, all of them, except for two journalists, were women.

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/broadcast 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*⁴ and *interpretations*⁵. These, mostly analysed news items, are followed by too much and too detailed data that do not say much to those who are unfamiliar with the NFP. This strategy can be named “*factism*”, the term borrowed from Johnson-Carteen (2005); it can be more generally defined as an excessive quoting of facts that do not offer a reader a sensible meaning due to a lack of interpretation. 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. Because of these strategies of factism, simplified positive vs. negative assessment, absence of basic, background and interpretative information, the audience does not see structural problems of the NFP and “interconnectedness” of the NFP with their lives. These strategies may also discourage the audience to be interested in this and other news about the EU topics.

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 use of aforementioned strategies compels a researcher to ask how and why the journalists used them. 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 and 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 *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, Factism, 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 defines *facticity* as 'a provision of detailed information about the NFP' and *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'.

Lack of background information and interpretation as 'the non-disclosure of negotiating positions of Slovenia that defended Slovenian national interests'. 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, 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. 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, because political communication analysts Entman (1993) claimed that they constructed information that promotes their preferred version of reality, PR practitioners’ willingness to reveal this strategy, however, is.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper analyses communication strategies of coverage of EU topics, specifically Slovenian news media coverage of the NFP, a relevant and general EU topic. 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.

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 and 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 because 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.

Because of these media and PR's strategies, the audience does not see structural problems of the NFP and "interconnectedness" of the NPF with their lives. This may discourage audience to be interested in the NFP and other EU topics and lead to a further communication deficit.

However, we cannot fully argue that these strategies are 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
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Večer

18 December 2005	Vlada zadovoljna s pogajanj
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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

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¹ 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).

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

³ *Delo*, *Dnevnik*, *Večer* and *TV Slovenija* have a correspondent in Brussels.

⁴ 'Background information' is distinguished from current facts primarily on a temporary basis and includes the history of actual events and their contexts.

⁵ 'Interpretation' is a kind of empirical discourse, but goes beyond current facts, setting or historical context to speculate on such things as significance, outcomes and motives. It differs from opinion which essentially is an exercise of judgment, either normative (what is good or bad) or empirical (what is true or false).



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Bestelladresse:

Universität für Bodenkultur Wien
Department für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften
Institut für nachhaltige Wirtschaftsentwicklung
Feistmantelstrasse 4, 1180 Wien
Tel: +43/1/47 654 – 3660
Fax: +43/1/47 654 – 3692
e-mail: Iris.Fichtberger@boku.ac.at
Download unter: http://www.wiso.boku.ac.at/h731_publicationen.html