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## Public-elite gap on European integration: the missing link between discourses among citizens and elites in Serbia

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between elite and citizen discourses on European integration. We argue that imperfections in cue-making and cue-taking lead to a gap between elite and citizen discourses, especially in societies experiencing major changes. To investigate this, we use newly collected data from Serbia shortly after the delayed start of accession negotiations in 2014. Using vignettes for different citizen discourses, we coded statements collected from major Serbian newspapers. The analysis shows that citizen discourses found in previous research are all represented in the media. We also find that approximately one fourth of media content does not fit any of the citizen discourses in Serbia. This gap confirms our hypothesis and demonstrates that elite ‘communicative’ discourses are not well linked to citizen discourses, leading to politically important imperfections.

### KEYWORDS

Citizen discourses; European integration; public-elite gap; enlargement; elite discourses; candidate countries

## 1. Introduction

European political leaders and scholars on the European Union (EU) have long underestimated the role of citizens in the process of deepening and widening European integration (Hobolt and de Vries 2016). In particular, enlargement as a policy does not have formal instruments for citizens in candidate countries to participate at an early stage. The question arises whether political elites are sufficiently able to convince or connect to citizens in formulating a shared perspective on enlargement. If this process hampers, either through elites not being able to convince citizens or citizens not being able to connect to national elites, the legitimacy of political decision-making will be at risk.

Focusing on citizens and elites, we propose to bring discourses back into the analysis of EU enlargement. We understand political discourses as ‘shared means of making sense of the world, embedded in language [...] [and] grounded in the assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions and capabilities of citizens, enabling them to construct shared or common narratives’ (Dryzek 2000, 18). Interestingly, discourses, including the ones explored in this contribution, are neither temporally fixed, nor rootless and easy to change (Risse 2010). Rather, they provide stability by being embedded in historical legacies and systems of values (Dryzek and Holmes 2002). However, there is some flexibility in how

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these deeper meanings are shaped and reshaped by political elites and the media (Dimitrova, Kortenska, and Steunenberg 2015). It is this gap between elite and citizen discourses, which we explore empirically in this article, that can produce political dissent and undermine the process of integration (Dryzek and Holmes 2002, 6).

Discursive approaches to European integration have mainly focused on the politicization of EU issues in domestic arenas (Leconte 2015). An important point of departure is Schmidt's (2006, 2010) framework distinguishing between coordinative and communicative types of elite discourses. The coordinative type refers to the way elites debate European policy. The communicative type is how elites communicate and justify their decisions at the EU level to the general public in Member States. We share the view that political discourses are both shaped by the specific institutional context, while simultaneously influencing it through the arguments and justifications they contain. Still, Schmidt's framework views citizens as recipients rather than active participants in the construction of domestic discourses. In contrast, citizen discourses have been explored in a limited number of studies. Steunenberg, Petek, and R uth (2011) focus on citizen discourses about European integration in Germany and Turkey, which suggest that Turkish membership is unlikely, based on existing discourses in these countries. Hurrelmann, Gora, and Wagner (2015) identified discourses constructed by citizens about European integration through focus groups as a way to evaluate the level of politicization of European issues. Recent research has started to pay more attention to citizens' perceptions and discourses (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016; Duchesne et al. 2013; Gaxie, Hube, and Rowell 2011; Ingelgom 2014), although these studies rarely focus on the issue of EU enlargement.

Within this literature, the links between political elites' discourses, media rhetoric, and citizen discourses remain unclear, partially due to limited empirical evidence about these connections. In this article, we focus on the link between communicative (elite) discourses (as they are presented in the media) and citizen discourses. Following Schmidt, we separate between the elite 'internal' discourses from communicative ones used in national media. We argue that in stable societies, the differences between citizens and elites will be minimal leading to a negligible gap between their discourses. This is indicated by our base-line hypothesis regarding *substantial alignment* between both groups. However, in a society in which major change occurs, driven by various events, imperfections in cue-making and cue-taking may lead to a gap between elite and citizen discourses. This is our *limited-overlap-hypothesis* about the correspondence between discourses of both groups, which will be put to a test in this article.

To test our hypotheses, we use the case of Serbia, which started accession negotiations in 2014 after years of uncertainty. While the prospect of membership was initiated in 2003, Serbia's initial reluctant cooperation regarding the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the normalization of Belgrade-Pristina relations appeared to be important barriers for a swift process. Official negotiations began in January 2014, but actual negotiations of the first two chapters started at the end of the year. These events, which relate both to the legacies of recent wars, and a new prospect of participating in the EU, have substantial implications for Serbian society and discourses. As a consequence, Serbia serves as an obvious case in which differences between elites and citizens could be observed and the base-line hypothesis of substantial alignment is expected to be rejected.

In our research, we use the citizen discourses identified by Dimitrova and Kortenska (2016) and compare these with statements from Serbian newspapers. Our analysis shows that of the four citizen discourses identified before, the one supporting Serbia's accession to the EU is also the one with the highest level of occurrence in Serbian media. In contrast, the discourse which vocally opposes enlargement and rejects Serbia's integration is least represented in newspaper statements that we collected. The other two citizen discourses are equally prevalent. We also find that approximately one fourth of the media statements does not match any of the four discourses among citizens. These media statements, which do not belong to any of the citizen discourses, reflect a mismatch between the elite and citizen discourses in Serbia. It fits with our *limited-overlap-hypothesis*, which indicates that elite and citizen discourses do not necessarily always match in periods of major societal change.

The article proceeds as follows: we first discuss our expectations in view of the current literature on discourses and cueing. The next section explains our research design and methods in order to research our hypotheses about public-elite gap. Finally, we present the results of our analysis of media statements and discuss what their implications are for the current literature.

## 2. European integration, public opinion, and political discourses

In understanding the relationship between political elites and citizens and their positions on European integration, scholars have argued that citizens rely on shortcuts or 'proxies' from their domestic context when forming their opinions on EU matters (Ray 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007). Citizens lack interest, awareness, and knowledge about the integration process and its impact on their own lives (Hobolt 2007). These studies suggest that a supportive opinion towards EU integration is primarily a result of the generally pro-EU positions of parties in government. However, this relationship is not straightforward. Ray (2003, 272) found that this effect of party positions on the electorate is conditioned by disagreement among parties, party unity, issue salience, and an individual's attachment to a party. Hooghe and Marks (2005) found that increased contestation of European integration among domestic political elites results in increasingly negative public attitudes towards the EU.

The use of shortcuts or cues is, of course, embedded in the media context in which information is transmitted. Political parties and elites refer to different arguments in their communication to supporters. For example, Maier, Adam, and Maier (2012) showed that some cues have stronger effects over others depending on the domestic political context. Moreover, media content analyses coupled with survey data provide evidence of media framing and priming effects on positive and negative stances towards EU enlargement. Azrout, Van Spanje, and De Vreese (2012) found that domestic media have greater influence on public sentiment to EU enlargement than individual information exposure. De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) observed that the visibility of news on EU matters influences public opinion in the Netherlands and Denmark. Moreover, the consistency in tone of news moderates the negative effects of media on public opinion.

While the media seems to be important for transmitting cues from elites, the underlying arguments and justifications about European integration are grounded in discourses. Hurrelmann, Gora, and Wagner (2015) argued that the politicization of

European integration is best approached as a discursive phenomenon. They distinguish three arenas of political discourse, which are the institutional, intermediate, and citizenry discursive arenas. The institutional arena is 'at the core of the political systems' and is populated by full-time policy-makers, politicians, and legislators. The intermediate arenas are those bridging the policy-making process with the broader citizenry (Hurrelmann, Gora, and Wagner 2015, 45). These two arenas reflect Schmidt's (2006) distinction between coordinative and communicative discourses. While coordinative discourses are foremost linked to the institutional arena where policies are made, communicative discourses are used by elites, in the intermediate arena, bridging their policy decisions to citizens.

An important question is whether these 'bridging' discourses, as found in the intermediate arena, do indeed link elites with citizens and if so what the arguments and justifications are that connect them. Comparing elite discourses with survey trends, Herranz-Surrallés (2012) identifies a public-elite gap due to differences between coordinative and communicative discourses in Germany about enlargement. The European *coordinative* discourse relies on arguments and justifications in favor of the Eastern enlargement, including solidarity, responsibility for peace and democracy, and European identity of the candidate countries, which remained more or less stable over various rounds of enlargement. In contrast, in their *communicative* discourse in Germany, political elites used different sets of justifications customized to every successive round of EU enlargement (Herranz-Surrallés 2012, 393).

These findings indicate that substantial differences may exist between what citizens really think about European integration and what elites want them to think as part of their communicative discourse. Crucially, Herranz-Surrallés (2012) does not research citizen discourses, but relies on public opinion research. In this article, we research citizen discourses and compare these with communicative discourses of political elites in Serbia. We expect that *these will not fit one-to-one*. In addition, we will focus on the main arguments and issues that are central to these discourses, indicating what their *differences* will be. When these arguments and issues differ and do not match, we speak of a *gap*. A gap between discourses is not only a matter of degree, but a difference in terms of the main underlying arguments and justifications. This is a result of our earlier conceptualization of discourses based on Dryzek and others. Discourses are internally coherent and provide a shared understanding of the world, while individuals may subscribe to these ideas to a different extent. As a consequence, any difference or gap between discourses can be traced back to these underlying arguments, which results in different understandings of the world.

A related question concerns the connection between elite and citizen discourses. As suggested in Schmidt's framework, 'communicative' discourses of elites seem to be foremost a 'one-way' street affecting citizens. Others, however, propose a 'two-way road' in communicating between elites and citizens. Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries (2007) provide evidence that cueing and offering shortcuts has a dual nature in which both groups react to each other. If cueing works – from elites to citizens and from citizens to elites – we would expect to find the same arguments and justifications to drive the *discourses of both groups* – whether they belong to a communicative or citizen discourse. Based on this position, information is expected to flow, without any change or obstacles, from elites to citizens and vice versa. Furthermore, there is limited competition in the

interpretation of important events, so that citizens as well as elites may continue using similar cues in their statements based on the underlying system of values underpinning discourses. As a result, citizens and elites share the same discourses, which is formulated as our base-line expectation:

*Base-line hypothesis (substantial alignment):* there is no gap between citizen and elite discourses.

The base-line hypothesis assumes a consistent and continuous exchange between elites and citizens regarding the interpretation of main events through discourses. However, one can imagine environments in which major events occur that are important to social and political life. These new events require elites as well as citizens to interpret and express what these events 'mean' in terms of the underlying discursive arguments and justifications. New interpretations may arise resulting in new cues for which it is not clear how these will be re-interpreted and understood by the cue-takers. Viewed in this way, new events challenge the exchange between elites and citizens as these events and the way they are interpreted may make cue-takers doubtful following new cues of cue-makers. This possibility is especially important to 'political entrepreneurs', who seek a new political platform and electoral support, and want to offer an alternative discourse to existing ones.

Based on the process of continuing reinterpretation we expect that *the links between elite and citizen discourses will be weaker*. The process of cue-making and cue-taking will not be well aligned, especially when there are more events to be interpreted, which could be related to important social changes. Occasionally, elites or citizens will use arguments and justifications that will not be represented in the discourse of the other. This will be reflected in a gap between communicative elite discourses and citizen discourses in the sense that not all arguments and justifications of elites or citizens would be reproduced. This position is expressed in our second, alternative hypothesis:

*Alternative hypothesis (limited overlap):* there is a gap between citizen and elite discourses.

In case of limited overlap, elites and citizens may participate in similar discourses, but there may exist discourses in which these links are very limited or absent. Especially citizen discourses, which involve a many more participants than elites, can be rather sensitive to changes in the processes linking events to understandings through making and taking cues. The existence of statements that are based on different or new arguments and justifications may serve as indicator of imperfect transmission, which leads to the hypothesized gap.

### **3. Research methods and data**

#### **3.1. Serbia and citizen discourses**

In order to research whether cueing is an imperfect process, which could lead to a gap between elite and citizen discourses, we focus on Serbia as a setting in which major socio-political changes have occurred. Since 2000, Serbia participated in a process of stabilization and association with the EU, which in 2003 was upgraded to prepare Western Balkan countries for membership. Though the Commission issued a favorable opinion to start

Stabilization and Association Agreement negotiations with Belgrade in 2005, signing of the deal was delayed until 2008 due to criticisms by the Netherlands about Serbian cooperation with ICTY. The Netherlands blocked further steps until all indictees were arrested and transferred to ICTY. The delayed start of the accession process in 2014 has contributed to conflicting positions of political elites on Serbia's accession over the last decade (Stratulat 2014).

In our research, we focus on a period shortly after the official start of accession negotiations in 2014, making the issue of Serbian integration and Pristina-Belgrade relations highly salient in the public and political debates. The stop-start trajectory of EU-Serbia relations is mirrored in public attitudes towards European integration at that time. Based on opinion polls, the percentage of those stating to vote for Serbian accession in a hypothetical referendum fell from 64 percent in October 2009 to 44 percent in December 2014 (MEI 2014b). The polls also show that Serbian citizens try to balance the increased opportunities of EU membership due to mobility (especially for youth) against extra conditionality related to arresting suspected war criminals and normalizing bilateral relations with Kosovo (MEI 2014a).

In order to *compare* discourses between citizens and elites, we make use of a design in which we build upon the results of previous research and collect new data based on newspaper statements from the same period. Dimitrova and Kortenska (2016, 2017; also Dimitrova et al 2015) studied citizen discourses in Serbia in the second half of 2014. They identified, using Q methodology (McKeown and Thomas 2013), different discourses among citizens. In their application of this method, statements were collected through focus groups, while the Q-sorts were done through a larger number of individual interviews in different locations.

Based on their dataset, Dimitrova and Kortenska (2016) identified four different citizen discourses. One is a clear pro-European integration discourse (discourse A 'Cautiously Positive Expectation'), whilst another is a similarly unambiguous anti-EU membership discourse (discourse B 'Mistrust and Hostility'). A more nuanced perspective on accession is provided by two other discourses that seem to promote or oppose moving to EU membership. These are discourse C ('The Devil's in the Conditions') and discourse D ('Moving towards EU Rules and Institutions'). We use these citizen discourses as the point of departure to code newspaper statements. The relatively low correlations between these discourses shows that they contain unique statements, which can be used to represent the content of each discourse separately.<sup>1</sup> We will use this feature in our analysis by deriving keywords that are typical for each discourse in order to classify newspaper statements, which may reflect the views of elites in Serbia.

### **3.2. Media-elite discourses: data collection**

Political involvement in the media makes it often difficult to discern political from journalistic activity in South-East Europe, including Serbia (Georgieva et al. 2015). This results in a lack of journalistic independence in the Western Balkans (Milosavljević and Poler 2018), where mainstream media are 'colonized' by political party elites. This type of state capture of the media also affects new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe (Bajomi-Lazar 2014). In our study, we can thus take newspaper statements to identify elite



discourses in Serbia. As indicated by our limited-overlap-hypothesis, we are interested whether a gap exists between these two groups.

In our study, we use statements from two Belgrade-based daily newspapers: *Politika* and *Danas*. We selected these two outlets for two reasons. First, these publications capture the dominant discourses of the Serbian establishment (*Politika*) and of the opposition (*Danas*). Second, both newspapers have a searchable archive. *Politika* published its first issue in January 1904, and represents one of the oldest continuously running newspapers in the Balkans (B92 2009). The daily is seen as the ‘newspaper of record’ in Serbia, publishing news from a conservative ‘official viewpoint’ (Radimirović 2015). At the beginning of the Milošević era in the 1980s, the *Politika* management was replaced by supporters of the regime so that it could act as a government mouthpiece (Jones 2015, 1902). Since then, the newspaper has regained editorial independence, but is still viewed as the newspaper of the establishment.

The heritage of *Danas* is distinctly different. This newspaper is seen as the Belgrade daily for independent intellectuals. *Danas* was established in 1997 by a group of dissident journalists who left *Naša borba* to start a daily independent of the regime. The medium was targeted by the Milošević-led authorities repeatedly. In October 1998, the police raided the offices of *Danas* and the independent *Dnevni Telegraph*, ordered closure, and placed the premises under armed guard (Smith 1998).

Statements on European integration were collected from both *Politika* and *Danas* from articles published between 20 January and 20 February 2014. This corresponds to the month right after Serbia had officially opened accession negotiations and approximately at the time of conducting the focus groups in the country.<sup>2</sup> A statement is defined as a complete thought about the question of enlargement and could consist of more than one sentence. An example is the statement of Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, quoted in *Politika*: ‘When one objectively examines the pros and cons the EU membership, only the malicious may say that Serbia will not benefit from joining the EU. Our goal is that Serbia is part of Europe; we want the best for our people.’

A total of 216 statements were extracted from *Politika*, whilst an additional 68 statements were collected from *Danas*. The statements were made by various actors, including Serbian politicians, members of the Serbian negotiating team, EU officials, and member state officials as well as experts. We did not distinguish between Serbian or EU elites in our analysis, as they are equally relevant in their appearance in the media content. However, we reflect on the elites when reporting the results. Multiple statements were extracted from each article, as the articles are all about European integration. All statements were coded and not just the ones that quote elites.

### 3.3. Coding media statements

Based on the results from the citizen discourse study conducted in Serbia, we develop four sets of keywords that characterize and capture the broader meaning and interpretation of each discourse. Table 1 presents an example of our method for the Serbian discourse of ‘Mistrust and hostility’. The way in which we also operationalized the four discourses can be found in the supplementary material.<sup>3</sup>

The previous interpretation of the citizen discourses is based on a statistical analysis of the factors using the centroid method (Dimitrova and Kortenska 2017). This

**Table 1.** From characterizing statements to keywords: The citizen discourse in Serbia on 'Mistrust and hostility'.

Characterizing statements based on centroid analysis	Keywords
<p><b>Agreement:</b> <i>Which one of the less developed countries that has become EU member is better off at present? None. (19) It would have been nice to have our own economy. So that we don't need the EU. To be able to export our own products and not pay any duties. (49) I am against EU membership. (12)</i></p> <p><i>Serbia shall not accept everything offered to it by the EU. (61) The terms for EU membership that are imposed on Serbia have not been imposed on the other countries, in the political sense for instance – the separation of Kosovo. I am afraid this tension will continue to build up. (47) All this talk about the integration into EU is quite meaningless – 'empty stories' – the way it is used by the politicians to convince the people to do things that politicians otherwise can't. (48)</i></p> <p><i>The EU will destroy even what little Serbia has. (37) The question is whether we are competitive at all in the EU in the field of agriculture. (24) EU would sooner fall apart rather than we would become a member. (17)</i></p> <p><b>Disagreement:</b> <i>I think that we will be better off for sure when we enter the EU. (34) Simply the countries that are not as developed, for instance Serbia and the other countries in the region, are welcome in the EU due to the opening of some new markets, the investments and expansion in some new fields of influence. (25) No, the countries that have become EU member states have not lost anything. They have not lost absolutely anything. (20)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● doubt about economic development;</li> <li>● economic costs for Serbia;</li> <li>● rejection of membership;</li>   <li>● opposition to EU conditions;</li> <li>● unfair, unclear and changing conditions;</li> <li>● imposing 'separation of Kosovo';</li> <li>● tensions with Pristina;</li> <li>● negative impact of integration on society;</li> <li>● loss of national sovereignty and competence;</li> <li>● EU's internal instability;</li>   <li>● negative impact of previous enlargements;</li> <li>● EU's disintegration;</li> <li>● mistrust in EU institutions;</li> <li>● mistrust in Serbia's EU prospects;</li> <li>● accession negotiations more difficult;</li> <li>● threat to national security and foreign relations.</li> </ul>

Source: the statements from Dimitrova and Kortenska (2016)

interpretation relied on positive and negative distinguishing statements, which are included in the first column of Table 1. Here, the numbers between brackets represent the respective number of the statement in the Q set of 64 statements, used in the interviews. These statements and their rankings guided the generating of keywords, presented in the second column. The sets of keywords encompass the content of each discourse in abstract terms, including the main arguments and justifications in it. These keywords were developed based on the broader meaning of each discourse, and capture the main arguments, justifications and motivations found in the statements characterizing the discourse. Thus, the four discourses act as a coding scheme by which we analyze the newspaper statements.

The keywords serve as mutually exclusive vignettes developed for each discourse. This allows us to code each media statement in a binary manner. We matched the broader meaning of each statement from media to the sets of keywords defining the four discourses. A statement matching one or more of the keywords, developed for each discourse, is considered to match the respective discourse. If a statement fits a discourse, it was coded '1' on this respective discourse; if not, it received '0'. Two researchers independently coded a total of 284 statements from both newspapers, which yielded a Cohen's kappa of 0.6967. This is a substantial level of agreement, using the benchmarks proposed by Landis and Koch (1977, 165). The two researchers then concurred on the coding of the remaining (20.8 percent) statements with initial disagreement. All statements that appear in the media but do not fit the vignette template were coded '0' for all four discourses. It is these statements that allow us to measure the size of the public-elite gap on European integration, and simultaneously to investigate those aspects of the

political debate that citizens filter out and substitute with own experiences or other contextual proxies in making up their minds about EU.

Of course, the use of keywords based on distinguishing statements from the initial discourse analysis using Q are two different methods. This may lead to the wrong classification of some newspaper statements to discourses, or the inability to link a newspaper statement to the existing discourses. In particular, the latter would be a problem for our research, as it may contribute to the rejection of our base-line hypothesis. Our impression is that this potential bias is rather limited. The intercoder reliability is quite high, suggesting that both independent coders were able to use our framework. Moreover, we are able to construct a clear story based on the statements that do not fit, which indicates that they are more than just noise.

#### 4. Media-elite versus citizen discourses: a gap in understandings

After coding all of the statements, we ran a simple frequency analysis in order to see how the total number of statements from media is distributed and to what extent these four discourses are represented in the broader discursive space moving from citizens to the communicative or intermediary discourses of elites.

Before presenting our results, it is important to note a few broad observations. First, statements by the two main governing parties (the Serbian Progressive Party and Socialist Party of Serbia) and the negotiating team are far more predominant in *Politika* than in *Danas*. Second, *Politika* has dedicated much more space and time to the issue of EU enlargement and Serbia's progress in signing accession negotiations – given that the number of news articles in *Politika* is much higher than in *Danas* for the same period of time. That is, in the total set of 284 statements, about two thirds (216 entries) are found in the newspaper of the 'establishment', *Politika*.

Table 2 summarizes the results of our frequency analyses of media content. It contains frequencies including repeated statements and those without. The analysis shows that all four discourses are represented in the media in a total of 228 statements. From this subset of statements, 20 statements fit in more than one discourse: 10 statements fit discourses A and C, 10 statements fit discourses A and D, and one fits discourses C and D.<sup>4</sup> This seems logical given the similarities between these three discourses providing a supportive position towards enlargement.

**Table 2.** Frequency of media statements classified by citizen discourse.

	All media statements (n = 284)	Non-duplicate statements (n = 262)
Discourse A – Cautiously Positive Expectations	133 (46.8%)	115 (43.9%)
Discourse B – Mistrust and Hostility	17 (6.0%)	17 (6.5%)
Discourse C – The Devil's in the Conditions	46 (16.2%)	45 (17.2%)
Discourse D – Moving towards EU Rules and Institutions	43 (15.1%)	38 (14.5%)
Statements not fitting any citizen discourse	66 (23.2%)	64 (24.4%)

The match between media and citizen discourses amounts 75.6 percent, which in our view captures the mass-elite linkage which some scholars have previously addressed (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007; Ray 2003). It emphasizes the similarities in discourses between elites and the public. However, 66 statements, or 24.4 per cent of media coverage analyzed, are out of the scope of citizen discourses about EU enlargement. This percentage represents, in our view, the dissimilarity between elite and citizen discourses, in the sense that elites use many more statements than we can trace back to citizen discourses. This is the size of the gap between elites and the public, which has been hypothesized in this article. These statements define a substantive difference in view between citizens and domestic political elites on Serbia's accession. Before focusing the public-elite gap, we first outline the way the media content matches the four citizen discourses.

#### **4.1. Citizens and elites in resonance: (mis-) matching support**

In contrast to rather pessimistic prognoses in public opinion surveys, the discursive approach to the study of citizen attitudes appears much more optimistic. We find that the highest share of media statements aligns with Discourse A 'Cautiously Positive Expectations', which expresses high level of support driven by predominantly rational and utilitarian justifications. Yet, this discourse views Serbia as still having a long road before becoming an official EU member state in terms of reforms and preparations. This discourse rejects claims of identity or sovereignty loss, or economic costs. Accordingly, media statements which fit this discourse resort predominantly to arguments of economic benefits, better standards of living, and of domestic reforms. The elite discourse steers away from identity-related arguments. Discourse B 'Mistrust and Hostility', on the other hand, is least represented in the print media, with only six per cent of the collected media statements matching its vignette. This finding appears counterintuitive given the negative trends in public opinion data and has significantly different policy implications for the future enlargement rounds and the accession of Serbia in particular than surveys suggest.

What is interesting about Discourse B is that all 17 newspaper statements that fit its frame quote members of the opposition Democratic Party of Serbia. Fourteen of these statements are made by the party leader Vojislav Koštunica. His claim about the economic costs and loss for Serbia due to the EU integration are fully in line with the rationale we find in the 'Mistrust and Hostility' discourse among citizens. It remains unclear from the analyses whether the shared understandings of this discourse have been cued by these political leaders. The opposite could be true as well: leaders such as Koštunica and other political entrepreneurs may have detected increasing dissatisfaction and opposition among the constituencies, and adopted a specific rhetoric in an effort for domestic vote-maximization.

Discourses C and D, which are both broadly supportive of EU enlargement, appear at similar levels in the media statements as indicated in the table. Furthermore, 10 of the statements assigned to Discourses C and D match the reasoning found in Discourse A as well. This re-emphasizes the systematic similarities which occur across these discourses that are all positive towards accession, but differ in their justifications of support. The match between Discourse C 'The Devil's in the Conditions' and media statements

illustrates the importance of country-specific criteria within the context of enlargement policy in shaping citizen perceptions.<sup>5</sup>

The enlargement process in Serbia includes the EU-led Belgrade-Pristina dialogue as a major condition for accession (Kmezić 2015). It is also the reason for delays and impasse in EU-Serbia relations. The distinction between recognizing Kosovo's independence as opposed to *normalizing* relations between Belgrade and Pristina being an EU condition remains unclear to citizens, included in Discourse C. They do not differentiate between Chapter 35 (on these relations) and other chapters and are afraid that EU conditions will 'force' the Serbian government to recognize Kosovo's independence. This automatically leads to a rejection of Serbia's membership, even though citizens acknowledge the potential positive effects of accession on the development of Serbia. Indeed, media statements that refer to the Kosovo issue signal ambiguity and uncertainty within the elites' rhetoric. While some clearly state that the Chapter 35 conditions and the Brussels Agreement are designed to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, they do not mention recognition of Kosovo's status. Evidently, the ambiguity on the Kosovo question in the media is in line with the uncertainty among citizens. Elite cues relating to economic benefits of European integration, which are prevalent in the media, may not be effective in persuading citizens adhering to this discourse to change their mind with regards to the recognition of Kosovo as a condition for membership.

#### **4.2. Citizens and elites in dissonance: the public-elite gap**

The statements that do not fit any of the citizen discourses are interesting, since these statements not only indicate the *size* but also the *content* of the public-elite gap.

Table 3 illustrates some of the issues in the media statements that are not found in the citizen discourses. First, the discourses among citizens do not refer to the start of accession negotiations as a *historical achievement* for Serbia. This was voiced predominantly by Prime Minister Ivica Dačić in January 2014, when the negotiations officially began. Of the statements that did not fit in with the dominant citizen discourses on EU accession, 17 (25.8 percent) alluded to the historic achievement of opening membership negotiations. This is in sharp contrast to the overarching 'Return to Europe' rhetoric shared by citizens and elites regarding the accession with Central and East-European candidates in the 1990s (Schimmelfennig 2001).

Second, citizens do not discuss the effects of an early general election on the process of Serbia's accession negotiations. Seven of the media statements (10.6 percent) referred to the upcoming national elections. This is not surprising due to the timing of the media data. Domestic political parties attempted to posture before the poll, while others assessed whether the elections would be disruptive to accession and Pristina-Belgrade negotiations.

Third, a mismatch in communication appears on the technical aspects of enlargement process. Details referring to the intricacies of the process are largely absent in the four discourses among citizens. Details about who will lead the Serbian negotiation team, how domestic leaders cooperate, the sequencing of chapter negotiations, and institutional steps required remain outside of the scope of citizen discourses. A total of 13 media statements (19.7 percent) were comments by Tanja Mišćević, the Serbian Government Chief Negotiator.

**Table 3.** Prevalent topics for media statements not matching citizen discourses.

Topic	Speaker	Example
Historic achievement	Ivica Dačić (PM)	Ahead of tomorrow's first intergovernmental conference with the EU in Brussels, Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić says that he is proud to be one of the few Serbian prime ministers who achieved historical results which future generations will remember.
Technicalities	Aleksandar Vučić (deputy PM) Tanja Mišćević (Chief Negotiator)	Vučić says that today is an important and big day for Serbia. Asked for a negotiating framework, she said that the document will contain the principles of negotiation and that this document, as well as the introductory statement at the intergovernmental conference will be published on the website of the government of Serbia, noting that both documents must be made public.
	Anonymous (Serbian negotiator)	Politika's source in the Serbian negotiation team said that Belgrade insists on opening three chapters in June, the above-mentioned Chapter 32, then the Chapter 35 relating to Kosovo, as well as one of the so-called easy chapters which do not contain too many EU legal norms, such as Chapter 25 (science and research) or 26 (education and culture).
National Election	Tanja Mišćević (Chief Negotiator)	Asked whether the elections would slow the integration process, she said: 'Not necessarily, if they were organized faster with a short electoral campaign.'
	Ivica Dačić (PM)	We'll make sure that Serbia doesn't lag behind in the EU integration process, despite the ongoing electoral campaign. It means that the elections should not affect the process of integration, or the implementation of reforms and, certainly not, the dialogue with Pristina, Dačić said.

Fourth, four statements (6.1 percent) referred to exact dates of expected accession and importance of accession for the Western Balkans. Another three statements (4.5 percent) mentioned a potential referendum on the EU Accession Treaty in Serbia. These have been completely ignored by citizens, for whom referendum is not central to their viewpoints. Citizens also do not refer at all to a particular timeframe for accession, even though they have expectations about the speed and quality of Serbia's preparation.

What is interesting is that regional reconciliation and security, which is at the heart of the EU Stabilization and Association process, only appears at the margins of communicative elite discourses in the media and is negligible amongst citizen discourses. The remaining 18 statements (27.3 percent) cover a range of low-key topics, including bilateral cooperation with Slovakia and public attitudes amongst member states about Serbian candidacy. While the media pays some attention to the details related to opening negotiation chapters, citizens ignore these aspects and instead rely on personal experiences in national and local socio-economic and political affairs. Indeed, political elites are closer to the negotiation process and thus the media content reflects on their direct engagement in it in terms of negotiations progress, chapters sequencing and the details of the negotiations.

## 5. Conclusion

This article explores the links between political elites and citizens in discourses on European integration. Studying the discourses in Serbia provides the opportunity to examine these relationships in a country in which discussions on European integration are highly politicized, and a gap between political elites and citizens can occur. We find

that in both major national newspapers all four discourses identified in Dimitrova and Kortenska (2016) are present. The pro-European discourse 'Cautiously Positive Expectations' is most prominent, which makes positive claims about EU enlargement and its effects on Serbia's economy and citizens. Furthermore, attention is given to the Kosovo question, pointing to different ideas about the future effects these issues may have on Serbia's accession negotiations.

Our results confirm the *limited-overlap hypothesis*, implying that there is a discursive gap, which is expected at times of major societal change. In our research, we found that some media content reflecting elite discourses does not appear in citizen discourses. These new elite cues, which do not match citizen discourses, may be the result of unsuccessful attempts of changing current discourses or a search for alternative ones. In the case of Serbia, elites appear to be more engaged with the process of enlargement, while citizens are concerned about its implications. More generally, this gap illustrates that, especially when it comes to mass processes in society, cue-making and cue-taking have all kinds of imperfections, which affect the correspondence between elite politics and citizen views.

Given the authoritarian past in Serbia, and generally weak civil society and civic mobilization, it could be expected that even in times of political change, there is a strong top-down link between EU and Serbian elites aiming to affect through communicating discourses in the media, the discourses of citizens. This traditional pathway is quite central to the literature. The existence of the four citizen discourses in the media suggest that this transmission has taken place. The correspondence between elite and media are particularly strong, especially in *Politika*, since it is the newspaper of the establishment. The predominance of the positive statements might correspond to the consensus around accession coordinated by EU and domestic elites.

The *cautiously optimistic* statements suggest that elites are not unfettered and are instead constrained by domestic factors and electoral appeal to citizens, particularly with the opposition invoking the 'Mistrust and Hostility' discourse. This nuances the idea of cueing as a two-way street. Citizen discourses do resonate with the statements in communicative discourses presented in the media. At the same time, these discourses do not fully reflect the stances of governing elites and filter some of the cues provided to them. There is no citizen discourse that is completely absent from media, but they are also not equally present.

With this in mind, a major discrepancy between elites and citizens is the lack of historically motivated rhetoric among the latter. This distinguishes the enlargement process of ex-Yugoslav countries from the earlier process in Central and Eastern Europe. Accession in Central and Eastern Europe was imbued with a strong pro-EU bridging discourse on the 'Reunification of Europe' that resonated among both citizens and political elites within candidate countries (Dimitrova and Kortenska 2017). Such discourse is absent in the citizen discussions in Serbia, even though we find some of this rhetoric in the media. Another finding is that there is only minimal reference to the EU as a broker of regional security, cooperation, and peace. Citizens seem to downplay this aspect of enlargement, even though security and stability in the region is one of the EU's underlying rationales behind EU enlargement.

Our article shows that we are able to join up discourse analyses from citizen focus groups with discourse analyses of elites using national media from a specific period in

time. From a substantive point of view, we show that the key components of the EU's enlargement strategy – justice, stability, and 'returning to Europe' – do not filter down to citizens. The positivity towards EU integration amongst citizens is based on opportunity and pragmatism. If the EU and Serbian elites are serious about effectively communicating an inclusive environment during the accession process, they should further emphasize the discourses around opportunity and pragmatism in moving forward.

## Notes

1. Based on the original dataset, we calculated the correlations between the different factors representing the discourses, which are, in general, rather low. The correlation is slightly higher (0.32) between the anti-EU discourse on mistrust and hostility (B) and the critical discourse on national elites about moving towards EU rules (D). The other correlations are  $-0.16$  between A-B;  $0.11$  between A-C;  $0.04$  between A-D;  $-0.08$  between B-C; and  $0.23$  between C-D (the capital letters refer to the labels of the discourses mentioned in the text).
2. The *Politika* website has a searchable online archive sub-divided by day. We searched the term 'evrop\*' identify relevant articles related to EU accession. An automated search was not possible for *Danas*, so we examined the papers' politics, economy, and society sections. Within each relevant article, the statements on EU accession were separated by the individual speaker, and comprised of one or more sentences. For each statement, we recorded the date of newspaper article; name of individual making statement; original statement (in Serbian); translated statement (in English); newspaper article title; and article URL.
3. See [doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WYG5RV](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WYG5RV) for coding schemes and data.
4. We counted them in both discourses in which they appear, making the total percentage higher than 100 percent.
5. There is no substantial difference in the distribution of discourses between the two newspapers. Within the *Danas* and *Politika* statements, respectively: 51.47% versus 45.37% were from Discourse A; 10.29% versus 4.63% were from Discourse B; 11.76% versus 17.59% were from Discourse C; and 14.71% versus 15.28% were from Discourse D. The discursive gap is also similar, with 19.12% and 24.54% of the statements from *Danas* and *Politika*, respectively, not fitting any of the citizen discourses.

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