
Prison and Probation: Differences in Croatian Media Coverage

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Martina Pleško

Purpose:

The aim of the paper is to analyse dominant media narratives and differences with respect to the visibility and interpretation of prison sentences and probation in Croatian media.

Design/Methods/Approach:

Content analysis of articles published in leading Croatian online media between 2020 and 2024 was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. The analysis focused on the thematic framework, language, frequency of mentions, and social context.

Findings:

The topic of prison sentences was mentioned significantly more often than probation was. Regarding their portrayals, certain differences were found in the tone of the articles, the use of sensationalism, the naming of well-known persons or the full identity of offenders, suspects, convicts, prisoners and victims, as well as in the use of cover images.

Research Limitations/Implications:

The research has several limitations, including the method used to search for articles and the possible influence of the researcher's subjectivity and bias in the analysis. Future research should include more websites over a longer period and examine journalists' reporting methods and their familiarity with criminal sanctions.

Practical Implications:

The findings may assist with a better understanding of how the media shape public perceptions of prison sentences and probation, and open up space for a discussion on the visibility and acceptance of different forms of sanctions in Croatian society.

Originality/Value:

As the first research of its kind in Croatia, this work can help raise awareness and understanding of how the media portray criminal sanctions, while also serving as a starting point for comparative analysis of the media representation of criminal sanctions on an international level.

Keywords: sanctions, prison sentence, probation, community sanctions, media,

Croatia

UDC: 316.77:343.84(497.5)

Zapori in probacija: razlike v medijskem poročanju na Hrvaškem

Namen prispevka:

Namen prispevka je analizirati prevladujoče medijske narative ter razlike v vidnosti in interpretaciji zapornih kazni in probacije v hrvaških medijih.

Metode:

Izvedena je bila analiza vsebine člankov, objavljenih v vodilnih hrvaških spletnih medijih med letoma 2020 in 2024, z uporabo pristopa mešanih metod. Analiza se osredotoča na tematski okvir, jezik, pogostost omemb in družbeni kontekst.

Ugotovitve:

Rezultati kažejo, da se tema zapornih kazni omenja bistveno pogosteje kot tema probacije. Pri njenem prikazovanju so bile ugotovljene določene razlike v tonu člankov, uporabi senzacionalizma, navajanju znanih oseb ali popolne identitete storilcev, osumljencev, obsojencev, zapornikov in žrtev, pa tudi v uporabi naslovnih slik.

Omejitve/uporabnost raziskave:

Raziskava ima več omejitev, vključno z metodo iskanja člankov in morebitnim vplivom raziskovalčeve subjektivnosti ter pristranskosti pri analizi. Prihodnje raziskave bi morale zajeti več portalov v daljšem časovnem obdobju ter preučiti poznavanje kazenskopравnih sankcij in načinov poročanja med novinarji.

Praktična uporabnost:

Ugotovitve lahko prispevajo k boljšemu razumevanju, kako mediji oblikujejo javno dojetje zapornih kazni in probacije, ter odpirajo prostor za razpravo o vidnosti in sprejemanju različnih oblik sankcij v hrvaški družbi.

Izvirnost/pomembnost prispevka:

Kot prva raziskava te vrste na Hrvaškem lahko pomaga povečati ozaveščenost in razumevanje načina, kako mediji prikazujejo kazenske sankcije, ter služi kot izhodišče za primerjalno analizo medijskega prikazovanja kazenskih sankcij na mednarodni ravni.

Ključne besede: sankcije, zaporna kazen, probacija, skupnostne sankcije, mediji, Hrvaška

UDK: 316.77:343.84(497.5)

1 INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, the media are an indispensable part of everyday life. Often referred to as the seventh power or the fourth estate, the mass media indirectly and/or directly shape social worldviews (Malović, 2007). The media has an undeniable role in creating and maintaining the perception of social problems generally (Robinson, 2011), yet also the perception of crime itself and the criminal justice system (Marsh & Melville, 2009).

1.1 Media and the perception of crime

Scientific research on the media–crime relationship dates back to the beginning of this century (Schlesinger et al., 2010). Crime is one of the most common topics in the media because it attracts the attention of large numbers of people, which makes it financially profitable to report on it (Chermak & Chapman, 2007). Despite noticeable public interest, the general population does not really know much about crime and criminal justice (Roberts & Hough, 2005). Part of the reason for this is that most people have no direct contact or experience with crime (McGreevy, 2013; Robinson, 2011; Sučić, 2015), especially not violent crime (Robinson, 2011). Nevertheless, people often clearly express their opinions and attitudes concerning offenders, victims and criminal justice policy (Kovčo Vukadin, 2012). In the absence of personal experience, what is known about these social problems mainly, but not exclusively, comes from the media (Marsh & Melville, 2009; Muraskin & Domash, 2007; Robinson, 2011). Apart from the mass media, the personal experiences of individuals, significant others, and social groups and institutions are also important for creating a picture of one's own reality (Robinson, 2011; Surette, 2007). As the influence of other sources is decreasing, the influence of the media is increasing (Robinson, 2011), which further indicates its significance and the importance of the type of reporting that is engaged in (Borovec, 2012).

Numerous theories have sought to explain the media's complex influence on how the public sees a given problem, including crime (e.g., framing theory, cultivation theory, limited action model). Differences in the theoretical starting points are largely shown while assessing the intensity of the effect media content has on the public and the level of audience participation in the process of receiving and interpreting media content. For example, according to framing theory, the media directs attention to specific events and places them within meaningful frames, shaping how the audience perceives and interprets those events (Valkenburg et al., 2016), whereas cultivation theory highlights that long-term media exposure leads to an exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust or a belief that the world is cruel and frightening (Gerbner, 1998). In contrast, the limited action model assumes that the audience already holds predetermined opinions and attitudes that are simply reinforced by the media (Borovec, 2012).

When it comes specifically to the ways and impact of media coverage of crime, Robinson (2011) sets out two models – one objective, the other subjective. The first view assumes unbiased reporting of the empirical reality of crime, whereas in a subjective interpretation the media cannot report objectively on social problems

because knowledge about these phenomena is socially constructed (Robinson, 2011), which is what the theory of social constructivism (Surette, 2007) refers to. According to the theory, the media provide images from which people create their own reality, and are thus a key element in defining reality for most people, with a central role to play in the dissemination of knowledge and what society regards as crime (Surette, 2007).

1.2 Media coverage of criminal sanctions

Alongside crime, the public is interested in the ways in which offenders are tracked down and prosecuted within the criminal justice system. In particular, the public is interested in the entire process, from the apprehension of offenders by the police, to the pronouncement of court judgements and enforcement of the sanctions imposed (Marsh & Melville, 2009). However, the enforcement of criminal sanctions is seen as a less valuable and interesting topic than other segments of the criminal justice system, which explains why it is the least represented in related media coverage. Further, access to individuals and institutions where sanctions are enforced is much more complex than access to police and court officials and their procedures (Robinson, 2011).

It is well known that the media tend to focus attention and report on the most spectacular crimes that bring the most severe penalties (Marsh & Melville, 2009), while ignoring the issue of the rehabilitation of offenders and the circumstances of individual cases (Milićević & Drndarević, 2023). It is noticeable that the use of sensationalism, namely a style of writing that primarily aims to attract readers' attention (Molek-Kozakowka, 2013) and evoke strong emotions among content users (Uribe & Gunter, 2007), in media portrayals of crime is linked to sensationalist reporting in the area of punishment (Hayes, 2013). Indeed, when crime is portrayed as more serious and widespread than it actually is, retributive punishments are presented as necessary and justified, leaving alternative sanctions to struggle to gain legitimacy (Hayes, 2013). In this way, a distorted picture of the criminal sanctions enforcement system is created, according to which imprisonment is the dominating or most frequently imposed sanction (Marsh & Melville, 2009; Robinson, 2011).

Studies on media coverage of criminal sanctions consistently point to the unequal representation of prison sentences and probation in the media, with probation¹ and alternative sanctions² being significantly less present in the media (Happer et al., 2019; Hayes, 2013; Maguire & Carr, 2013; Sučić, 2015; Tidmarsh,

1 *Probation is not easy to define with precision. However, it is a widely accepted and internationally recognised term used to denote various forms of supervision of offenders in the community, along with the organisations responsible for such work, like probation agencies and probation services (Council of Europe, 2009). According to Appendix I to the Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)1, probation is defined as the implementation in the community of sanctions and measures prescribed by law and imposed on an offender. It includes a range of activities and interventions, such as supervision, guidance and support, with the aim of promoting the offender's social reintegration and contributing to community safety (Council of Europe, 2010).*

2 *Although there is no single definition of alternative sanctions, in the broadest sense, alternative sanctions include all sanctions by which convicted persons are not sent to serve a sentence in a penal institution, namely, sanctions imposed as alternatives to prison sentences (Tot, 2007). The concept of probation is today considerably broader than that of alternative sanctions as it also includes various community-based measures that may be imposed on offenders by criminal justice authorities. In this paper, the terms probation and alternative sanctions are used according to the terminology used by the respective authors cited.*

2023). Media portrayals of prison sentences and penal institutions often present them as distant from the everyday lives of most people (Stiernstedt & Kaun, 2022) and are typically framed by two extreme narratives: the 'boot camps', where prisons are portrayed as dangerous and violent places dominated by strict discipline, and 'holiday camps', which portray prisons as places at which prisoners enjoy various comforts and privileges (Marsh, 2013). In contrast, probation and alternative sanctions are generally represented in relation to prison sentences and often presented in a neutral tone (Happer et al., 2019; Sučić, 2015) as less effective or too lenient sanctions against offenders (Hayes, 2013; Maguire & Carr, 2013). As concerns media coverage of criminal sanctions in Croatia, Sučić (2015) conducted a study on media coverage of probation. She analysed 390 newspaper articles on probation published between 2009 and 2013, a noteworthy period that coincides with the establishing of the probation system in Croatia, a more comprehensive reform of the "Criminal Code" ("Kazneni zakon", 2011), and the creation of a fully functional probation service. The results of her research show that the probation service in Croatia receives little media attention. It is frequently presented superficially and in the context of prison sentences, emphasising the role of probation as a means of relieving overcrowded prisons or reducing costs, while other positive effects are rarely highlighted (Sučić, 2015).

Since most people do not have a personal experience of being imprisoned and probation, media narratives can have a considerable impact on the public's trust in the criminal justice system (Sučić, 2015). Inadequate media coverage of these issues can contribute to the public developing misconceptions about the punishment of offenders, which ultimately might produce a negative impact on the criminal justice policy as a whole (Mason, 2006; Milićević & Drndarević, 2023). It is thus important to consider how imprisonment and probation are portrayed in the media in Croatia. Since a look at the available literature shows no research involving a comparative portrayal of imprisonment and probation in Croatian online media has thus far been performed, this paper may help with gaining new insights into the way the media report on criminal sanctions in Croatia, together with knowledge about this topic on the international level.

1.3 Prison system and probation in Croatia

In order to understand the media's portrayal of prison sentences and probation in Croatia, it is necessary to briefly discuss the structure and functioning of the Croatian prison and probation system.

The Prison System and Probation Service are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, Administration and Digital Transformation, and organised as the Prison System Sector and Probation Service Sector within the Directorate for the Prison System and Probation. The Croatian prison system is organised hierarchically, with the Central Office for the Prison System and other organisational units, which include 7 penitentiaries, 14 prisons, 2 reformatories, the Diagnostic Centre, and the Training Centre. The probation sector consists of the Central Probation Office and 14 probation offices, which are responsible for the entire territory of the Republic of Croatia. The operation of both systems

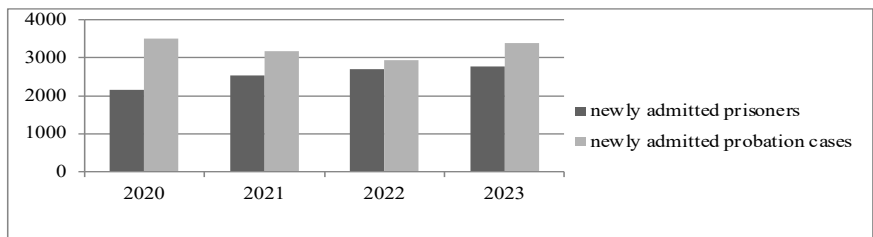
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is financed from the state budget (Ministarstvo pravosuđa, uprave i digitalne transformacije [MPUDT], n.d.).

The main role of prison sentences is to protect society from offenders and enable offenders to live a life of freedom in line with the law and social norms (MPUDT, n.d.). A very similar role is played by alternative sanctions implemented by the Croatian Probation Service, which began work in 2011 (Maloić, 2015), and became fully operational after a more comprehensive reform of the Criminal Code in 2013 (Špero, 2015). The Probation Act (“Zakon o probaciji”, 2018) stipulates that probation activities are implemented to protect society from offenders and for the purpose of their resocialisation and reintegration into the community. It is clear that both the prison and probation systems promote a rehabilitative approach to offenders, with a focus on preventing recidivism in the commission of offences and the social reintegration of offenders (Maloić & Brkić, 2019).

The “Criminal Code” of the Republic of Croatia (“Kazneni zakon”, 2011) provides three types of penalties – a fine, a prison sentence, and a long-term prison sentence, whereby a prison sentence cannot be shorter than 3 months, a long-term prison sentence cannot be longer than 40 years, and a sentence of 50 years may only be imposed in exceptional cases for offences committed at the same time. The ‘new’ and still valid “Criminal Code” of 2011 introduced the possibility of imposing sanctions less severe than imprisonment (Turković & Maršavelski, 2012), and the establishment and operation of the probation service enabled alternative sanctions to be more broadly applied, in turn minimising the use of short-term prison sentences (Kovčó Vukadin & Špero, 2015). Today, the probation service performs a whole range of tasks in all stages of criminal proceedings and the enforcement of criminal sanctions (Maloić & Brkić, 2019). The importance of probation services is also revealed by data on the number of new cases received over the years. Graph 1 shows that the number of new cases received by the probation service during the reporting period was slightly higher than the number of new prisoners admitted to penal institutions³ (Ministarstvo pravosuđa i uprave (MPU), 2021, 2022, 2023; Vlada Republike Hrvatske (Vlada RH), 2021, 2022, 2024, 2025a; 2025b). Even though these figures do not represent the exact number of sanctions imposed, they provide an indicative overview of the prevalence of prison sentences and probation in the Croatian penal system.

Graph 1:
Number
of new
admissions:
prisoners and
individuals
for probation



³ As the probation service’s interventions focus exclusively on adult offenders (Sučić, 2015), the number of newly admitted prisoners also relates solely to adult offenders.

2 PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to gain insights into the way Croatian online media portray prison sentences and probation in order to better understand the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of criminal sanctions. To that end, the prevailing media narratives and differences in the visibility and interpretation of prison sentences and probation in Croatian online media are analysed.

To further guide the paper, the following research questions were posed:

1. Are there differences in the visibility, i.e., the frequency of mentions of prison sentences and probation in Croatian online media?
2. What are the prevailing media narratives about prison sentences and probation in Croatian online media?

3 METHODOLOGY

With a view to answering the research questions, content analysis of articles published in leading Croatian online media between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2024 was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. For this purpose, online portals were analysed, noting that the Internet is the most widely used media today, and information available through online sources is considered more reliable than that in other media (Benzinović et al., 2021).

The unit of analysis in this paper was a single article, i.e., a post on an online portal. An article on an online portal is defined as a single, independent and meaningful whole published on an individual media outlet's website (Benković & Balabanić, 2010). The analysis included articles from three Croatian online portals, which a survey conducted by the Reuters Institute in 2024 showed were the most visited websites on a weekly basis: *Index.hr*, *24sata online* and *Dnevnik.hr* (Peruško, 2024). The articles were looked for using the search engine available on the websites and the following keywords;⁴ for articles mentioning prison sentences, the keywords: *prison sentence*, *prisoners* and *prison system*⁵ were used, while articles referring to probation were searched using the words: *probation*, *probation services*, *alternative sanctions*, *probation sentence* and *community sanctions*.

A search of the portal using the above keywords returned a total of 1,446 articles mentioning prison sentences and 38 articles mentioning probation. It is important to note that the analysis included articles on prison sentences which mentioned prison sentences in the context of a legally prescribed or imposed sentence for adult offenders and in the context of serving prison sentences in penal institutions. Articles that referred to pre-trial detention, prison in connection with a misdemeanour or juvenile prison were excluded from the analysis. Articles that were identified as complete duplicates of other articles or which did not allow access to the full article without an additional subscription⁶ were also excluded.

⁴ The original keywords, i.e. the keywords in Croatian are: *kazna zatvora, zatvorenici, zatvorski sustav, probacija, probacijska služba, alternativne sankcije, uvjetna osuda, rad za opće dobro*.

⁵ One of the keywords originally intended for the search for articles on the topic of prison sentences was the term *prison*. This was later removed because a large number of articles were found that were not necessarily related to prison sentences, and the articles could not be selected in any other way.

⁶ The *24sata online* portal also contains articles labelled '24sata plus+', which require a subscription to read them in full.

Therefore, among the total number, 978 articles on prison sentences and 19 articles on probation (altogether 997 articles) were included for further analysis.

In order to systematically analyse the collected articles, a matrix containing a list of variables relevant to the research was created. The matrix recorded the main topic of the article, the tone in which the article was written (positive, neutral-factual, negative), the use of sensationalism, the full first and last name of the offender, suspect, convict, prisoner and/or victim. It also recorded whether public figures were named in the article as an offender, suspect, convict, prisoner or victim, and whether and which photos were used in the article. The matrix for analysing articles about prison sentences and probation was the same, except that for articles on prison sentences the length of the prison sentence mentioned was also recorded. The coding was carried out by a single researcher using this predefined matrix and clearly defined operational categories to assure consistency of the analysis.

Once all relevant online articles had been read and analysed according to the matrix described above, the data were grouped and summarised into several categories in order to identify patterns in media coverage of prison sentences and probation and to draw conclusions in line with the formulated research questions.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question concerned whether differences exist in the frequency of mentions of prison sentences and probation in Croatian online media. Analysis of the collected articles makes it clear that prison sentences are a much more frequent topic than probation on all the portals included and in all years (Table 1). Although the current "Criminal Code" (2011) provides a framework for the broader application of alternative sanctions, as reflected among others by the fact that the number of newly admitted cases in the probation system slightly exceeds the number of newly admitted prisoners in correctional institutions, prison sentences remain predominantly represented in the media. This discrepancy can be explained by the limited action model, which holds that the media chiefly confirm and reinforce the public's pre-existing attitudes and opinions (Borovec, 2012). If society is generally more inclined to view prison sentences as the standard form of punishment, media reporting can reinforce this perception. One possible reason for this public perception lies in the development of criminal sanctions in Croatia. Prison sentences and the prison system have a long-standing and well-established institutional structure and are continuously discussed in the media, whereas the Croatian probation service is relatively new and still developing (Špero & Brkić, 2021). Moreover, this discrepancy is not surprising considering that, according to previous findings, probation is much less frequently present in the media compared to prison sentences (e.g., Happer et al., 2019; Hayes, 2013; Maguire & Carr, 2013; Sučić, 2015).

Portal name	Topic	Year				
		2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Index.hr	Prison sentence	59	103	61	98	86
	Probation	0	1	4	2	1
24sata online	Prison sentence	58 ⁷	98	43	102	88
	Probation	1	0	1	1	1
Dnevnik.hr	Prison sentence	27	38	39	39	39
	Probation	1	1	3	1	1
Total	Prison sentence	144	239	143	239	213
	Probation	2	2	8	4	3

Table 1: Number of articles analysed that mention prison sentences and probation

In 742 of the articles analysed, prison sentence is mentioned in the context of a criminal sanction prescribed or imposed by law, although in most articles it is only mentioned as information with a more detailed description of the offence committed or as an integral part of the reasoning of the court judgement. Among the total number of these articles, 78 explicitly refer to long-term prison sentences, associated with the linking of the commission of serious offences, such as multiple murders. In this type of reporting, the prison sentence serves largely as a frame of reference for understanding the offence's seriousness. According to framing theory, associating serious criminal offences with long-term prison sentences shapes the interpretive framework via which the public evaluates the severity of crime and the appropriateness of criminal sanctions. In this way, the media can play an important role in shaping the public's perception and understanding of criminal sanctions and crime in general (Marsh & Melville, 2009). On the other hand, 196 articles dealt with the topic of prison sentence exclusively from the point of view of being carried out in penal institutions. Such a disproportion in the number of articles on prison sentences as a prescribed or pronounced sanction is not surprising as the enforcement of criminal sanctions is often perceived to be a less valuable and interesting topic than other stages in criminal justice, and hence is less represented in media coverage in this area (Robinson, 2011). Access to the individuals and institutions in which the sanctions are enforced is also not easy (Robinson, 2011). It is therefore possible that this disparity is partly due to the penal system's lower 'transparency' relative to the different stages of the criminal justice process. In other words, the question arises as to whether the relative invisibility of prison sentence enforcement is due to a genuine lack of interest and to what extent there is a degree of 'closedness' in the system for enforcing sanctions. Articles on the execution of prison sentences mention the conditions and life of prisoners in penal institutions in general, including issues of prison overcrowding, availability of medical care, (attempted) escapes of prisoners etc. Even though two extreme narratives are often stressed in the literature while describing the execution of prison sentences, namely life in penal institutions ("boot camps" and "holiday camps") (Marsh, 2013), such polarisation was not seen in the articles analysed, which principally focused on specific and current problems in the Croatian

⁷ While searching for articles on the 24sata online portal for 2020 with the keyword prison sentence, it was only possible to access articles up until 16 July 2020, and thus one may assume that the number of articles for this year is higher than what is stated here.

prison system. For example, it can be observed that in certain years articles on the conditions and changes in particular penal institutions that occurred as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the earthquakes that shook parts of the Republic of Croatia in 2020 stand out. Accordingly, it is noticeable that a prison sentence is mostly presented in the media space as an expected or desirable form of sanction for an offence, while the concepts of rehabilitation and resocialisation of prisoners during the execution of their prison sentence are represented less, which is harmony with previous research (e.g., Marsh & Melville, 2009; Miličević & Drndarević, 2023).

When the articles in which the term probation appears are considered separately, the word is mentioned in nine articles in connection with a convicted person's obligation to report to the probation office (e.g., *...and after being released, he must also report to the competent probation office* (Tkalčević & HINA, 2024)), and only eight articles briefly describe the work of the probation service. In two articles, the probation service is mentioned exclusively in connection with the name of the Directorate for the Prison System and Probation. Therefore, based on the small number of articles in which the term probation is mentioned and the analysis of the articles themselves, it can be stated that the media visibility of probation is very low in Croatia, as Sučić (2015) found while analysing Croatian newspaper articles on probation for the period 2009–2013. In those cases where probation is still mentioned, it is often presented superficially and casually, without any details given of the probation work (e.g., *If he actually receives a conditional release, he will be in the probation system, the so-called conditional and supervised release, during which the officers will work on the offender's resocialisation and integration into society* (P. A., 2024)). From the perspective of the theory of social constructivism, the media provide images on whose basis most people form their perceptions of reality (Surette, 2007). This means that superficial reporting on probation in which its role and function are rarely explained may hinder probation from gaining social legitimacy.

To answer the second research question regarding the way the media portray prison sentences and probation in Croatia, focus was given to recording and analysing specific aspects of the articles, including the tone, the use of sensationalism, the mentioning of famous people as offenders, suspects, convicts, prisoners or victims, the full first and last name of the offender, suspect, convict, prisoner and/or victim. Also considered were whether the article had a cover photo and, if so, what type of photo, i.e., what or who it shows.

As concerns the tone of an individual article, its assessment was limited to four categories: positive, neutral-factual, negative, or cannot be determined. The researcher established the tone of an article based on the overall impression it created, the choice of words, and the presence/absence of emotionally charged expressions. It was found that the majority of all the articles analysed were written in a neutral-factual tone (Table 2), meaning that such texts present concrete facts (e.g., the length of the sentence, a description of the crime) without any additional emotional interpretation or moral evaluation. A negative tone was observed in 11.8% of all articles analysed. These articles mostly contained references to moral judgements and criticism, and largely referred to prison sentences imposed for

serious crimes or concerning public figures or recidivists (e.g., *Reduced sentence for former HDZ leader for rape because he is a 'decorated veteran'* (Tomšić, 2022)). It is noteworthy that a bigger share of articles on probation had a negative tone than the share of articles about prison sentences did. This could be due to the overall small number of articles on probation, several of which reported on the failure of probation officers in sending a person convicted of a sexual offence against a child to a home for children with special needs for community service (e.g., *Malenica: Probation officers responsible for placing a paedophile in a children's home* (Index vijesti, 2022b)). These articles directly criticise the work of the probation service. Such emphasis on the probation service's shortcomings, especially given the small number of articles that describe probation, can add to the public's perception that the probation service is inefficient and unreliable, further limiting its social acceptance. However, a neutral-factual tone was observed in the majority of articles on probation, which is consistent with previous research showing a similar pattern of media coverage of the probation system (e.g., Happer et al., 2019; Sučić, 2015). For 1.3% of the articles analysed, the tone could not be determined. This refers to texts written ambiguously or unclearly, where the researcher could not decide if the tone was positive, negative, or neutral-factual. It should also be noted that a positive tone was evident in the smallest number of articles, and only in those about prison sentences. These were mostly texts about the rehabilitation of prisoners, describing successful examples of work with prisoners within penal institutions (e.g., *The first computer-assisted psychotherapy treatment in Croatia helps prisoners deal with anger* (HINA, 2020a)).

Table 2: Tone of the analysed articles

	Articles on prison sentences (% of total number of articles on prison sentences analysed)	Articles on probation (% of total number of articles on probation analysed)	Total (% of total number of all articles analysed)
Positive tone	12 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (1.2%)
Neutral-factual tone	844 (86.3%)	12 (63.1%)	856 (85.6%)
Negative tone	110 (11.2%)	6 (31.6%)	116 (11.8%)
Undecidable tone	12 (1.2%)	1 (5.3%)	13 (1.3%)

It was also relevant to examine the use of sensationalism in the articles. The presence of sensationalism (in the title and/or text of the article) was operationalised with a binary variable (yes/no). The use of sensationalism was observed in slightly more than half of all articles, more precisely in 551 of them (Table 3), which reflects the media's desire to attract the attention of as many people as possible. Some of the best-known examples of sensationalist headlines are: *Monster from Solin gets reduced sentence. He came to borrow flour and beat a couple with a mallet* (Index vijesti, 2022a), *Paedophile molested and filmed his daughter for years, and the court reduced his sentence because he said he was sorry!* (HINA, 2020b), *Young mother brutally killed baby, now it's the psychiatrists' turn: This is what they will try to find out* (Dnevnik.hr, 2024). When comparing articles about prison sentences and probation, one can observe that sensationalism is present among a slightly larger share of articles dealing with prison sentences than among those mentioning probation. This may

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Table 3:
The use of
sensationalism
in articles

be expected since prison sentences are more often associated with more serious offences, which are inherently more attractive to the media, and therefore lend themselves better to a sensationalist approach (Marsh & Melville, 2009). It is important to note that sensationalism can make crime appear more serious than it is, which can reinforce the public's perception of the necessity and legitimacy of retributive punishments (Hayes, 2013).

The use of sensationalism	Articles on prison sentences (% of total number of articles on prison sentences analysed)	Articles on probation (% of total number of articles on probation analysed)	Total (% of total number of all articles analysed)
Yes	542 (55.4%)	9 (47.4%)	551 (55.3%)
No	436 (44.6%)	10 (52.6%)	446 (44.7%)

The use of sensationalism can also be linked to the mentioning of public figures in media reports. The collected articles were analysed to determine whether public figures were mentioned in the role of offenders, suspects, convicts, prisoners or victims of a crime. Public figures were placed in five categories: politicians, entrepreneurs, singers and actors, athletes, and other famous persons. Table 4 also displays a category referring to articles in which public figures are not mentioned. It is this last category that contains the largest number of articles, i.e., those in which no famous persons are mentioned, but persons who are unknown to the public. On the other hand, one may observe that among public figures, former or current politicians are most frequently mentioned in articles about prison sentences, usually as offenders, suspects, convicts or prisoners, and after them, famous entrepreneurs are most frequently mentioned in this context. Singers, actors and athletes are also mentioned in a smaller number, i.e., in a few articles. Among articles dealing with probation, just one article in which a politician was mentioned was found, which was in connection with a person on probation.

Table 4:
Mention of a
public figure
as an offender,
suspect,
convict,
prisoner or
victim

Public figures	Articles on prison sentences (% of total number of articles on prison sentences analysed)	Articles on probation (% of total number of articles on probation analysed)	Total (% of total number of all articles analysed)
Politicians	129 (13.2%)	1 (5.3%)	130 (13.0%)
Entrepreneurs	97 (9.9%)	0 (0.0%)	97 (9.7%)
Singers / actors	5 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (0.5%)
Athletes	4 (0.4%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (0.4%)
Others	18 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (1.8%)
Not mentioned	725 (74.1%)	18 (94.7%)	743 (74.5%)

In order to gain a deeper insight into the media coverage of prison sentences and probation, the articles were also analysed in terms of how often the full first and last names of offenders, suspects, convicts, prisoners and/or victims were mentioned. The naming of identities was categorised as follows: mention of the full first and last name of the offender, suspect, convict or prisoner; mention of

the full first and last name of the victim; simultaneous mention of the full first and last name of the offender, suspect, convict, prisoner and victim; mention of initials; and other combinations of mentioning the identities of individuals. Table 5 also displays the number of articles in which the identities of persons were not mentioned at all. The analysis showed that in the majority of cases the identity of the person was not given or the full first and last name of the offender, suspect, convict or prisoner was given. In half a smaller percentage, the full first and last name of the offender, suspect, convict, prisoner or victim was given, while very rarely the initials or another combination of identity were used. In five articles, the full first name and surname of the victim of the offence were explicitly stated. When comparing articles on prison sentences and articles on probation, it is noticeable that the identity of the person was not mentioned much more frequently in articles on probation, which can be linked to media appeal. As previously noted, prison sentences more often appear in the context of serious and media-attractive crimes, and mentioning the perpetrator's identity adds to the appeal of these articles. These findings are particularly important in the context of the ethics of media reporting. Pursuant to provisions of the Croatian journalists' Code of Honour (Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, n.d.), journalists must protect the privacy of individuals from sensationalist reporting and any other unjustified disclosure of their identity to the public. Therefore, the results obtained can serve as an indicator of how (in)consistently ethical principles are applied while reporting on criminal sanctions.

Identity of the offender⁸ and/or victim	Articles on prison sentences (% of total number of articles on prison sentences analysed)	Articles on probation (% of total number of articles on probation analysed)	Total (% of total number of all articles analysed)
Full first and last name of the offender	362 (37.0%)	5 (26.3%)	367 (36.8%)
Full first and last name of the victim	5 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (0.5%)
Full first and last name of the offender and victim	138 (14.1%)	1 (5.3%)	139 (13.9%)
Initials of the offender and victim	61 (6.2%)	0 (0.0%)	61 (6.1%)
Other	42 (4.3%)	0 (0.0%)	42 (4.2%)
Not mentioned	370 (37.8%)	13 (68.4%)	383 (38.4%)

Table 5: Identification of the offender, suspect, convict or prisoner and the victim

Given that images can operate on a subconscious level and influence the cognitive processes of news consumers and their interpretation of the content (Leckner, 2012), visual elements were also examined while analysing the articles. Particular attention was paid to the cover images of the articles, which were

⁸ For greater clarity, only the term *offender* is used in the table, but the full name also refers to suspects, convicts and prisoners mentioned in the articles analysed.

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divided into 10 categories: police features; crime scene; image of an offender, suspect, convict or prisoner; image of victim; image of an offender, suspect, convict, prisoner and victim; image of an institution; image of a politician; illustrative photos; other; and no image. The first category of police features includes images depicting police vehicles, police officers, police insignia or other symbols related to police work, while the illustrative category includes, for example, images of abuse, images of a gavel, symbolic representations of children, and children's toys. Such photos are linked to the content of the article text. Table 6 shows the distribution of articles on prison sentences and probation in terms of the presence and type of visual content, i.e., images, and the total number of articles included in the analysis. It is evident that among the total number of articles analysed, 38.5% showed the offender, suspect, convict or prisoner on the cover, which contributes to the sensationalised portrayal of crime and attracts greater public attention. This was followed by illustrative photos. A smaller percentage is accounted for by covers showing police features, official facilities such as a courthouse, prison, penitentiary etc., as well as those that had picture, only the name of the portal. In addition, 7.1% of the articles showed the place where a particular offence was committed. It is also worth noting that in a very small number of cases, symbols classified as other and images showing Croatian politicians, victims of a committed offence or images of offenders and victims appeared together as cover images.

Table 6: Cover images of the analysed articles

Cover images	Articles on prison sentences (% of total number of articles on prison sentences analysed)	Articles on probation (% of total number of articles on probation analysed)	Total (% of total number of all articles analysed)
Image of offender ⁹	378 (38.6%)	6 (31.6%)	384 (38.5%)
Illustrative photos	158 (16.1%)	6 (31.6%)	164 (16.4%)
Police features	96 (9.8%)	1 (5.3%)	97 (9.7%)
Image of institution	96 (9.8%)	0 (0.0%)	96 (9.6%)
No image	89 (9.1%)	3 (15.8%)	92 (9.2%)
Crime scene	71 (7.2%)	0 (0.0%)	71 (7.1%)
Other	34 (3.5%)	2 (10.5%)	36 (3.6%)
Image of politician	22 (2.2%)	1 (5.3%)	23 (2.3%)
Image of victim	19 (1.9%)	0 (0.0%)	19 (1.9%)

⁹ For greater clarity, only the term offender is used in the table, but the full name also refers to suspects, convicts and prisoners mentioned in the articles analysed.

Image of offender and victim	15 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	15 (1.5%)
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4.1 Limitations and contributions of the research

The presented research has several limitations that must be considered while interpreting the results. First, it should be noted that the articles analysed were collected exclusively through the search engine available on the portals, which means it might not have been possible to access all newspaper articles in this way, and only those that were excluded based on the keyword search. It is possible that due to certain technical limitations in the search for articles, such as the impossibility of accessing all articles on the *24sata online* website for 2020, some relevant articles were not available for analysis, which certainly affects the representativeness of the sample. In addition, the analysis was limited to selected websites, namely the three most visited portals in the Republic of Croatia, and hence other portals used by citizens were excluded. It is therefore possible that the results would have been slightly different if more websites or if websites less visited had been analysed. The considerable imbalance between articles on prison sentences and probation should also be noted since it might limit the validity of direct comparisons between these topics. Further, even though the articles were analysed according to a predefined matrix so as to achieve consistency and objectivity, this type of analysis is subject to the researcher's subjectivity and bias, particularly since the coding was conducted by a single researcher. The categorisation of articles by tone and sensationalism involves a subjective impression, which may affect the reliability of the results.

The most remarkable contribution of the research, however, is that it is the first study to deal with the parallel representation of prison sentences and probation in the media in Croatia. Considering that the media play an important role in creating and maintaining perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system (Marsh & Melville, 2009), this work can help in raising awareness and understanding of the way the media portray criminal sanctions in Croatia. In other words, the aim is to raise awareness of the media narratives that people are exposed to, and provide insight into the way online media convey relevant information in this area, while opening a space for discussion on the visibility and acceptance of different forms of sanctions in both Croatian society and the wider international context. Noting there are few foreign studies on this topic, this work can also provide a starting point for comparative analysis of the media representation of criminal sanctions on an international level.

4.2 Recommendations for future research

Given the limitations of this study described above, future research should include more portals over a longer time period to enable a broader and more representative analysis of media content. It would also be desirable to utilise media monitoring services to gain quick and complete access to all articles (Sučić,

2015), which could add to the reliability and validity of the results. Considering the results linked to the first research question, which show that prison sentences are mentioned more frequently than probation is, it would also be worthwhile to investigate how familiar journalists are with the concept of probation. Namely, do they know what it entails, how it is implemented, and which advantages it holds over a prison sentence. This could help assess to what extent the extremely limited mentioning of probation in online media is due to journalists lacking knowledge or understanding of the topic, and to what extent it is influenced by news selection and framing criteria, such as the unusualness of the event and the presence of sensationalist elements. Another suggestion for future research on the above topic is to conduct focus groups with journalists who report on criminal offences and criminal sanctions to ascertain which guidelines they follow while reporting on them and in which cases they resort to sensational reporting and for what purpose. Similarly, it is important to consider how judicial institutions present specific criminal sanctions and the degree to which such presentations contribute to probation being seen as a legitimate and socially acceptable response to crime, particularly during the period of establishing probation systems¹⁰. A more in-depth analysis could thereby be conducted, which could provide more appropriate conclusions about media coverage of criminal sanctions, and a more concrete comparison of the portrayal of the prison and probation system in the Republic of Croatia could be made. Such research is especially valuable because the way the media report on these issues can help to strengthen the social legitimacy of probation and its public acceptance, which aligns with current trends in criminal policy towards the broader use of probation.

5 CONCLUSION

One cannot deny that the media, as an indispensable part of most people's everyday lives, contributes significantly to the creation and continuance of perceptions of social problems, including crime and the criminal justice system. Besides the area of crime, the operation of the criminal justice system is also in the public interest, and the way in which the media report on criminal sanctions is of particular importance. The aim of this paper was to analyse the prevailing media narratives and differences in the visibility and interpretation of prison sentences and probation in prevailing Croatian online media in order to obtain insight into the way the media portray criminal sanctions in the Croatian context. The analysis of articles from the three most visited websites in Croatia showed there is a clear imbalance in the media coverage of prison sentences and probation. More specifically, a prison sentence as a legally prescribed or imposed sanction for adult offenders or in the context of serving a prison sentence in penal institutions, is a much more common topic than probation. Probation appears very rarely in the

¹⁰ A similar process of introducing probation occurred in Slovenia, where the establishment of probation services was accompanied by media coverage, including interviews and press conferences organised by the Ministry of Justice (Mrhar Prelič, 2022). Given that probation in Croatia also received greater media attention at the time of its introduction (see Sučić, 2015), it would be valuable to examine and compare its current media visibility in Slovenia several years after its implementation. Such a comparison could provide useful insights into how different approaches to institutional communication and the promotion of probation may influence its media visibility.

portals analysed; it is often simply mentioned in passing, without any details of what it actually is. Such a disparity in reporting can give the public the impression that prison sentences are standard sanctions. In addition, all articles were analysed with regard to several important aspects. First, the tone in which each article was written was observed. It is interesting that a positive tone was found in articles about prison sentences, but not about probation. In addition, the use of sensationalism, which was more common in articles about prison sentences, was also noted. Regarding the mentioning of known persons as offenders, suspects, convicts, prisoners or victims and the mentioning of the identity of persons, it was found that known persons and the full identity of a person were mentioned less frequently in articles on probation than in those on prison sentences.

The above limitations must be taken into account while interpreting the results of this study. This paper contributes to the field of media coverage of prison sentences and probation in the Republic of Croatia, which has been insufficiently researched, and is very important for understanding criminal sanctions, the criminal justice system generally, and shaping penal policy, which to a considerable extent is determined by the support of public opinion. In this setting, the question arises as to what extent the Croatian public is willing to accept international recommendations that prison sentences should be reserved only for the most serious crimes and the most dangerous offenders against the background of such a media portrayal of the enforcement of prison sentences and probation measures and sanctions. Moreover, the study findings raise the question of the extent to which they are country-specific, which opens up scope for further comparative analyses and a broader international discussion of trends in media coverage of criminal sanctions. Accordingly, further research is desirable to be able to better understand, among other things, how the media shape public perceptions of criminal sanctions and to create a space for discussion on the visibility and acceptance of different forms of sanctions in society on both the national and international levels.

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About the Author:

Martina Pleško, Assistant at the Department of Criminology, University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia. E-mail: martina.plesko@erf.unizg.hr