



Diplo Media Report 2021/01  
National Centre for Research on Europe

# MEDIA REPORT

**New Zealand's Media Portrayals and  
Understandings of the European Union:  
January 2021**

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## New Zealand’s Media Portrayals and Understandings of the European Union January 2021

January media report, Dr Serena Kelly, *University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

*The summary below highlights key points found from the media analysis conducted from leading media outlets in New Zealand from January 1 – January 31 2021.*

The analysed printed newspapers were: *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion Post*, *The Press*, *The New Zealand Farmers Weekly*. In addition, online platforms, *Newsroom*, *RNZ* and *Stuff* were also canvassed for content. This is the first time online platforms have been used in studies on NZ perceptions of the European Union. Figure 1 shows the number of articles published by publication. As demonstrated, RNZ published the highest number of articles which mentioned the EU or its institutions for the month of January. In the print media, New Zealand’s largest distributed publication, *The New Zealand Herald*, published the most articles – 30 – only two more than *The Dominion Post*.

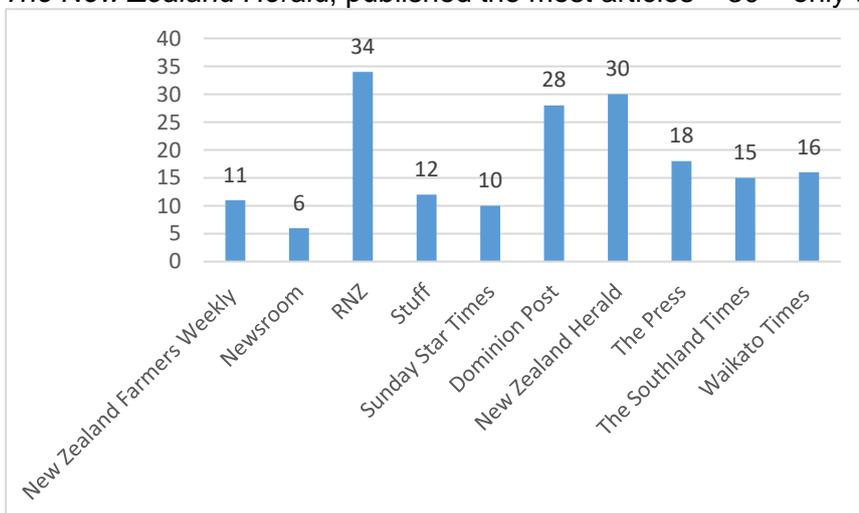


Figure 1: Number of articles per publication

Another online publication, *Newsroom*, had the least number of articles that mentioned the European Union in the month of January (6). The only weekly publication under consideration, *The New Zealand Farmer’s Weekly* published a considerable number of articles (11), averaging 2.2 articles per publication. These were mostly pertaining to trade. Overall, a total of 169 articles which mentioned the European Union were identified and classified in the monitored publications.

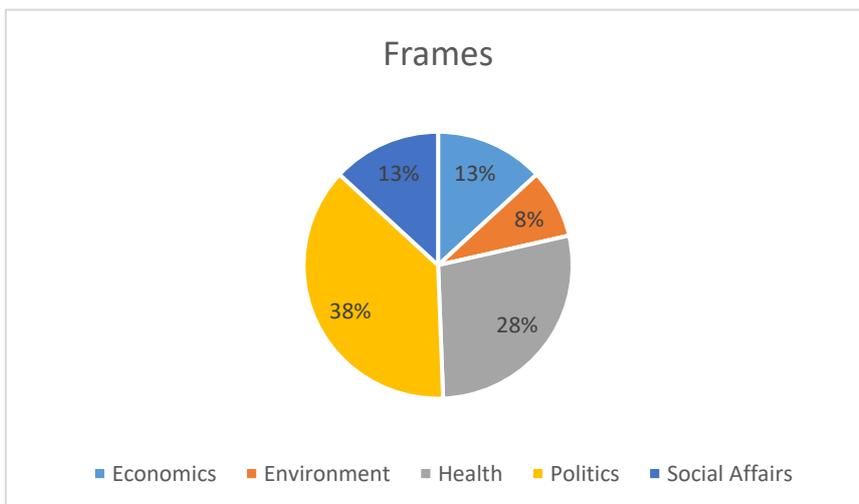


Figure 2: Analysis by Frame/Issue

Figure 2 demonstrates the number of articles per topic/frame in the data. In comparison to other years of analysis, when economic issues dominated news items about the EU, in January 2021 issues concerning politics were the most reported item (38%), followed by health (28%). EU articles concerning economics were only published in 15% of the total articles, and equalled social affairs. Pure environmental articles accounted for 9% of the total publications.

## **Brexit and NZ**

Articles pertaining to the EU as a political actor featured the EU's response to Joe Biden's inauguration, when the EU welcomed back an "old and trusted partner".<sup>1</sup> There were also a number of articles pertaining to the EU's response to the Russian treatment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. (6 articles). Most articles pertaining to politics in January related to the United Kingdom (UK) finally agreeing to a leave agreement (Brexit). Brexit was also mentioned in each of the seven articles pertaining to the FTA. Also unsurprising is the number of the articles on the EU which also made mention of Brexit. Three and a half years on from the British referendum to leave the EU, when NZ media was saturated with news reports about the EU, the New Zealand media continues to be focussed on issues pertaining to the decision. 50/169 of the analysed articles mentioned Brexit.

Some of the articles in early January were descriptive and almost sanguine about the changing relationship between the EU and United Kingdom. For instance, it was noted in the *Sunday Star Times* that "A steady trickle of trucks rolled off ferries and trains on both sides of the English Channel yesterday, a quiet New Year's Day after a seismic overnight shift in relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

The theme of Christmas was used satirically by journalists when describing Brexit. An article written by independent opinion columnist, Gwynne Dyer, compared the departing Britons to turkeys at Christmas time: "As Britain finally leaves the European Union, 1651 days after the Brexit referendum of 2016, we should try to remember that 48 per cent of the turkeys didn't vote for Christmas."<sup>3</sup>

Overwhelmingly, articles pertaining to Brexit and the EU in January were disparaging towards the United Kingdom reflecting, and continuing, New Zealand's media tendency to watch Brexit developments from afar with slight disdain and more in favour of remain. According to Fairfax journalist, Verity Johnson, Britain's manoeuvres to leave the EU left Britain looking like a 'bitter ex'. Verity went on to say: "(Sniffly separating on "a point of principle" that nobody else understands, although it looks suspiciously like xenophobia.) And Boris Johnson's decision-making went from charmingly Churchillian to giving off the panicked vibe of a last-minute shopper before lockdown."<sup>4</sup>

Although our study has not looked specifically at images (due to database limits). One of the collected news items made a reference to a cartoon which featured in the NZ Herald the previous week. In this item, a news reader made a comment about prominent New Zealand cartoonist Rod Emmerson's portrayal of Boris Johnson's mission to remove the United Kingdom from the European Union (see below). In the cartoon, whilst other countries were celebrating New Year's Eve with fireworks, Johnson was depicted adrift at sea wearing a lifejacket. Instead of fireworks, he is holding a rescue flare in his hand (see Image 1). The cartoon gives a satirical and negative depiction of the UK's decision to leave the EU.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula von der Leyen quoted in Reuters/BBC 'Joe Biden inauguration: World leaders react to new US president' RNZ 21/1/2021

<sup>2</sup> AP 'Slow, Quiet Start to Brexit' *Sunday Star Times* 3.1.2021.

<sup>3</sup> Gwynne Dyer 'Brexit has set the European Union free at last' *The New Zealand Herald*, 04.01.2021.

<sup>4</sup> Verity Johnson, 'Now the world's looking to NZ as the grown-up' *The Dominion Post* and *The Press* 8.2.2021.

<sup>5</sup> New Zealand Herald, p.A20, 2.1.2021, Rod Emmerson.

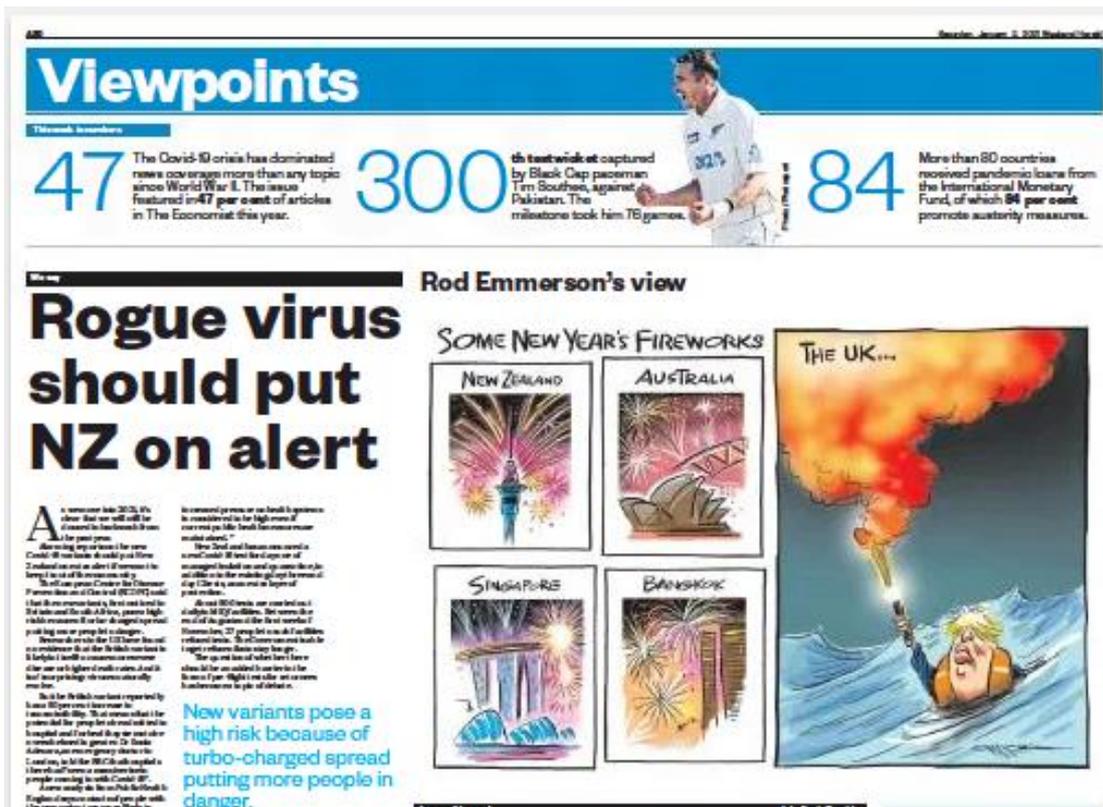


Image 1: New Zealand Herald Cartoon

Apart from Brexit articles, all but one of the political articles pertaining to the EU depicted the Union operating externally, beyond its borders. This finding is positive for images of the EU as an external actor, but was a surprising finding compared to other studies, which tend to portray the EU as an internal-looking entity, focussed on its own internal political developments rather than operating abroad.

### The EU's Pandemic Response

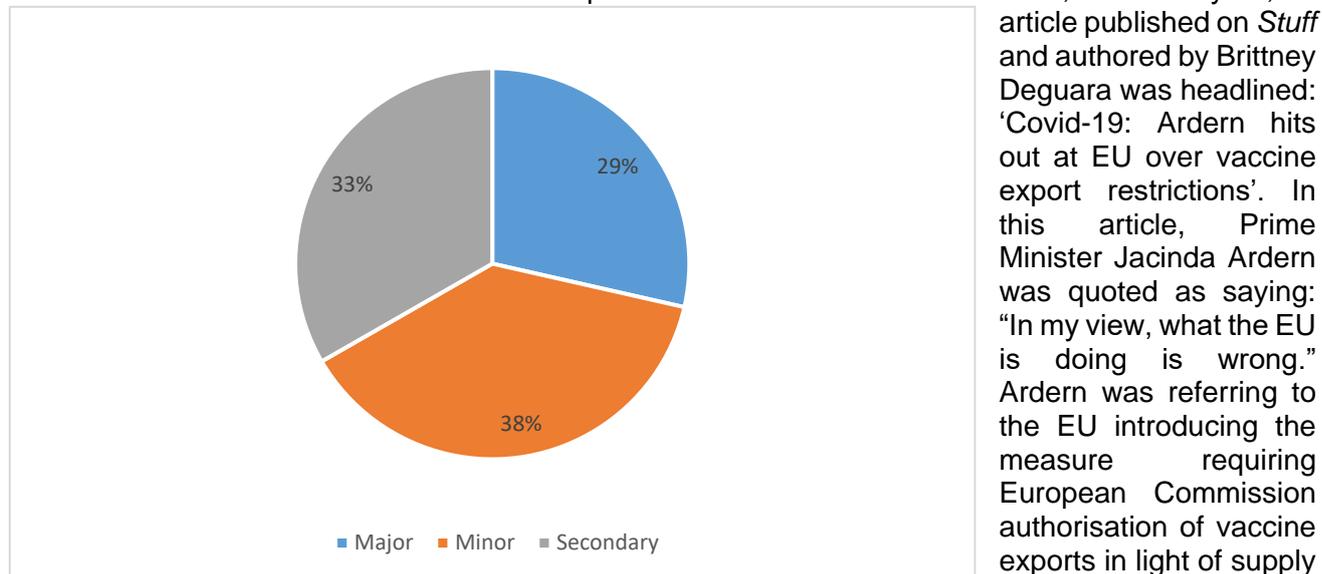
Yet, it could be argued that some of the internal political issues that have been traditionally covered and observed as being part of the internal politics of the EU, may now be covered under the frame of health. Unsurprisingly, articles pertaining to health accounted for 28% of the news reportage of the EU in January 2021. These news items were all concerned with the European Union's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the majority of these concentrated on the EU's vaccine policy. Twenty-one of the articles on the EU's reaction to Covid-19 were written by local sources, indicating a local interest in the connection between EU health policies and their potential impact on New Zealand. Figure three demonstrates the degree of centrality of the EU in the locally sourced news items about Covid-19. In other words, how important was the EU in these news items.

In 38% of articles, the local author framed the EU as a minor actor in these articles. Minor mentions means that the EU was mentioned only in passing in the news item under analysis, maybe in one or two sentences. The minor mentions of the EU in this field primarily focussed on New Zealand's ability to secure vaccines for Covid-19. In this instance, the EU was reported from a neutral perspective with a brief mention about the EU's concerns with deliveries of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

In the locally sourced items, when the EU was mentioned as a major or secondary actor, the journalistic attitudes towards the EU were more nuanced, and often negative. These articles show increasing alarm about the EU's vaccine policy and its potential impact on New Zealand's own vaccine

roll-out. These negative charges came towards the end of January and used quotes from the World Health Organisation (WHO) to openly criticise EU policy. Arguably, introducing the opinion of the WHO adds legitimacy to New Zealand's concerns.<sup>6</sup>

The biggest and most impactful news story in the New Zealand media concerning the EU in January 2021 was Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's open criticism of the EU. For instance, on January 31, an



article published on *Stuff* and authored by Brittney Deguara was headlined: 'Covid-19: Ardern hits out at EU over vaccine export restrictions'. In this article, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was quoted as saying: "In my view, what the EU is doing is wrong." Ardern was referring to the EU introducing the measure requiring European Commission authorisation of vaccine exports in light of supply concerns.

Figure 3: Frame: Health; Source: Local; degree of centrality

Two articles also published on the last date of January in the *Sunday Star Times* also highlighted this development, and utilised quite strong terminology in the headings: 'Worrying signs of a vaccine trade war'<sup>7</sup> and 'Vaccine tug-of-war infecting Europe.'<sup>8</sup> These articles were concerned with the emergence of trade protectionism by the EU in regards to its vaccine exports, arguably drawing on historical criticisms of the EU by New Zealand who experienced trade barriers with the EU until the establishment of the GATT in the 1990s. In other words, the terminology used in these articles would be expected to resonate with New Zealand readers, especially older ones who remember when the United Kingdom first joined the EU and the succeeding 20 years.

### The Environment Frame

In spite of the open criticisms directed at the EU by the New Zealand government, there was arguably one important positive finding in the NZ media in 2020. In previous NZ media analysis, there has been little attention given to the EU as an environmental actor. Yet, since the von der Leyen Commission, this is an area of focus that has been given increasing importance and attention by the EU. This focus in Brussels appears to have filtered into international media, including in NZ. As shown in Figure Two, articles pertaining to the environment accounted for 8% of all of the NZ–EU media coverage. Although this is less than other frames, it nevertheless is significant in comparison to previous years observations.

There were 18 articles pertaining to the EU as an environmental actor in January 2021. In 17 of these articles, there was with a local focus of domesticity. In other words, the EU was connected to a local, NZ context and therefore arguably more relevant to the domestic reader. These environmental articles made explicit mention of the EU's green deal, with one comparing it to the Biden administration's green stimulus plans.<sup>9</sup> The EU's Paris Agreement targets and carbon neutrality goals were also listed in relation to New Zealand ones. Whereas most of the environmental articles pertained to New

<sup>6</sup> Health officials 'concerned' about new EU controls on Covid-19 vaccine exports, RNZ, 31/01/2021

<sup>7</sup> Worrying signs of a vaccine trade war, *Sunday Star Times*, Fairfax NZ, 31.1.2021.

<sup>8</sup> Vaccine tug-of-war infecting Europe, *Sunday Star Times*, Fairfax NZ, 31.1.2021.

<sup>9</sup> Jesse Mulligan, 'The Economist's Tom Standage on the World in 2021', RNZ, 19.1.2021.

Zealand learning from the EU's example, for example, one article noted: 'In the last six months the UK, EU Japan, Korea and China have all made commitments to carbon zero by 2050 and New Zealand must follow suit',<sup>10</sup> one article noted that New Zealand has the potential to lead the world. This article stated: 'We can be an inspiration for other countries including the big players – the US, China, the EU – to follow our lead.'<sup>11</sup>

### Missing: Trade

The most surprising finding from the first month of January 2021 was the lack of attention given to the negotiations for the EU–NZ Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Traditionally, New Zealand has tended to view the EU through the lens of its economic and trading opportunities, ignoring other aspects of the nature of the European Union and of its relationship with the EU. It was therefore surprising to note that only 7/169 of the analysed articles made any reference to the on-going negotiations between New Zealand and the EU. Four of these were printed in New Zealand's largest agricultural newspaper, *The New Zealand Farmers Weekly*. One article, published on January 11, portrayed relief that "the UK and the EU agreed to continue tariff-free trade in goods when the UK left the EU customs union on January 1."<sup>12</sup> This agreement meant that sheep meat exports from the UK to the EU would continue tariff-free. Without this agreement, there could potentially have been "sparked a meltdown in the UK domestic market compared to the firm prices NZ exporters are currently enjoying".<sup>13</sup> The same article also highlighted New Zealand's ongoing concern with the sheep-meat quota split between the EU and UK.<sup>14</sup>

The same journalist had a second article in the newspaper pertaining to Brexit and the EU–NZ FTA negotiations. As Stirling noted:

EXPORTERS fed up with the dismal agricultural market access offers made by the European Union in two-and-a-half years of trade talks with New Zealand say there should be no more excuses now that it has sorted out its future trading relationship with the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

There was also a hope by commentators that the last-minute leave deal between the EU and UK would mean that more progress could be made between the EU and New Zealand on the FTA. Karapeeva, the Meat Industry Association (MIA) chief executive, was quoted in an article as saying "I would certainly now expect the EU to pull up their socks and get to the negotiating table fairly smartly to take a serious look at this negotiation now that that the major stumbling block that was Brexit has been cleared away."<sup>16</sup>

Another article published in the NZ Farmers Weekly quoted New Zealand's leading trade negotiator, Vangelis Vitalis: "On the EU front, Vitalis says the new EU Commissioner will be very aware the bloc has very few trade partnership options currently underway and, of these options, NZ offers the best opportunity to show political intent".<sup>17</sup> In other words, this statement reflects on the EU's political ambitions to show the world that the EU is a strong supporter of free trade.

The three articles published in the more mainstream NZ media that made any mention of the FTA were primarily concerned with changes around the EU–UK relationship. It is very surprising that what is arguably currently the most important part of the EU–NZ relationship – the on-going negotiations for a comprehensive FTA with the European Union – was almost entirely absent. The observers of this report are interested to see how the EU was framed in the month of February.

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<sup>10</sup> Jesse Mulligan 'Climate Change: Moving from advocacy to action', RNZ, 28.01.2021.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Burrell, 'Go hard and go early on climate change', Newsroom, 28.1.2021.

<sup>12</sup> Nigel Stirling, 'Deal softens lamb export 'nightmare'' New Zealand Farmers Weekly, p. 4, 11.1.2021.

<sup>13</sup> Nigel Stirling, 'Deal softens lamb export 'nightmare'' New Zealand Farmers Weekly, p. 4, 11.1.2021.

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Stirling, 'Deal softens lamb export 'nightmare'' New Zealand Farmers Weekly, p. 4, 11.1.2021.

<sup>15</sup> Nigel Stirling, 'Brexit Clears way for NZ negotiations', New Zealand Farmers Weekly, p. 4, 11.1.2021.

<sup>16</sup> Nigel Stirling, 'Brexit Clears way for NZ negotiations', New Zealand Farmers Weekly, p. 4, 11.1.2021.

<sup>17</sup> Allan Barber, 'Time for progress around free trade' New Zealand Farmers Weekly, p. 23, 25.1.2021.