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MEDIA REPORT

**The European Union and Mahuta: New
Zealand's Media Coverage**

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The European Union and Mahuta: New Zealand's Media Coverage

March 2022 media report, Dr Serena Kelly, *University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

New Zealand and the European Union (EU) have long been hailed as harmonious voices on the international stage, with New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) commenting on the "like-mindedness on international issues" between New Zealand and the EU.¹ Indeed, the EU's interest in pursuing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand cannot be understood without an awareness of the international political context in which it is being negotiated. Improving New Zealand's trading relations with the EU would not be of significant economic value (New Zealand ranks as only the 50th most important trading partner for the European Union). The political motivations behind the FTA can be connected with the common values such as rule of law, democracy, human rights, good governance and, importantly, an international rules based order and the opportunity to strengthen the EU's voice on the world stage.

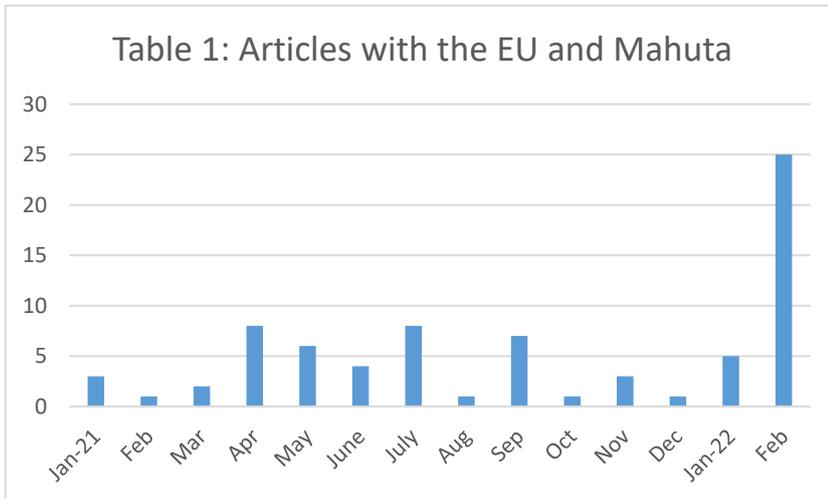
Given the significance of these shared values, this media summary offers analysis of how the New Zealand media has covered and/or connected Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta with New Zealand's media coverage of the European Union. That is, how were both the EU and Mahuta discussed in the NZ news? Under particular consideration is February 2022, when Mahuta made her first trip to the Continent. Mahuta was appointed as the New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs in November 2020. Therefore, the timeframe under consideration includes the months immediately after her appointment. Throughout much of that time Mahuta was unable to travel due to the global pandemic outbreak.

Our team was looking forward to following the media coverage of Mahuta's trip, her second since her appointment. Mahuta's first overseas trip was in November 2021 when she visited six countries: Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and the United States.² Not only was the visit to Europe Mahuta's second overseas trip, but her visits to Europe were expected to gain traction in the New Zealand media due to the significance of the arranged meetings. As we now know, the security situation in Europe became of concern in February, so we were interested to see whether the significance of Mahuta's trip was overshadowed by events unfolding in Ukraine? Or did Mahuta's presence in Europe at a time of an escalation of security issues, mean the visibility of the EU's reaction to Ukraine was increased?

¹ <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/countries-and-regions/europe/european-union/> accessed 4.3.2022.

² <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/foreign-affairs-minister-nanaia-mahuta-carry-out-first-international-visit>

As demonstrated in Table One, Mahuta's visit to Europe unsurprisingly resulted in a saturation of NZ news items which included both the EU and Mahuta. In the 13 months from January 2021–January 22, Mahuta and the EU were mentioned together on average of four times a month. This spiked to 25 news items in February 2022. This elevation in coverage was arguably positive for both Mahuta and the European Union. For Mahuta, her trip contributed to increased media coverage of her role and



her importance as a Foreign Minister. For the EU, news coverage that links it with a local actor, Mahuta, can serve to increase not only the visibility of the European Union, but also the legitimacy of the EU as a credible and legitimate international actor.

Mahuta's trip to Europe involved a number of stops. Departing on the

weekend of February 20, according to her media release, she first visited Paris to join the *Ministerial Forum for Co-operation in the Indo-Pacific*, co-hosted by the European Union and France as the current President of the Council of the European Union. Not only were Foreign Ministers from all 27 European Union Member States in attendance, but also a range of countries from the Indo-Pacific region were invited.

Following Paris, Mahuta met with the UK's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Liz Truss, to discuss key areas of cooperation. This was followed by Mahuta's travel to Geneva, Switzerland, to meet with United Nations (UN) leaders and multilateral organisations, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Director General of the World Health Organisation and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. According to her press release, Mahuta also represented Aotearoa New Zealand at the High-Level Segment of the UN Human Rights Council.³

Hence, according to Mahuta, her trip to Europe was based around three primary meetings/destinations, with the European Union making up only one-third of the main visits. Yet, as can be seen from the incredible spike in numbers, the media coverage around Mahuta and the EU in February was disproportionate to the visit to Paris alone. The following section will dissect the focus of the media in February. Was it only concerned with Mahuta's EU visit, or did the Ukrainian crisis

³ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/foreign-affairs-minister-nanaia-mahuta-visit-europe-key-regional-and-un-engagements> 17.2.2022.

spark a mass of articles which linked Mahuta with the EU? As we now know, on Thursday February 24, Russia began a military invasion of Ukraine.

Sources

All of the articles included in the dataset under consideration (February 2022) were written either partially or fully by a local NZ author. Only 3/25 were co-authored by both local and international sources. These three items were published on *RNZ's* website and all three sourced *Reuters* as the international news source. The first, published on 19 February, was titled 'Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta set for 11-day Europe mission'⁴ and almost matched Mahuta's Press Release mentioned above. The second dual-sourced news item was published on the 23 February and concerned Mahuta summoning the Russian Ambassador over the Ukrainian crisis. This news item listed the EU as a minor actor, mentioning the EU's actions alongside the US and Britain's plans to implement sanctions against the EU.⁵ Hence, although Mahuta was apparently physically in Europe at the time of the announcement, no mention was made about her trip. The third news item which used both local and international news sources included information from *Reuters / RNZ / ABC / BBC* and was published on 24 February. Titled, 'World reacts to 'full-scale invasion of Ukraine' by Russia,' the item, which also mentioned the EU in only a minor way, canvassed the reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by a myriad of leaders around the world. Although neither the EU, nor any of its Presidents, was included in the suite of responses, many of the EU Member State leaders included the EU in their official statements. For instance, "Germany's defence minister said it was never too late for dialogue with Russia while underscoring that Nato and the European Union stood united in the face of Moscow's "drastic breach of international law"".⁶ All other items pertaining to the EU and Nanaia Mahuta were written by local sources. The significant findings from our analysis are outlined below.

Degree of Centrality

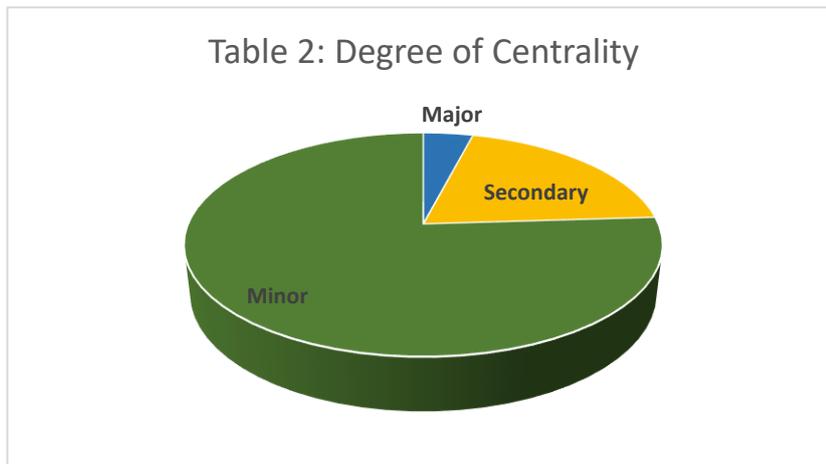
As demonstrated in Table 2, and perhaps disappointingly for the EU, there was only one article in February which mentioned the EU as a major actor where Foreign Minister Mahuta was also mentioned. This single article was published on 21 February and authored by *Newsroom* journalist, Sam Sachdeva. Echoing the *RNZ* article in anticipation of Mahuta's European trip, the item cited that "the focal point of the trip is arguably Paris, site of the Ministerial Forum for Co-operation in the Indo-Pacific being co-hosted by the European Union and France. Exactly what will come out of the forum, both from a New Zealand perspective and more broadly, remains unclear". Although this article was overwhelmingly focused on the EU and highlighted to readers the importance of the trip. It was nevertheless the only article under consideration with such a strong focus on the EU.

⁴ [Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta set for 11-day Europe mission | RNZ News](#) 19.2.2022

⁵ [Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta calls in Russian Ambassador over Ukraine crisis | RNZ News](#) 23.2.2022.

⁶ [World reacts to 'full-scale invasion of Ukraine' by Russia | RNZ News](#) 24.2.2022.

Table 2 also demonstrates that 20% of news items focussed on the EU as a secondary actor. That means that the EU wasn't the main focus of the article, but still an important actor. On 3 February,



online source, *Stuff* published an article concerning Prime Minister Ardern's intention to travel in 2022 to a number of destinations, including Europe.⁷ *Stuff* also reported on Mahuta's intended European destinations on 18 Feb. On 19 February, both *The Press* and *Dominion Post* published almost identical news items titled:

'Mahuta has full agenda in Europe' by Thomas Manch. A topic that may have ordinarily resulted in an article that framed the EU as a major actor, was apparently overtaken by developing events in Ukraine and Russia. Thus Mahuta's perspective on Ukraine was also discussed, alongside her intended visits to Europe. Positively for the EU, the on-going Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations between the EU and Aotearoa New Zealand were mentioned, and the EU Ambassador to New Zealand, Nina Obermaier, was directly quoted, stating: "Mahuta would share a "very special perspective on the Indo-Pacific"" at the Indo-Pacific Forum in France. Further, Obermaier discussed the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy stating that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is about recognising the region as a "centre of Economic gravity as well as an area of increasing geopolitical tensions and environmental challenges".⁸ Obermaier left the reader wondering about what the "expected...concrete deliverables" of the Indo-Pacific forum would be.⁹ Yet, there was only one news item which briefly mentioned the meeting after the fact – one can imagine that once again the outcomes of the landmark meeting were lost in the media rush for covering Ukraine–Russia tensions.

When it came to minor articles, three were framed around the economy (with brief references to the FTA). Fifteen were primarily interested in the EU's response to the Ukraine–Russia Conflict. The section below discusses the framing of the EU in the articles pertaining to Mahuta. We will consider whether it is possible that the Ukraine crisis led to a positive outcome for EU reporting, or whether it overshadowed Mahuta's visit?

⁷ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/127676201/prime-minister-jacinda-ardern-promises-to-travel-to-europe-us-asia-australia-in-2022>

⁸ Manch, Thomas, 19/02/2022, *The Press, Dominion Post*, 'Mahuta has full agenda in Europe'

⁹ Manch, Thomas, 19/02/2022, *The Press, Dominion Post*, 'Mahuta has full agenda in Europe'

Framing

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the articles under analysis emanated from a political frame (21). Of those political articles, 16 were primarily concerned with the Russia–Ukraine conflict and five on the Indo-Pacific Strategy (and Forum that Mahuta attended). The Indo-Pacific Forum was mainly covered in the lead-up to the meeting, with only one article mentioning it after the fact, and then only in passing (stating that Mahuta attended).

The results of this news coverage are arguably both a positive and negative finding for scholars who are interested in the EU's visibility as an international actor and its efforts at public diplomacy. The event itself was obviously a coup for the EU's Strategy, leading to high level European visits from like-minded leaders in the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, EU coverage would have gained more visibility in a number of countries from the attending leaders.

As demonstrated above, the results of the analysis discussed above demonstrated some positive results for the visibility of the European Union in the New Zealand print media during Nanaia Mahuta's visit to Europe. The lead-up to the trip showed an increase in news items which included both Mahuta and the EU. It also resulted in garnering the attention of local journalists who were interested in the trip and, presumably, the outcome of the trip.

Yet, the escalating security situation on the EU's borders appears to have overshadowed some of the concrete outcomes from Mahuta's visit to Paris. Rather than focussing on the outcomes of the Indo-Pacific Forum, journalists turned their attention to the unfolding events in Ukraine. This unfolding situation demonstrates the evolving nature of news items and the inability to predict future events of importance. What may have resulted in major and secondary news items about the EU as a political actor was quickly changed to focus on New Zealand's (and its foreign minister) reaction to Ukraine, with the EU's visibility and actions becoming less important. It was unclear if an NZ journalist accompanied Mahuta on her trip.