



Diplo Media Report 2021/02  
National Centre for Research on Europe

# MEDIA REPORT

**Summary of New Zealand Media Coverage of  
the European Union: January–December 2021**

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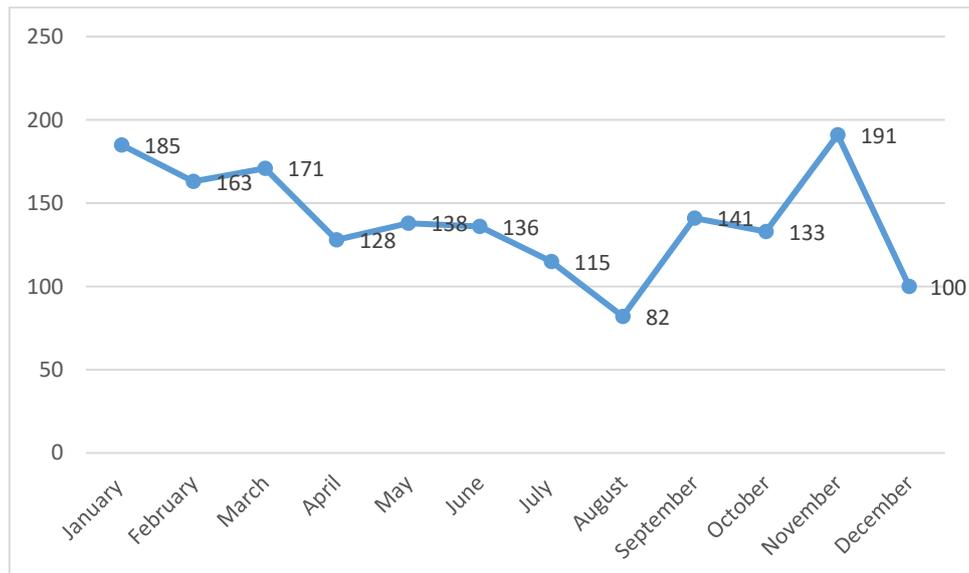
## Summary of New Zealand Media Coverage of the European Union: January–December 2021

December 2021 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 1 January – 31 December 2021.*

The following outline provides a summary on the New Zealand's media coverage of the European Union and its institutions in 2021. In total, our team collected 1678 items for analysis over the course of the year. Figure 1 demonstrates the distribution of these articles per month. As can be seen from Figure 1, the month that recorded the highest number of articles pertaining to the European Union (EU) was November, when a total of 191 articles about the EU was collated and analysed. The month with the lowest recorded number of news items (82) in August is not surprising. Rather than being due to a lack of events in Europe, it can be interpreted as the time when most of Europe is enjoying their summer holidays and thus much business is closed.

*Figure 1 No of news items per month*



The spike in news items for the month of November was not due to one particular event, but may be understood as a culmination of a number of prominent news items which had an EU

involvement. Key topics included in the November media reporting included: coverage of the EU's position at COP26, tensions on the Belarussian border with Poland and the emergence of a new strain of Covid-19 in South Africa. New Zealand also hosted APEC in November.

Held in Glasgow, the mentions of the EU connected to COP26 is a positive finding for the European Union – the EU views itself as a leader in world environmental policy, and reinforcing multilateralism is a part of its normative influence. A number of articles surrounding COP26 and the EU presented the EU in a major way and as one of the 'big players' at the event alongside the likes of USA, China, Russia, India, Britain, and Brazil. Specific EU policies were also highlighted such as the EU–US Global Methane Pledge. The EU's development assistance with the Pacific was also apparently of interest to New Zealand readers. An article titled 'COP26: Pacific, EU launch landmark alliance' was mainly positively focussed, and discussed the launch of the Blue Green Alliance that pledges €197 000 000 to the Pacific over 6 years focussing on climate change.<sup>1</sup> It was published on both *RNZ* and *STUFF*.

Yet, some of the discussion about the EU in the 2021 New Zealand print media was very negative. For instance, the *Farmers Weekly* published an op ed which was scathing of the European Commission President:

The second big idea from the first week was the Global Methane Pledge to cut methane emissions by 30% by 2030 – again without any commitment from major players like China, Russia and Australia -- President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen leapt at the methane reduction pledge as though it was an oasis in the desert, saying it was a critical factor in limiting global warming to 1.5degC by 2050. -- Her enthusiasm was in stark contrast to the fact she has been outed for using a private jet for more than half her official visits since December 2019, including a 19-minute flight from Vienna to Bratislava, which would have taken an hour by train. Do as I say, not as I do is obviously the motto here.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the prominence of APEC in the media was a surprising finding, given that APEC is the Asia-Pacific Economic Foundation and thus, at first glance, does not naturally include the European Union. Yet 27 of the identified articles in 2021 made at least a passing reference to APEC, all of which emanated from a local source. The prominence of APEC can be attributed to New Zealand hosting the 2021 virtual platform and thus was of particular interest to local

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<sup>1</sup> *Stuff* 2021 'COP26: Pacific, EU launch landmark alliance'

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/300447750/cop26-pacific-eu-launch-landmark-alliance> accessed 25.1.2022

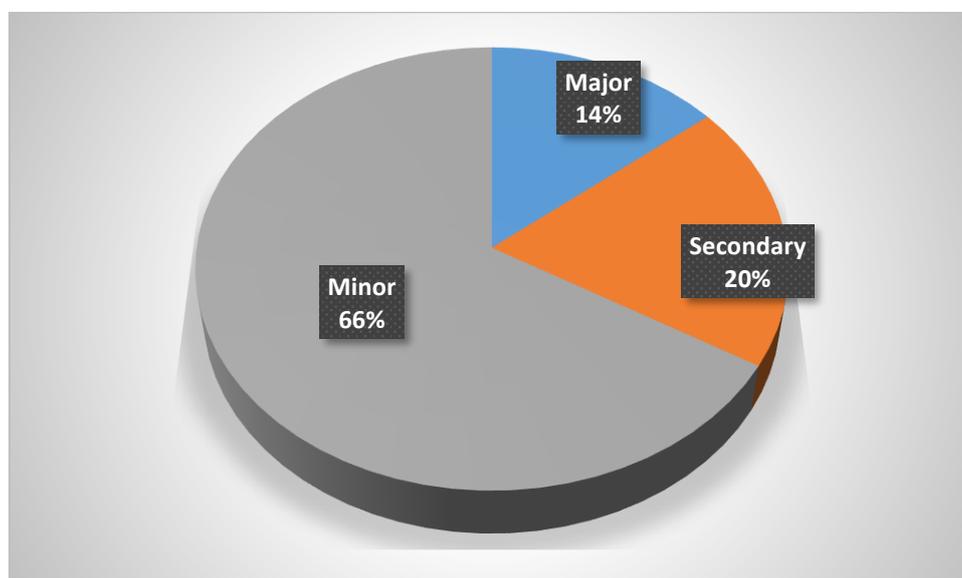
<sup>2</sup> Allan Barber (2021) Is COP26 just a cop out? *New Zealand Farmers Weekly* 15 November

readers. Thus, APEC was particularly significant from the New Zealand government's point of view. However, when the EU was mentioned in these articles, it was from a minor perspective. For example, the EU was sometimes included as a way of introducing New Zealand's leader at APEC – Vitalis Vangelis is was also the chief negotiator for the EU-NZ FTA.

### Degree of Centrality

One major finding from the 2021 analysis was the lack of in-depth discussion about the European Union in the major New Zealand media outlets. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the EU was framed as a major actor in only 14% of all the analysed news items, indicating a lack of interest, or perhaps understanding of the EU, by New Zealand journalists and public.

Figure 2 Degree of Centrality

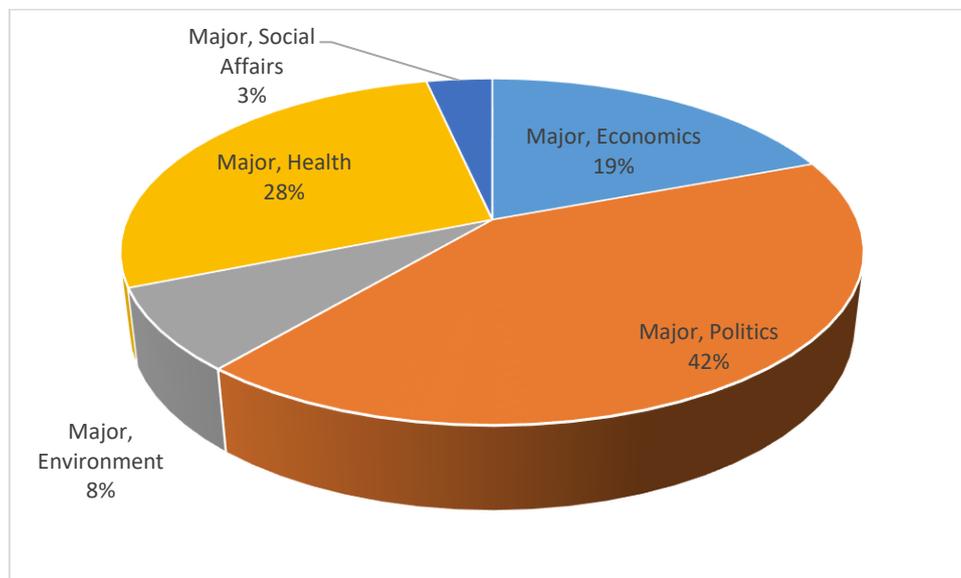


Articles that were interested in the EU from a major perspective included a focused effort on the issues connected to politics (42%) followed by health (28%) and economics (19%). Only 8% of the major articles had an environmental concern (see Figure 3). 19 out of 97 of the political articles were interested in the EU's *internal* politics, that is, developments with the EU's borders. Some of the internal political articles were concerned with Poland, although only four of the major articles addressed the EU's on-going tension with Poland in a meaningful way. All four of these articles were printed in October after judges in Poland ruled that Polish law superseded EU law and, as quoted in one article, " Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, threatened to withhold access to millions of euros from a pandemic recovery fund if Poland did not obey."<sup>3</sup> As outlined by Doidge's DIPLO development summary

<sup>3</sup> The New Zealand Herald 'In Brief -- Sub: Poland Refuses EU Fines' 30/10/2021 World

(2022), in recent years Hungary and Poland have experienced an erosion of their democratic values<sup>4</sup> making this a pertinent issue for the EU in 2021.

Figure 3 Framing of major articles



As demonstrated in Figure 3, health was the second most reported topic that discussed the EU meaningfully. In 2021 the world was still dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and thus the EU's lead role in implementing some of the health policies for its Member States made it of interest to third country New Zealand. 67 articles specifically framed the EU as an actor in Covid-19 vaccine policy. At first glance this might be interpreted as a positive development for the EU, given the EU's perceived success at demonstrating unity in this field. Yet, closer analysis of the printed articles in the NZ media shows a negative slant about this policy. Previous research has demonstrated that articles printed about the EU in New Zealand tend to be overwhelmingly neutral, attributed to the use of international sources<sup>5</sup>

As demonstrated in Figure 4, 40% of the articles pertaining to the EU's Covid-19 policy had a negative spin. Thus, a topic that had a high local resonance, and featured the EU as a major actor, in turn had the potential to negatively influence New Zealand readers' perceptions of the EU. However, the long-standing impact of this perception remains to be seen – these articles were mainly printed in the first 3 months of 2021. During this time, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern criticised the EU's vaccine policy as being 'vaccine nationalism'. According to one report:

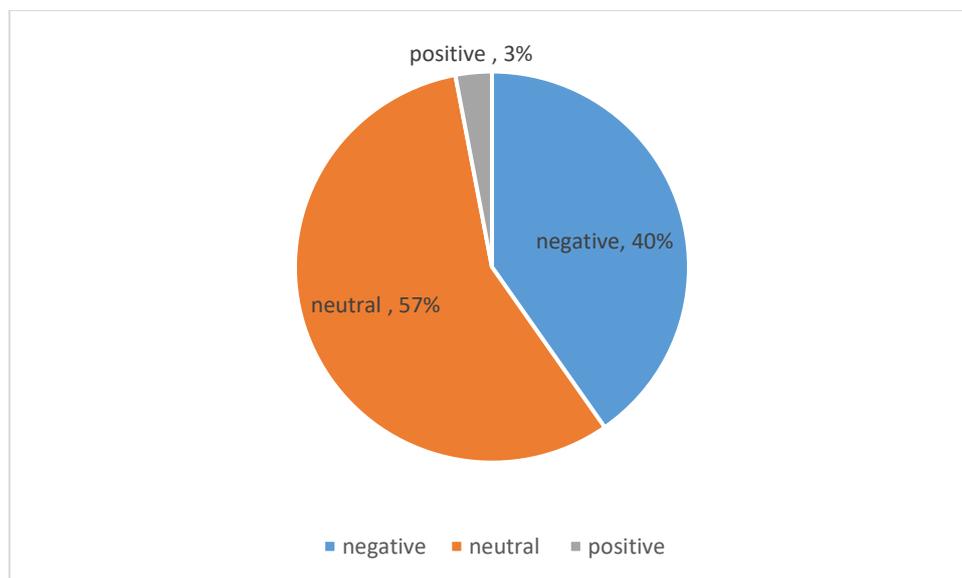
<sup>4</sup> [DIPLO Development Summaries 2 – EU Public Diplomacy and Outreach in New Zealand](#)

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Kelly, S., F. Doser and N. Chaban (2021) "Shifting frames: images of Brexit in NZ and possible consequences" in K. Haba and M. Holland (eds.) *Brexit and After*, Springer, pp.159-179.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on Sunday said the European Union (EU) was “wrong” to require vaccine producers to seek authorisation before exporting vaccines, a move aimed at enforcing pre-purchase agreements which the EU says are not being honoured...“The world cannot afford vaccine nationalism right now,” Ardern said.<sup>6</sup>

This assertion was refuted by the EU ambassador to New Zealand who was given the space by a local journalist to defend the EU’s position, stating that the EU’s policy was about transparency.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 4 Evaluations of the EU in Covid-19 policy



Two final analyses are considered in this report. Firstly, the local resonance of the articles. That is, the number of articles which had a ‘local hook’ for readers. Secondly, how many articles included a mention of the British decision to leave the European Union (Brexit).

Pertaining to the first, as demonstrated in Figure 5, 40% (682) of the articles published on the EU in New Zealand newspapers geographically connected the EU to New Zealand. This can arguably be a positive finding for the EU as it can mean readers feel more connected to the EU. All but one of the news items which featured the EU as a local actor were authored by a local. These authors ranged from prominent NZ journalists, academic commentators, to

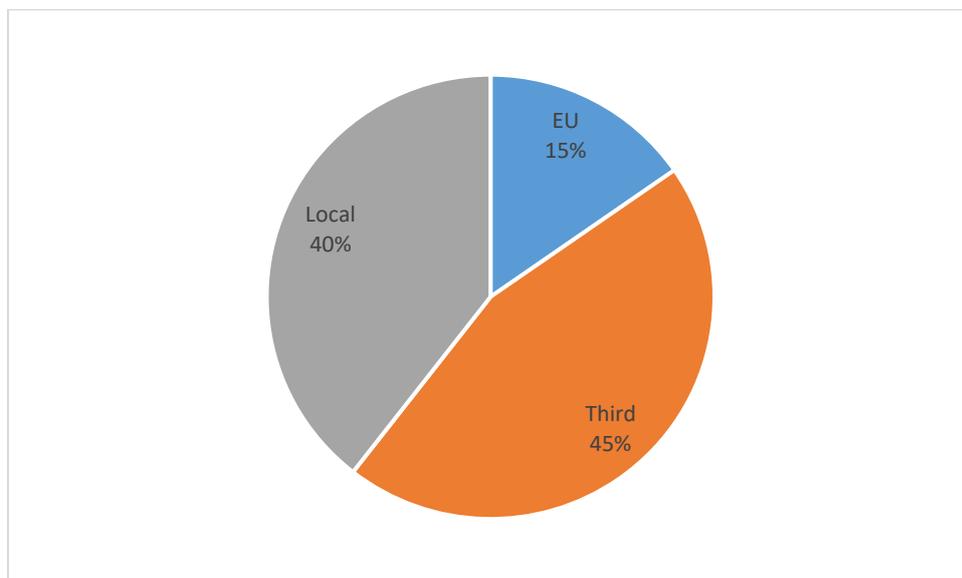
<sup>6</sup> Thomas Manch 2021 ‘EU pushed back at concern over Covid-19 vaccine, says “transparency” will help New Zealand’ *Stuff* 1 February

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Manch 2021 ‘EU pushed back at concern over Covid-19 vaccine, says “transparency” will help New Zealand’ *Stuff* 1 February

business leaders. Occasionally no authors were cited – only the source (e.g. *Stuff*, *Newsroom*, *RNZ*). *RNZ* occasionally re-worked news articles emanating from international sources – *BBC*, *Washington Post*, *Reuters*.

Yet, 544 of these articles presented the EU as a minor actor and 6% (42) of the articles featuring the EU as a local actor included the EU in a major way. Unsurprisingly, these items focused on New Zealand’s Covid-19 vaccination concerns with the EU. Thomas Manch, from the *Dominion Post*, *The Press*, and *Stuff* was the journalist most likely to present the EU as a major, local, actor with 13 articles published in 2021. Manch often quoted the EU ambassador to New Zealand, Her Excellency Nina Obermaier, hence giving the EU representative in New Zealand the opportunity to clarify misperceptions about the EU. For instance, one article by Manch was titled ‘European Union ambassador plays down concerns France has delayed NZ-EU FTA’<sup>8</sup> and was in response to a rumour that the French President was waiting until after the 2022 French election before approving the final draft. In total, Manch authored 60 articles from our dataset.

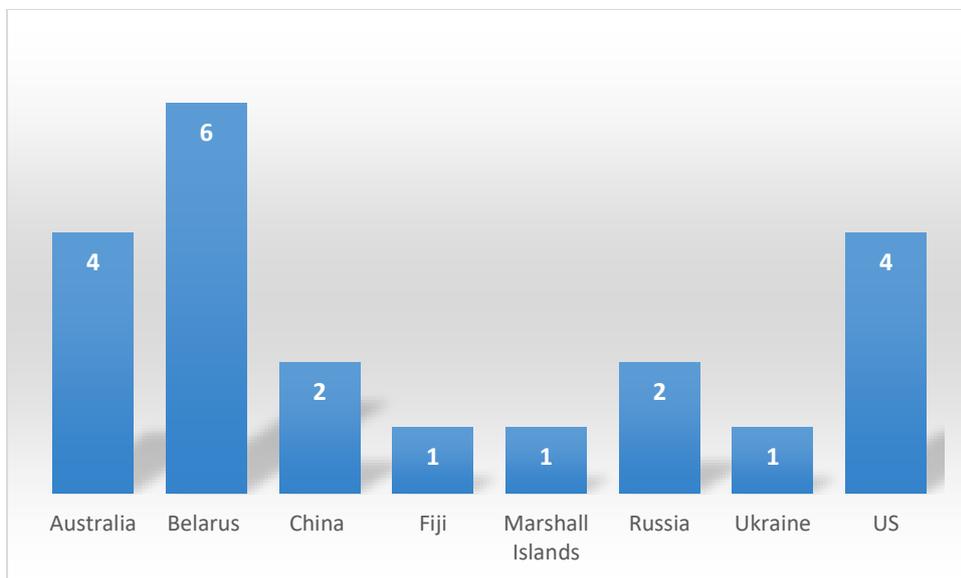
*Figure 5 Focus of domesticity*



Further pertaining to *Figure 5*, 45% of articles published about the EU referenced the EU acting outside its borders, but not in NZ, indicating that the EU is most likely to be portrayed as an international actor in the NZ print media. Yet again the EU was most likely to be a third actor in a minor way (497).

<sup>8</sup> Manch Thomas (2021) *Stuff* 12 November <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/126978145/european-union-ambassador-plays-down-concerns-france-has-delayed-nzeu-fta> accessed 5.2.2023.

When the EU was a major actor in third countries, Brexit and the EU's relationship with the UK predominated (see below). Although the numbers are very small, as shown in Figure 6, other areas of EU major action portrayed in the NZ media ranged from EU engagement with Belarus (6), to EU–US and EU–Australia relations. Perhaps surprisingly, the EU was only twice linked to Pacific Island countries (once in Fiji and once in the Marshall Islands) in a major way. As noted above, these articles were detailed. It will be interesting to measure if there is an evolution in this field, given that the EU launched its own Indo-Pacific Strategy in November 2021. Finally, EU action with Ukraine and Russia was only mentioned on one occasion with the EU as a major actor. This is expected to greatly change in 2022.



The final reflection of this report pertains to New Zealand news items pertaining to Brexit. Long a topic of interest to New Zealanders (see Kelly *et al*), the United Kingdom officially left the European Union on 1 January 2020, but there have been on-going issues about the relationship. Almost 22% of all the news items collated for 2021 made at least a passing reference to Brexit. This shows not only the perceived newsworthiness of Brexit by New Zealand editors, but could also be a shadow of New Zealand's on-going personal connections with the United Kingdom.