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UDK 32:82-225(497.11+497.5)  
316.774(497.11+497.5)

# LAUGHTER AS RESISTANCE: THE RISE OF POLITICAL SATIRE IN CROATIA AND SERBIA

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*Srđan Jovanović*  
Lund University

## SUMMARY

With the recent rise of the Right Wing throughout the world, there has been a significant increase in production of countervailing political comedy and satire. In the USA, figures such as Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway and Sean Spicer have increasingly figured as objects of unbound satire, in shows from Stephen Colbert's to Saturday Night Live. Political satire has been recently developing in the Balkans as well, especially in Croatia and Serbia, with the work of Croatia's *News Bar* and Serbia's *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net*. Contemporary media theory and political science have begun to stress the importance and influence of this type of resistance to authoritarianism from the point of view of participatory democracy and active citizenship. This article presents the *modus operandi* of Croatia's and Serbia's political satirists and examines their approaches to resistance by engaging with a set of representative texts and videos.

KEY WORDS: political satire, Croatia, Serbia, Njuz.net, News Bar, political participation

## INTRODUCTION

This article tackles the two political satire sibling-groups, the Croatian News Bar and the Serbian Njuz.net (with their televised version, *24 Minuta*), both of which consist of web and televised material, concentrating on their written texts. Both can be classified as political satire, a subgenre of political comedy. They are published increasingly in online format, as political satire is nowadays most successful in online form (Baumgartner 2008, 735) worldwide. Political satire in Croatia and Serbia have seen a rise in production and audience interest during the last decade, almost exclusively due to the work and production of News Bar (Croatia) and Njuz.net (Serbia). The perhaps single 'predecessor' in the Yugoslav region (when talking about the audio-visual media) could be seen in the

former Yugoslav (nowadays Bosnia) television show *Top lista nadrealista*, or perhaps *Zlikavci*, yet nothing similar has been seen since the end of the show (as an exception, social media user generated content could serve as a separate node of analysis, yet this falls beyond the scope of this work). Given that political satire is seen as important to the development and encouraging of political participation and participatory democracy in general (Cao and Brewer 2008, 90, 92), and that political satire has an intrinsic educational property (Hariman 2008, 264) – in Doona's words, 'political comedy and political identity are connected', as 'engagement is what comes before participation' (Doona 2016, 125) – it is of some surprise that they have not received much academic interest. While some scholars have suggested that satire could be linked to political quietism and lack of participation (Balmas 2014), research has shown that 79% of the audience of *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta*, voted on the elections before the survey, so it is safe to say that, at least in the Serbian case, the audience is politically engaged (Jovanović 2018).

Whilst *Njuz.net* has figured in but a few scholarly articles (Kalaba 2014, Petrović 2015), *News Bar* has, so far, been completely ignored. However work on political satire and comedy at the international level – most concentrating on famous American political satirists (Baym 2005, Feldman 2007, Baumgartner and Morris 2006, Baumgartner 2008, Amaras-ingam 2011, Colletta 2009, LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam 2009) provides groundwork for research on contemporary Croatian and Serbian political satire as well.

#### THEORY AND STATE-OF-THE ART ON POLITICAL SATIRE

Political satire is taken quite seriously by contemporary media scholarship. Fox et al. claim that satirical shows such as the *Daily Show* are 'just as substantive as the broadcast networks' campaign coverage' (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin 2007, 222), while others have called the same show a new type of journalism (Baym 2005). It can thus be said that 'political entertainment has the ability to generate politically relevant outcomes' (Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee 2011, 98) by motivating its audience. Even though a number of studies have shown that audiences follow political comedy shows for entertainment (Baum 2005), they 'may exert a positive impact on public knowledge about politics' (Cao and Brewer 2008, 90) and foster a potential for political activation and participative democracy. In other words, contemporary theory sees political satire as promoting active democracy among an audience, which has, in the case of Serbia and Croatia, become increasingly disappointed with local politics and society (Petrović 2015).

The written production of News Bar and Njuz.net, however, are more akin to the Onion news, a satirical site that has reached worldwide readership. The Onion News Network has 'created hyperreal spaces for satirizing public foolishness at every level, leaving few cultural or political topics off its agenda' (Waisanen 2011, 508). Unlike News Bar and Njuz.net, the Onion began relatively early, in 1988, in print, moving to the world wide web in 2007 (Waisanen 2011, 509). By 2008, it reached over one million views per week (Stephen 2008). News Bar and Njuz.net do not publically present their view count, but it is safe to say that they have reached iconic status in their respective states, often by following in the footsteps of the Onion News Network. In the words of Waisanen, 'ONN denaturalizes the common frames, clichés, and the worn communications of the news world, providing viewers with ironic clues to the very situatedness of media structures and styles' (Waisanen 2011, 512–513). Additionally, 'by imitating but also reconfiguring the typical structure, delivery, and content of the news media, ONN gives its audience a way to identify with what they have come to expect on the news while providing an alternative lens through which to view such events' (Waisanen 2011, 513), indicating that such satirical production allows the audience to view events and happenings from a different perspective. Thus, 'political humor and particularly its core modality of parody are essential for an engaged, sustainable, democratic public culture' (Hariman 2008, 253). In simpler terms, political satire is taken seriously by its audience, having in mind that conventional journalism has already been reported as facing a "crisis of authority" (Carlson and Peifer 2013), as "political comedy's use of irony, parody and self-deprecation is what makes it different from conventional news, as it invites something different from the engagement of its audience" (Doona 2016, 79).

Writing about Njuz.net, Petrović wrote that 'Njuz.net's serious reception (as reflected in the professional journalism society's award, the fact that it is largely considered a news source and not entertainment, and its becoming a self-sustaining enterprise that provides full-time employment for six people) and its increasing popularity and visibility in the Serbian media justify a closer look at this phenomenon' (Petrović 2015, 291), essentially confirming Baym's categorization of contemporary political satire as a new and important type of journalism. This is due to the serious issues tackled within Njuz.net (the same could be said about News Bar), as 'perhaps the most interesting clusters of Njuz.net articles are the ones relating to the process of Serbia's accession to the European Union. The prolongation of Serbian acceptance to the community of European nations, infinite as it appears to the majority is seen to be caused primarily by Serbia's slowness and inefficiency in implementing political, social and

economic reforms' (Kalaba 2014, 4). On the other hand, News Bar tends to concentrate mostly on Croatia's societal and political failings after and despite joining the EU. Both tend to satirize and ridicule a slew of societal and (primarily) political issues within their respective countries, from cases such as Croatia's president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, and her 'apologizing' for sending Serbian chocolates to Croatian children, to the Serbian government's grand opening of an elevator in a home for the elderly. Njuz.net and News Bar have had a plethora of objects for their satire, oftentimes covering issues that have already been presented on national television, thus contributing even to the spread of information, however contorted they might get in its satirical presentation.

### THE SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT IN SERBIA AND CROATIA

Understanding contemporary political satire in the two countries cannot be attained without putting it into a broader, political and societal context. Both Serbia and Croatia emerged from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s (see: Jovanović 2017, López-Barajas 2016, Andjelic 2014, Transchel 2007, Gagnon Jr 2010, Kecmanovic 2002, Denitch 1996, Spencer 1998, Lucarelli 2000). Even though some authors stressed the difference in democratization between Croatia and Serbia (Zakošek 2008), the results of the (unsuccessful) democratization in the two countries show marked similarities: the diminishing freedom of the press (the Freedom House report on both states designate the press in Croatia and Serbia as 'partly free', see: [freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org)), increased authoritarian tendencies (Milačić 2017), as well as poor economy development (Deskar-Škrbić and Šimović 2017). Both governments have been involved in numerous scandals, such as the Croatian case of one of the ministers, Zlatko Hasanbegović, openly flirting with fascism (N1 Hrvatska 2017), to the now infamous demolition of the Savamala region in Belgrade by masked men during the election night of April 24, 2016, where the state ombudsman came to the conclusion that the operation was planned and coordinated (Mihajlović 2016). One person died in the aftermath, and the courts and the police have not made the slightest progress in investigating since. These are just the tip of the iceberg, as scandals have occurred at an alarming rate during the past several years. All of these, including smaller-scale, local happenings, have been tackled by Njuz.net and News Bar, whose written (online) and televised production has been extensive. Especially with the diminishing quality of the (primarily) traditional media via the proliferation of so-called 'fake news' (see: Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, Lazer et al. 2018, Shu et al. 2017, Tandoc Jr, Lim, and Ling 2018), political satire has gained in importance. With the pervasiveness of the World Wide Web, Njuz.net and News Bar have been able

to reach their targeted audiences with more ease as well, enabling a development of political satire on a higher scale. We shall now concentrate on several representative examples of their discourse, looking into the topics and their *modus operandi*.

## DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION

Similar to the Onion News, where 'ONN's material is state of that particular art because their productions are almost indistinguishable from the programmes they're imitating' (Sharp 2008, 4), News Bar and Njuz.net's *modus operandi* is based on copying the style of standardized contemporary journalism. Having in mind that 'satire is defined as a form that holds up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn' (Colletta 2009, 859), that it is 'an attack on or criticism of any stupidity or vice in the form of scathing humor' (Cuddon 1991, 202), the ridicule is achieved via faithfully copying standardized journalist reporting, yet with a strong dose of irony and exaggeration. As Colletta wrote, 'irony has been a means to expose the space between what is real and what is appearance, or what is meant and what is said, revealing incoherence and transcending it through the aesthetic form and meaning of a work of art' (Colletta 2009, 856). Hyperbolic 'reporting' is used as a means of emphasizing the object of ridicule. Additionally, almost identically to the Onion Network, News Bar and Njuz.net resort to the tactics of recursivity, defined by Waisanen as 'a process by which rhetors leverage past and present resources toward innovation' (Waisanen 2011, 515), similar to what LaCapra described in 1983 as 'repetition with variation over time' (LaCapra 1983, 44).

We are approaching the subject from a text analytical perspective, which is closely related to Critical Discourse Analysis, though without the purely linguistic emphasis. In the words of Michael Stubbs, 'sometimes this terminological variation signals important conceptual distinctions, but often it does not, and terminological debates are usually of little interest' (Stubbs 1996, 2). Drawing on Fairclough, we are interested in intertextuality, for 'whereas linguistic analysis shows how texts selectively draw upon linguistic systems, intertextual analysis shows how texts selectively draw upon *orders of discourse* – the particular configurations of conventionalized practices (genres, discourses, narratives, etc)' (Fairclough 1992, 194). We shall thus draw upon these broader societal discourses, and see how they relate to the production of News Bar and Njuz.net. Text selection was based upon the Grounded Theory approach, that works 'with individual cases, incidents or experiences and develop[s] progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize' (Charmaz and Belgrave 2007, 28). It is based on the procedure of *subsumption*, that 'proceeds from an already known context of features, that is from a familiar *rule* (e.g. all burglars

who steal from a medicine chest are drug addicts), and seeks to find this general context in the data (e.g. the unknown burglar has robbed the medicine chest) in order to obtain knowledge about the individual case (e.g. the unknown burglar is a drug addict). The logical form of this intellectual operation is that of *deduction*: the single case in question is subordinated to an already known rule. Here a tried and trusted order is applied to the new case' (Reichertz 2010). Thus, knowing the broader socio-political context, we looked at production of News Bar and Njuz.net, and selected several cases accordingly. Due to the constraints of a research article, only the most prominent examples were selected. The samples are taken from the online production of News Bar and Njuz.net, at their websites, njuz.net and news-bar.hr. The material from their corresponding television shows is available on YouTube. The following articles/video clips are used in the paragraphs to come:

*'A Serbotaur born in Knin, a mythical creature with the head of a Serb, and the body of a Croat' (News Bar)*

*'Hasanbegović wishes to change the name of tomorrow's celebratory day to the Day of Anti-fascist struggle' (News Bar)*

*'The president was devastated as she could not be photographed putting the fire out' (News Bar)*

*'A rare phenomenon in the sky: If you should miss tonight's address to the nation by Vučić, you will have to wait for the next one for one whole day' (Njuz.net)*

*'The Government of Serbia proposes that every ID document should have the picture of Aleksandar Vučić' (Njuz.net)*

*'Twitter decided to step up as the leader of the opposition' (Njuz.net)*

*'The offices of the Croatian Radio Television moves to Kaptol in order to be closer to its editorial board' (News Bar)*

*Episode 103, 24 Minuta (Njuz.net)*

*'Gynecologist with a religious conscientious objection' (News Bar)*

Consequently, the question we want to ask within this article is about what the main discursive properties of the production of Njuz.net and News Bar are – how they manage their production of parody, and what their production draws upon (the material is taken from the ongoing decade, primarily newer material).

Let us take a look at the first example, the News Bar text 'A Serbotaur born in Knin, a mythical creature with the head of a Serb, and the body of a Croat' (News bar, 2017a), in which the following was claimed: 'for the first time in history of our peoples, a child has been born with a Croat mother and Serb father ... The boy from a mixed marriage, at first

glance, looks like any other child, but Croat and Serb nationalists claim it has a head of a Serb and the body of a Croat, for which he is feared by both types of nationalists. Even though united in their fear, the Croat and Serb nationalists have diverging views on whether it is his body or his head that is monstrous'. This short text plays off the ethnic hatred and severe reduction in frequencies of so-called 'mixed marriages' between Serbs and Croats, starting from the early nineties onwards (Hayden 1996, Massey, Hodson, and Sekulić 1999), as there was an increase in ethnic distancing and mistrust (Kandido-Jakšić 2008). Written in the language of standard journalism, the text exaggerates by introducing a nonexistent, mythical figure of the 'Serbotaur', which represents the 'horror' of 'mixed marriages' in its horrid persona, as seen by both Croat and Serb nationalists, stressing the similarity between Serbian and Croatian nationalism, the only difference being in that they accuse the other side of 'monstrosity'. The story is published in the textual style of 'real' news (as opposed to today's 'fake news'), as if it were but one among the plethora of other newsworthy topics to be presented to the audience. Additionally, it is hyperbolic, with the hulking image of the 'Serbotaur' placed in the center of attention.

In a different text, titled 'Hasanbegović wishes to change the name of tomorrow's celebratory day to the Day of Anti-antifascist struggle' (News bar, 2017b), minister Hasanbegović's constant flirt with Croatia's Ustaša past. In an invented quote, the virtual Hasanbegović explains: 'The Day of the Struggle against Fascism is a name that spread hatred. So, you have a negative prefix *anti*, which is in and of itself a bad connotation. Whence the phobia against fascism? The fact that somebody thinks differently from you is not a reason to fight them, as in this case, with fascism. One should develop tolerance towards differences and respect everybody's political orientation, unless it is sexual'. Hasanbegović was then described as 'not really fascist, he only has a *U* on his forehead', indicating the Croat Ustaša's symbol. The whole text ridicules Hasanbegović's regular anti-democratic discourse, by use of which he has gained a reputation as an 'icon of the Right Wing' (Hrvatska 2017). As Hockenos reported for Foreign Policy, 'Hasanbegovic had been a prominent figure in a small ultra-rightist party that openly extols the fascist World War II-era Ustashe movement (he left the party and is now unaffiliated, though he has never renounced it). As a historian, his work focuses on downplaying the crimes of the Ustashe and cautiously rehabilitating its ideas' (Hockenos 2016). The resurgence of fascist thought has been a serious problem in contemporary Croatia.

'The president was devastated as she could not be photographed putting the fire out' (News bar, 2017c) was an article published by News Bar in which they exposed Croatia's president to ridicule, saying that she 'lacked

a non-existent photography in which she is quenching a fire', commenting on the common proclivity of local politicians to present themselves in a positive light. The story read: 'The president of the Republic of Croatia confirmed the resignation of the Defense Minister ... as the fire was put out before she managed to photograph herself in a fireman's suit while actively putting the fire out'. This points to the potential firing the Minister of Defense, who in fact fulfilled his role at the position on which he is, because of his "negative" conduct, drawing an unsaid conclusion that 'doing one's job' is less important than sending a positive image to the public.

In September 2017, Njuz.net published the text titled 'A rare phenomenon in the sky: If you should miss tonight's address to the nation by Vučić, you will have to wait for the next one for one whole day' (Njuz.net 2017a). Aleksandar Vučić, the current president of Serbia (who switched roles from Prime Minister in 2017, in a Putinesque maneuver), is known for his constant presence on the television and in the printed media. The text is based on the use of hyperbole, as 'speaking hyperbolically about a negative situation is an example of a contrast of magnitude, yet it is also an instance of a person expressing a very negative attitude. As such, it may be equally powerful in expressing condemnation as speaking ironically' (Colston and O'Brien 2000, 180), having in mind that exaggeration 'makes the intended meaning of nonliteral statements clearer as less ambiguous' (Kreuz, Kassler, and Copenrath 1998, 97). Vučić was, within the text, said to 'take the stage rarely, only once in a 24-hour period', playing on the President's constant presence in the media.

In another recent text, Njuz.net played on the 2017 affair in which several high ranking members of the government spoke their mind about having the picture of President Vučić in the Ministry of Defense and army facilities; the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić having said that 'the cult of national symbols ... should be strengthened' (N1, 2017), essentially equating the President with a national symbol. Njuz.net wrote a piece with the title 'The Government of Serbia proposes that every ID document should have the picture of Aleksandar Vučić' (Njuz.net, 2017b). The text goes on to say that 'according to the Prime Minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, the government decided to take steps in this direction after the conclusion that the photography of Aleksandar Vučić in all IDs would contribute to the strengthening of the cult of national symbols of Serbia'. The article plays on the importance of national symbolism in Serbia, that has, since the early nineties, become and remained a major trope (Mock 2011), even though the government has, pro forma, denounced its nationalist past.

The text 'Twitter decided to step up as the leader of the opposition' (Njuz.net, 2017c), presents the reader with an anthropomorphized vision of the Twitter social network, in which it 'decides' to represent the opposition,



'saying' that 'the only thing this government fears is Twitter, the only criticism it reacts to is that coming from Twitter. This is why we can say that I, Twitter, am the only one capable of leading the fight against this regime'. This text refers to what is nowadays known as 'clicktivism' and/or 'slacktivism' (Karpf 2010, Halupka 2014, Cornelissen, Karelaia, and Soyer 2013), referring to a habit of using social media as a platform instead of actual social and political action, thus 'slacking' by 'clicking', which could be said to be the *modus operandi* of many opposition parties in Serbia. It additionally reminds readers of the incompetence of Serbia's opposition, primarily while preparing for the Belgrade elections (supposed to be held by the end of 2017), when no coalitions or agreements have been made, even though Belgrade is seen as the only location where the support for the President can be challenged.

The media themselves – especially their connection to the government – is yet another theme of *News Bar* and *Njuz.net*. *News Bar*'s article 'The offices of the Croatian Radio Television moves to Kaptol to be closer to its editorial board' (*News bar*, 2017d) takes the Croatia's Catholic Church' excessive attempts to influence and control Croatia's main national television, the HRT (*Hrvatska Radio-televizija*). It says that 'by this move, as the editor's office claims, a significantly more fluid correspondence between the editorial office and the journalists shall occur, which will now get more detailed instructions about the program scheme and leading of shows orally, instead of the so far difficult communication via email'. As was noted already in 2003, the emancipation and democratization of the media (instead of their being under constant influence of the government) is judged to be 'unsatisfactory' (Zgrabljčić Rotar 2003, 60), as the government is seen to influence the media in a strong manner; the situation since 2003 has not changed for the better (see: Vučković 2016, DellaVigna et al. 2014).

The televised versions of the two hubs of political satire work in the same way. In episode 103 of *24 Minuta* – the televised version of *Njuz.net* – the anchor, Zoran Kesić, tackled the repeating elections in Serbia, claiming that his show got 'more votes than all other shows together, which may not have been difficult, since there are no other shows' (*24 Minuta*, ep. 103) indicating the poor diversity of information that has become a hallmark of Serbia under the regime of Aleksandar Vučić and increasing censorship. Additionally, it satirizes the Prime Minister-cum-President for his repetitive bragging that he wins by a large margin.

*News Bar*'s clip 'Gynecologist with a religious conscientious objection' (*News bar*, 2016) introduces an imagined gynecologist, who due to his faith, refuses to examine women at his work place. Croatia is known in academic circles as having a problem with political Catholicism (Perica

2015) – similar to political Orthodoxy in Serbia – including mass protests against abortion and an insistence on Catholic ethical mores. This clip satirizes the issue, by imagining a medical doctor who does not wish to engage in medical practice. In addition, the standard trope of a professional who does not wish/does not know how to do their job is stressed, as nepotism and lack of professionalism are seen to run amok in Croatia.

## CONCLUSION

Both News Bar and Njuz.net have been consistent, since their inception, in ridiculing politics (and society) in Croatia and Serbia, respectively (sometimes even cross-state, occasionally tackling neighboring countries, often referred to as ‘the region’ in local media and political discourse). It is safe to say that political satire has found a fertile ground, and that it will continue to challenge authoritarianism, fostering political consciousness and potential participation by engaging in direct attacks on authoritarian modes of governance and behavior. We have here presented but a few relevant and illustrating discursive examples of their production; the sheer volume of their work could inspire monographs, and we hope that other scholars will contribute.

The discursive *modus operandi*, so to speak, is consistent, both in Njuz.net and News Bar, as seen in the examples above, and can be said to comprise three elements as most important:

- 1) copying the style of classic journalism,
- 2) hyperbole (discursive exaggeration), and
- 3) concentrating on the most relevant or most salient issues in the daily sociopolitical life of their respective communities.

The classical journalistic style is probably the easiest to follow, with the obligatory hyperbole that exaggerates and emphasizes the key points in their production. By concentrating on the highly relevant (and often inflammatory) issues, News Bar and Njuz.net keep holding their audience’s interest. Since the question of censorship has become more salient in the recent years (especially in Serbia, with the cancellation of the ‘Utišak nedelje’ weekly talkshow, as well as shutting down of the newspaper *Vranjske novine*), the continued operation of News Bar and Njuz.net might become challenged. Whilst the televised versions can be stopped with more ease, it would be more difficult to censor their online editions. Still, that might well become an issue in the years to come.

Another issue that would need to be addressed in future research is the problem of ‘clicktivism/slacktivism’ (Karpf 2010, Cornelissen, Karelaia, and Soyer 2013, Halupka 2014), that is, the question (which has been debated within the studies on the topic of political satire and participatory democracy) whether political satire pacifies people, who might succumb under

the impression that simply watching the show may substitute for real societal and political action. However, this is a contested topic, and deserves future research. What has so far been certain is that conventional modes of political action (protests, elections) are the most effective means of holding reactionary forces at bay. Nonetheless, I believe there are signs that political satire can play a role in engaging the public in strengthening democratic forces in Serbia and Croatia.

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## SAŽETAK

SMEH KAO OTPOR:  
USPON POLITIČKE SATIRE U HRVATSKOJ I SRBIJI

S nedavnim rastom u snazi i uticaju desnice širom sveta, javila se i intenzivirana proizvodnja političke komedije i satire koja pokušava da joj se odupre. U Sjedinjenim Državama, figure poput Donalda Trampa, Kelien Konvej, ili Šona Spajsera, počele su sve češće da postaju objekti satire, u produkcijama od Stivena Kolberta, pa sve do *Saturday Night Live*. U međuvremenu, politička satira se razvijala i na Balkanu, pogotovu u Hrvatskoj i Srbiji, sa radom ljudi koji stoje iza hrvatskog News Bar-a, i srbijanskih 24 Minuta i Njuz.neta, tokom poslednjih nekoliko godina. Savremene teorije medija i političkih nauka počele su da naglašavaju uticaj i važnost ovog specifičnog načina otpora autoritarizmu sve češće sa stanovišta participatorne demokratije i aktivnog državljanstva; ovaj članak predstavlja *modus operandi* hrvatskih i srbijanskih političkih satiričara, te analizira njihove metode i pristupe otporu, sagledavajući njihovu diskurzivnu produkciju u slučajevima nekoliko reprezentativnih tekstova i videa.

KLJUČNE REČI: politička satira, Hrvatska, Srbija, Njuz.net, News Bar, politička participacija.