

Research Article

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One Tabloid To Rule Them All: Structuring Populist Media Response – the Case of Belgrade Waterfront Protests in 2016

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Summary

This paper explores the strategies that populists use in the media in contexts of civic contestations of populist government policies. The authors take the case study of Belgrade Waterfront protests in Serbia in 2016, in which the dominant populist party (SNS) successfully devalued the protests by using tabloid press and pro-government TV news broadcasts. The paper argues that a successful consolidation of populist politics was possible only through developing deep political and media polarization. As a sample, the authors take a look at protests from April to September and analyze dominant media narratives in pro-gov tabloid *Informer* and *TV Pink*, cross-comparing them with critically oriented daily *Danas* and *TV N1*.

Keywords: Populism, Grassroots Movements, Right to the City, Media Polarization, Belgrade Waterfront, Protests

Introduction¹

“Nine television screens in his office suggest a man who keeps tabs on everything — and everybody.” This is how *Financial Times* (2018) used to explain the daily routine of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. The journalist expressed concern that he might be witnessing the emergence of a new Viktor Orban. “The parallel is 99 percent crap”, Vučić said. But “crap” is not a valid dismissal of what is turn-

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ing out to be the truth, as time shows. The populist matrix of merging politics and media changed the nature of populism in the past decade or two. The explicatory potential of the concept of populism as a thin ideology (Mudde, 2007) and populism as a discourse (Laclau, 2005) has been recently challenged by the longevity of populist governments in Europe in the last decade. This created an analytical gap between the studies of populism and political reality. There are plausible reasons to investigate whether populism is transformed into a thick ideology in the traditional meaning of the concept (Freedon, 1996). Substantial contribution to this state of affairs was made by the media, since populism today is extensively using the sphere of communication to build, buttress, and amplify the ideological functions (motivation, orientation, and mobilization) of its voters.

To explore these transformations, the authors analyze the case of Serbia, i.e. the case of Belgrade Waterfront (BW) protests as an ideological clash between the populist image of modernization of the city and civic grassroots response to the urban redevelopment of the traditional city center to a modern Dubai-like area. Serbia is a particularly riveting case, with populism being an important political option since the legalization of party pluralism in 1989. During the 1990s, the government of Slobodan Milošević was often characterized as “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Vladislavljević, 2016), while the political opposition party (SRS) from the right side of the ideological spectrum is characterized as radical right populism (Vranić, 2020). The modern face of populism emerged in 2012 when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS – Serbian acronym) won the parliamentary elections, advancing the dominant discourse from radical to centrist populism ideological position (Stojiljković and Spasojević, 2018). Even with this shift, SNS “steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organization” (Freedom House, 2023).

Aleksandar Vučić, being the drivetrain of SNS’s success, is strongly hooked to the media on the populism matrix, showing himself as a central figure in the (political) victimization discourse, and a defender of true people’s interests. The tabloid press and private TV broadcasters have become Aleksandar Vučić’s primary means to address Serbian voters. Taking into consideration the congruence of political and media context, the research question of this paper is: Which media strategies do SNS and Aleksandar Vučić use to shape voters’ attitudes so that they accept populism as their ideological orientation?

This paper argues that the success of the consolidation of populist politics in the case of post-2012 Serbia was possible only through a deepening of media polarization. Populism uses strategies of media polarization to deflect the political arrows coming from the opposition when they are protesting forms of democratic backsliding. To qualitatively assess this hypothesis, the authors analyze the case

of the Belgrade Waterfront protests from April 24th to September 30th, 2016. These protests were caused by the unlawful demolition of the buildings in Hercegovačka Street in the heart of Belgrade. More importantly, these protests were the first major political and civic challenge to the SNS government, lasting several months and involving, at their peak in July 2016, more than 20,000 protesters (Matković and Ivković, 2018).

The BW protests are relevant to our research question in two respects. Firstly, the beginning of democratic backsliding in Serbia coincided with the protests against the BW project, and resulted in Freedom House (2020) indexing Serbia as a hybrid regime, with media freedom scoring the lowest (3.25/7) compared to other measured categories. Secondly, we argue that SNS developed a strategic pattern during these events that is buttressed by the negative media framing of civic movements. Starting with the theoretical assumption that the populism matrix is strongly linked to the media (Mazzoleni, 2008), we analyze media wars in press and TV activities during the period April – September 2016, comparing pro-government tabloid daily press and TV with their critically oriented counterparts. As samples, we take pro-gov daily tabloid *Informer* and critically oriented daily *Danas*, comparing the structure they laid with what became nationwide news in pro-gov *TV Pink* and critically oriented *TV NI*.

Populism, Polarization, and Ideological Structures

The literature on populism, both ideational and empirical, has been booming in the past two decades. The theoretical position of this paper is derived from a summarized overview of relevant literature on the ideational populist approach, highlighting three concepts that constitute the nature of populism: anti-elitism, moral polarization, and emotional charge (Kulić i Vranić, 2021). The concept of anti-elitism has advanced most in its ideational development. Populists rely on policies that affirm the idea of ‘the true people’ versus estranged representative elites (Canovan, 2002; Taggart, 2002; Heinisch *et al.*, 2020). The meaning of the ‘estranged elites’ syntagm varies greatly when applied in different ideological, cultural, and spatial contexts, making populism intrinsically ambivalent (Taggart, 2000), shifting its ideological position from right to left. The global populist mistrust over representation is causally connected to anti-elitism, since “for populists, representation is a process of corrupting and perverting the will of the people” (Šalaj, 2012, p. 27). As Mudde (2017) concludes, populism is “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism”.

Moral polarization is often constructed based on the ‘moral imagination’ of the people (Müller, 2015). Discourses such as victimization, anti-capitalism, nativism, heartland, etc., shape the populist matrix of what a true people is. Finally, the inter-

connection of populist leaders and the people directly shapes the style of communication that populists use with amplified emotional charge, picturing themselves as paternalistic protectors of the people's interests. To achieve this end, populists seldom reach for what Levitsky and Ziblatt refer to as authoritarian behavior, related to "readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including the media" (2018, p. 25). In this process, the media play a constitutive role: "Populism shows a unique alliance of the media and political factors, but the main catalyst may be found in the country's political culture at a given time" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50). Populism and "media populism" complement each other and, at the same time, derogate the substance of the two professions (Kulić, 2020).

To best include these theoretical concepts in our research on the ideological framework of populism in Serbia and the BW protest case, the authors find particularly applicable the idea of ideological structures derived from discourse analysis proposed in Van Dijk's works (1988; 1998; 2015). In a nutshell, Van Dijk stresses the importance of the "social dimension of a group, namely, membership, activities, goals, values, relations to other groups and resources" when analyzing ideological structures (1998, p. 128). This "polarized nature of the expression of ideologies, as Us and Them" (*ibid.*, p. 129), is also the crux of every version of populism. The authors argue that these polarizations strengthen the structural conditions in which the contestations between hegemonic and opposing elites take place.

Relying on Van Dijk's points, the paper argues that SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić use the media to structurally frame political and policy issues and communicate them to their voters. This coincides with existing empirical research on populist voters' habits. As cross-national research on voters' attitudes done by Van Houwaert and Van Kessel (2017, p. 13) delineates, populism voters from both left and right are politically active (no apathy or abstinence), are very informed and follow the news religiously, and are (in different ways) dissatisfied with democracy. Put differently, the 'motivational dynamics' of populist voters are actively shaped by pro- and anti-populist media. In the case of the BW protests, SNS used daily tabloid *Informer* and *TV Pink* for structuring their political response to the protest, and to frame and shame the 'enemies' of the people. Finally, the ideological polarization was entrenched with critically oriented daily paper *Danas* and *TV NI*, who reported on the same issues from the opposing ideological spectrum (in this case, by emphasizing the actions of contesting elites).

Contemporary Media Context in Serbia

The polarization of the media today is a paradox: it exists in an era of numerous media platforms – an era of a multitude of possibilities to observe different ideological perspectives, and yet readers, viewers, and content creators seldom get out of their

trenches. An argument suggesting that new media technologies tend to exacerbate polarization, forming “echo chambers” and “clustering of like-minded” (Bishop, 2008), goes in parallel with the perception of the influence of traditional media in fueling political and social polarization and thereby conforming to the existing ideological positions (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2008; Sunstein, 2009). However, there is still a need to question its composition effects, “whereby a lowering of barriers to media accessibility increases turnout and hence lowers polarization since newly motivated voters are relatively more moderate” (Campante and Hojman, 2010, p. 3). The prevailing trend, symbolically manifested in 2016 (the Brexit and the election of Donald Trump), appears to deviate from this ideal, as the diversity within media landscapes often gives rise to the formation of two dominant ideological currents, around which media groups coalesce, mostly in populist regimes (Rose, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Dominant communication styles within the context of populism occurring in numerous modern democracies (Rowland, 2019) also reflect on populist media patterns in democratic backsliders and even authoritarian regimes (Dawson and Hanley, 2016; Bugarič, 2019; Kulić, 2020).

Media polarization doesn’t solely entail media capture and the influence of political leadership on shaping the media narrative. It also involves the response of media outlets within such a narrative, often inciting them to ‘take sides’. Media polarization simultaneously signifies that the media often abandon their primary principles of professional autonomy (Carlson, 2017), fair and balanced reporting as a core of the ideology of the profession (Deuze, 2005; Deuze and Witschge, 2020), replacing their orientation with cheering for or advocating against another side. Media polarization contributes to media populism particularly when journalists turn into advocates for particular policies and engaged workers rather than critical examiners of public policies. In such divisions, there are often no truly ‘independent media outlets’ and it is more appropriate to make a distinction between pro-government and critically oriented media outlets (Kulić, 2022).

Serbia does not deviate from these trends. The media landscape greatly coincides with the political scenery of democratic backsliding and ideological entrenching in Serbia, often intertwining with populism. After a democratic shift in 2000, the country “has undergone a politically turbulent transition from authoritarian to democratic rule over the past 20 years” (Krstić, 2023), with the media still being captured by political and market forces (Schiffrin, 2018; Milosavljević and Poler, 2018). While Serbian media laws are commendable, their implementation within a fragile democracy and an overcrowded media market has proven rather ineffective, where “journalists are threatened by political pressures and impunity of crimes committed against them” (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). In 2016 Serbia ranked 59th on the global index of press freedom, and in 2023 the country fell to 91st place

(Global Press Freedom, 2023). During Vučić's reign, "the country has fallen into disarray, with the stifling of the freedom of the press, increased poverty, an intense brain drain, and several bizarre affairs in which Aleksandar Vučić's collaborators are often involved" (Mladenov Jovanović, 2018, p. 22).

Putting Populist Strategies in Context: Belgrade Waterfront Protests

Since the beginning of party pluralism in 1989, Serbia has been struggling with the quality of democracy, taking one step forward and two steps backward. Three periods can be distinguished in the last 30 years. The first two were from 1990 to 2000, and from 2000 to 2012, the former being labeled as the period of Slobodan Milošević's regime of a competitive authoritarian system (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Vladislavljević, 2016), while the latter, after the 5th October revolution, was marked by stabilization of an imperfect, but resilient democracy with strong tendencies to consolidation (Vladislavljević, 2016). After 2012 and SNS's rise to power, Serbia slipped in just two years from a polarized party pluralism to a system with a predominant party (Lončar, 2017), setting structural conditions for democratic backsliding.

Nationalism, xenophobia, warmongering, and ethnopoltics were major political and cultural narratives at the core of Serbian traditional far-right populism developed during the 1990s period. There was a significant ideological shift in Serbian far-right political options when the SNS emerged as a fraction of the radical-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) in 2008. SNS adopted a party program in 2011 that made an ideological leap to a conservative center-right party spectrum (Stojiljković and Spasojević, 2018, p. 114). However, after forming the government in 2012, SNS pushed their policies more toward the illiberal populism matrix. The actions of SNS's leading figure Aleksandar Vučić had a strong emphasis on condemning corrupted transitional elites (the tycoons), moralizing the role of the true people in the decision-making process, reducing xenophobic narrative, and adopting a clear pro-EU course (Vranić, 2020). Put in an ideational populism framework, SNS is a part of what Mudde and Kaltwasser refer to as exclusionary populism in its political (competition) dimension (Stojiljković and Spasojević, 2018, p. 119). This structural (uncompetitive) setting made possible for SNS to more than double its parliamentary election results in just two years, from 22.06% in 2012 to 48.35% in 2014 (Kulić i Vranić, 2021).

With uncontested power after 2014, SNS and Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić turned from the phase of consolidation to the phase of identity-building. This phase of representing Serbia as the economic tiger of the region is materially incarnated in the BW project. The urban megaproject was promoted in the media by SNS as an engine of Serbia's GDP: "The BWP envisages the construction of 2 million m² on 177.27 ha over 30 years, including 6128 flats (1 million m²),

commercial spaces (1 million m², a 210 m-high main tower, a shopping mall, eight hotels and several tall buildings)” (Zeković and Maričić, 2020, p. 7).

The project was contested from the beginning. The Savamala urban area was a gentrification project and part of the Rights to the City movement since 2012. Once a major railway junction, it became a desolated part of the city during the general decay of the Serbian economy in the 1990s. In the late 2000s, a group of NGOs, artists, and cultural troupes initiated a bottom-up redevelopment of Savamala, turning it steadily into cultural hubs, educational centers, and new hipster nightlife places. In the period from 2008 to 2017, Savamala was an example of grassroots Rights to the City movement in the gentrification context of spatial imagination. Zeković and Maričić (2020) classified 5 grassroots hubs lively operating in the Savamala area by the time the BW project was announced: cultural hubs (*KC Grad*, *Mikser*, etc.), participatory economic spaces for start-ups, urban transformation CSO programs, offices for different CSOs, and individual pop-up initiatives. These hubs developed a new left cultural pattern that served as a foundation for civic movements that occupied the left side of the ideological spectrum from 2014.

In the early stage, the BW project faced civil society resistance. Serbian government and the city of Belgrade started to change regulations in 2014 (establishing a joint BW Ltd company, changing the urban master plan, etc.), and declared the BW project a venture of national interest in 2015. The civic initiative against the project was formed immediately in 2014 by the NGO Ministry of Space (*Ministarstvo prostora*) and Who Builds the City? (*Ko gradi grad?*), oriented toward collective action (Fagan and Ejodus, 2020). With their initiatives being completely ignored by the authorities, the activists resorted to collective action obstructions, “by organizing performances at public hearings such as attending with beach paraphernalia (an allusion to the idea that the Belgrade Waterfront project will drown the city), or placing a giant yellow duck made of Styrofoam in front of the National Assembly of Serbia” (*ibid.*).

The contestation escalated during 2016, with parliamentary and Belgrade city council elections taking place at the end of April. The BW project was one of the pillars of SNS’s campaign. The second half of 2016 was colored by mass civic protests against the BW project, triggered by violent demolitions of the buildings in Hercegovačka Street. On the eve of the parliamentary election night, April 24th, a group of masked men demolished several buildings that were still under legal dispute for expropriation. The police refused to intervene, even after numerous calls from the witnesses were made. The night watchman was tied to a chair during the demolition, and was released after a couple of hours, but passed away in a month (which was one of the key mobilization effects for mass protests). The leadership of the protest was taken by the new grassroots civic movement Don’t let Belgrade

D(r)own (*Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*) (NdB – Serbian acronym used throughout), which emerged from NGO activism, but distanced themselves from it (*ibid.*). The demolition, aside from being an illegal activity, also became a subject of institutional and regulatory scrutiny, with Ombudsman Saša Janković initiating a control process to determine police oversights on the night of the demolition. The report showed major omissions in police actions. The Ombudsman's report would play a vital role in both protest dynamics and SNS media protest framing as political actions in the first period of the BW protests.

The protests lasted until February 2017. During May 2016, the grassroots character of the protests was established, since the protesters were concentrated on the local citizens of Savamala, doing mostly political performances. The goals of the protests were to stop the BW project and to find the persons responsible for the Savamala demolition. Their actions mobilized a wider participation, leading to mass protests from June to September 2016. The leaders of the protests were from NdB, publicly excluding traditional opposition parties (ex. Democratic Party – DS). These protests assumed the form of protest walks and civil disobedience, and led to transforming a local issue into political struggle against SNS. Finally, from October 2016 to February 2017 the protests politically merged and organizationally coordinated with opposition parties that jointly challenged Aleksandar Vučić, who decided to run for presidential elections. The numbers of people involved in protests were constantly decreasing in this phase. The opposing candidate that NdB endorsed was Saša Janković, who resigned as ombudsman for the opportunity to run for presidency. Aleksandar Vučić won by a landslide with 55.08%, while Saša Janković ended up with 16.36% in April 2017 elections. Protests diminished after protest organizers decided to join the presidential campaign. None of the protest goals were acknowledged by the government. The outcome of the 2016 protests was the introduction of grassroots movements as an important political factor, thus demonopolizing traditional political parties.

Methodology, Research and Analysis

Drawing upon the literature discussed, we merge media content analysis for the descriptive part of the research with ideological discourse analysis, in order to identify linguistic models and their framing in a specific context during the first 5 months of protests (April 24th to September 30th). In this period the protests peaked in numbers and were the primary focus of political life in Serbia. We opted for samples from two newspapers – *Danas* and *Informer*, and two TV channels – *Pink* and *NI*, as media mirrors of political life in Serbia.

These media outlets are positioned at two opposing political and media poles. They are not equivalent in reach, quality, or media capabilities. However, they sym-

bolize two contrasting media landscapes in Serbia. While *TV Pink* and *Informer* are openly pro-government, *TV NI* and *Danas* positioned themselves as media Meccas for civic-oriented political opposition. The formation of niche audiences and filter bubbles around these two groups of media explains their mobilizing and agitational roles. For these reasons, the authors opt to focus only on the opposing poles of media clashes, as clear-cut cases of political polarization in Serbia.

The media content of each sample is analyzed on the day of the protest, as well as the day before and after. We take these dates as clusters of political, ideological, and media agglomerations in which actors intensify their activities and sharpen their opinions and attitudes, making them analyzable. In the process, we mapped the key daily issues and central news shows that appeared as congestions on the road to ideological polarization (April 24th, May 10th, May 12th, May 27th, June 9th, June 11th/12th, July 19th, September 29th). Although reporting and covering of the protest were intense during the selected period (particularly in *Danas* and *NI*), we opted for a deep scan of the media content only when both pro-gov and pro-civic actors were in direct ideological clash. Between these congestions, we identified repetitive forms of journalism in both pro-gov and pro-civic reporting.

Informer is a privately-owned penny press and widely circulated daily newspaper in Serbia. The tabloid is closely intertwined with SNS, effectively serving as an official publication that promotes state policies. *Informer* often violates the Code of Ethics: in the 6 months during which this research was conducted, *Informer* violated the Code of Ethics 763 times in the coverages (Council of Press, 2016).

Danas is a left-oriented newspaper situated critically toward the government and promoting European Union values. It was established in 1997 when a group of journalists stood against Milošević's media politics and launched counter-regime newspapers. Its circulation is in constant decline, and it is privately owned by United Media since 2021.

TV Pink (from 1993) is a commercial television channel with a national frequency in Serbia, very popular in the Western Balkans region as well. Politically, since its inception, *TV Pink* has been known to be closely aligned with the authorities, even diametrically shifting its political orientation and support from former political adversaries. TV is known for its frequent violations of journalistic codes, labeling political opponents and defaming them, with regulatory bodies often turning a blind eye to these codex violations (Đorđević and Kostić, 2019).

NI is a cable news TV channel founded in 2014 by United Media as CNN's affiliate in the Western Balkans. Except in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it has national frequency, *NI* doesn't have coverage beyond cable networks in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Since its establishment, the television station has nurtured a critical attitude towards governments that adopt populist and far-right policy orien-

tations. This criticism intensified over the years, as populism and nationalism took root even more in the Western Balkans region.

For connecting populism with the media in discourse analysis, this paper strongly relies on Van Dijk's framework. The research identifies two levels of discourse: language and meaning. At the former level, the authors search for repetitive forms of media language, i.e. words, syntagms, and sentences that are meant to shape readers' attitudes, and at the latter, the findings are extended by connecting a context of polarization in a fragile media landscape. Van Dijk's (2015) "subjective context models" are employed in the analysis both of the events and of how subjects think or talk about them, i.e. "the very actions and environment in which they are currently engaged" (*ibid.*, p. 233). The research is based on the three criteria derived from Van Dijk's theoretical framework:

1. Macro level: Ideological discourse in media products (both text in print, including headlines, leads, and body texts, and TV forms, packages, and voiceovers) in which subjects are identified in negative ways.
2. Micro level: Local coherence of text and context.
3. Actors' descriptions, especially with explicit or implicit attributes.

Based on the three criteria, the research marked the main narratives used in pro-gov *Informer* and pro-civic *Danas* as structural conditions for ideological polarization between SNS and civic elites. To bridge information and opinions provided in dailies with what *Pink* and *NI* frame as news on the selected days, the paper maps codes that viewers and voters use to form opinions and attitudes on what is happening at the BW protests.

Mapping the structure of populist response: media content and discourse analysis of pro-gov daily Informer and pro-civic daily Danas

In scanning the media sample covering the BW protests (*Informer*, *Danas*, *Pink* and *NI*) from April 24th to September 30th, 2016, the authors cross-referenced Van Dijk's three criteria of ideological discourse analysis. This resulted in mapping populist media response to grassroots contestations, which we divided into three phases of ideological polarization. The summary of the result is given in *Table 1*.

The map demonstrates that *Informer* took the lead in tracing these phases, setting up the pro-gov ideological trench. Following these phases, the research identifies that pro-gov *TV Pink* was congruent with *Informer*'s writings, while pro-civic *Danas* and *NI* were reacting and opposing the writings, digging the trench on the opposite side of the ideological division.

In the first phase, *Informer* covered the BW protests only superficially, treating them mainly as a non-event. The interest built up by mid-May, still only through the

Table 1. Description of the Phases of Ideological Polarization During BW Protests

Phase	Macro Discourse	Key Actors	Media Polarization	Daily Print and TV Coverage Period	Local Coherence Topic in Daily Prints	Local Coherence Topic in TV Coverages
1 st – May 2016	Building a political background for grass-roots protests through personalization and reduction to corrupted elites	Aleksandar Vučić (PM of Serbia) Saša Janković (Ombudsman) Siniša Mali (Mayor of Belgrade) Bojan Pajtić (President of Democratic party)	Partial	<i>Informer</i> (May 10 th – May 27 th) <i>Danas</i> (May 12 th – May 27 th) <i>Pink</i> (May 10 th – May 27 th) <i>NI</i> (May 10 th – May 27 th)	<i>Informer</i> : the “gun affair” of the Ombudsman; connecting demolition in Savamala with “illegitimate” demolitions done by the former government <i>Danas</i> : the Ombudsman’s report; covering protests on the site	<i>Pink</i> : the “gun affair”; connecting demolition in Savamala with past “illegitimate” demolitions <i>NI</i> : the Ombudsman’s report; covering protests on the site
2 nd – June and July 2016	Framing protests as political	Aleksandar Vučić (PM of Serbia) Saša Janković (Ombudsman) Kyle Scott (US Ambassador in Serbia) Michael Davenport (Head of EU delegation in Serbia) Dobrica Veseulinović and Radomir Lazić (Ndm Bgd)	Partial	<i>Informer</i> (June 9 th – July 19 th) <i>Danas</i> (June 9 th – July 19 th) <i>Pink</i> (June 9 th) <i>NI</i> (June 9 th – July 19 th)	<i>Informer</i> : framing “Savamala affair” as part of “taking down Vučić” <i>Danas</i> : the Ombudsman’s report; covering protests on the site	<i>Pink</i> : voiceovers to <i>Informer</i> ’s texts on the Savamala affair <i>NI</i> : the Ombudsman’s report; the civic character of protests; “unmasking” <i>Informer</i> ’s intentions
3 rd – August and September 2016	Polarizing protesters as corrupted political actors vs. ‘the true people’	Kyle Scott (US Ambassador in Serbia) Siniša Mali (Mayor of Belgrade) Dobrica Veseulinović and Radomir Lazić (Ndm Bgd)	Full	<i>Informer</i> (September 29 th) <i>Danas</i> (September 29 th) <i>Pink</i> (no coverage) <i>NI</i> (September 29 th)	<i>Informer</i> : putting protests in the “anti-Serbian” cluster <i>Danas</i> : the Ombudsman’s report; covering protests on the site	<i>Pink</i> : ignoring the protests <i>NI</i> : covering protests on the site

lenses of SNS's reaction to the protests, without reporting or covering. In this period, one could not speak of mass protests, since they involved up to 1000 protesters. The first major news bomb was dropped on May 10th by Prime Minister Vučić, who expressed his opinion on the demolitions in Hercegovačka Street:

If you ask me, I think that the one that would do such a thing, anyone from the government who might have done such a thing, is a complete idiot because he should've done it in broad daylight since the objects are illegal... we want to make the most beautiful part of the city, not to have dirty shacks! (*Informer*, May 10th).

The "complete idiot" thesis enraged the public. Vučić further elaborated on the topic at a press conference: he tried to adjunct the narrative to the wider political events of "colored revolutions" in Bosnia and Herzegovina and (North) Macedonia (*Informer*, May 12th). The initial reaction of SNS officials was to adjunct the narrative of urban redevelopment to a wider negative political context.

With the negative macro image set, the personalization of the protests began with the tabloid's focus on the Ombudsman Saša Janković. Tabloid press negated his attributes of institutional agency, designating Mr. Janković as a political persona. *Informer* published a series of negative texts on Mr. Janković, the most dramatic being the one on his alleged involvement in his friend's murder in 1993 (*Informer*, May 27th).

Applying Van Dijk's framework for discourse analysis, the authors deduce that SNS's aim in the first phase was to control the new political discourse that was started by the demolition. Vučić's and *Informer*'s shared focus in this phase was on replacing the negative images of the demolition with the (more) negative images of his political opponents, leaning on a basic populist strategy of anti-elitism ("the ugliest street", "politically corrupt shenanigans"). The goal was to map the protests as politically corrupt and not grassroots participatory events.

The second phase began in June, with protests now attracting more than 10,000 citizens. In this phase, *Informer* took the lead in promoting negative images of the protesters, while Vučić subsequently gave them legitimacy. The phase started with *Informer*'s "exclusive" findings on the alleged conspiracy of global centers of power and their aim to bring down the government via the BW protests. The key point for analysis is the June 9th issue of *Informer*, with the dramatic warning on the front page: "Killing Vučić", followed by the subtitle: "The EU and America organize and pay the extremists to wreak chaos in Serbia... The West finances anarchists, Marxists, syndicates, anti-globalists".

The lead of the text strongly opens with the claim that "the ambassadors of the EU and the US, Michael Davenport and Kyle Scott, are personally involved in the attempt at creating chaos in Serbia and destabilizing Aleksandar Vučić's govern-

ment” (*Informer*, June 9th). Prime Minister Vučić follows, arguing that the information is correct: “They finance a lot of organizations, so what? I got over that three years ago... And then I realized that they would finance anyone who will say something bad about the Government...” (*ibid.*).

The text was a matrix for all future articles, where we identify a repetitive form of journalism, without facts, with speculations and shady sources. The pro-government discourse promoted new ideological narratives by designating the protests as left extremism (“anarchist, Marxists, syndicates”). Here we identify the ideological profiling and spectrum fixing civic protesters as left political opposition. The negative macro designations (corrupted, volatile, financed by the West) submerged unlawful demolition as a topic.

With the third protest taking place in June and peaking in numbers, *Informer* intensified its activities with a special weekend double issue (*Informer*, June 11th/12th). The focus was still on the “corrupted elites” that organized the BW protests, now with “evidence” that the US ambassador and EU representative gave 1.367.000 euros to the Savamala organizations that participated in the protest. This evidence led *Informer* to name the BW protests – “Savamala affair”. Repetitive negative writing really gained momentum there: in each text, only the headline changed, while almost identical syntagms were used, solidifying the negative local coherence of corruption coming from the West.

The second phase ended with a toolkit for SNS voters to “unmask” the intention of the BW protests and clearly set the ideological distinction between the “radical” left and the populist center of the spectrum. In Van Dijk’s terms, this phase served to build meaning on the local coherence level, connecting text with political and cultural codes relevant to SNS voters (e.g., violent protests, foreign financing, destabilization of Serbia, etc.).

The third phase was dedicated to the mobilization of SNS voters by means of ideological polarization. In this phase, the number of protesters peaked. However, since the background work on structuring the attitudes of SNS voters was finished, the negative campaign became more neutral (this is more visible in *TV Pink*’s reporting). SNS decided to mostly ignore the protests, letting the tabloid publish whatever would sell the papers best. The focus of protest reporting in *Informer* in the second half of July relied on the incident in front of Belgrade city assembly, when the mayor of Belgrade, Siniša Mali (SNS), was physically attacked. This was enough evidence for *Informer* to designate the protest as violent, stating that the incident was the clearest sign that the USA aimed at radicalization (*Informer*, July 19th).

After the seventh protest on September 29th, *Informer* focused on the local context, connecting the BW protests with the Kosovo* problem. They bombastically

announced that they had evidence that “for the first time in history, Albanians from the south parts of Serbia support Belgrade protests”, inducing that “secret services of the US are involved” (*Informer*, September 30th).

In this final stage, the negative image of the protest was put in relation with other negatively perceived political issues, creating an “anti-Serbian” cluster. Following Van Dijk’s criteria, we claim that the negative ideological discourse was fully controlled by SNS, creating a clear-cut polarization between “Us” who are true patriots, and “Them” who are enemies, anti-Serbs, and US protégés.

The research now turns to the other pole of the media and ideological spectrum, the daily paper *Danas*. Unlike the case of *Informer*, the authors couldn’t identify a clear-cut phase of media presentation and image framing in *Danas*. Their strategy was more linear, meaning that *Danas* consistently and extensively reported on the BW protests as a key event in defending democracy in Serbia. The texts were characterized by the frequent involvement of protest leaders, opinions from random protesters, as well as opposition leaders and critically oriented analysts. We understand this consistency as an attempt to solidify the opinion of *Danas* readers, i.e. opposition voters.

From the beginning of the protests, *Danas* explicitly promoted the polarization standpoint. This is not so unusual, since the readers of *Danas* needed to be mobilized to go out and protest. From 2012 to 2016, the growth of SNS popularity was exponential, while the democratic opposition parties were reduced to barely crossing the threshold of 5%. This led to a wide abstinence in 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections, since voters were of the opinion that they should stay home because SNS was going to win anyway. To that respect, the mobilization efforts needed to change strategies that were failing in the past 4 years. One of the typical civic narratives from the first to the last protests is shown in this sentence: “Among those who gathered there were cyclists, mothers with infants, students, pensioners, foreigners” (*Danas*, May 12th). The BW protests were referred to as gatherings, not protests, the term signifying that it was a grassroots struggle with a strong democratic and participatory impulse. Put differently, protests were not framed as a political, albeit as a communal struggle, with the aim to mobilize those who became politically abstinent. Unlike *Informer*, *Danas* aimed at local coherence from the beginning of the protests, calling on established protest groups in Belgrade, such as cyclists (Kopf, 2015) students, etc. In other words, the pro-civic media was already polarized with no need to deliver codes for opposition voters.

The journalistic approach was always factographic, but sufficient space in the texts was given to opposition leaders to promote their political standpoints. In the May 12th issue of *Danas*, the “complete idiot” thesis was a leitmotif for comparing Aleksandar Vučić with criminals. One of the key NdB activists, Dobrica

Veselinović, used polarization as a method for mobilization: “They only know of violence, we need to remain dignified. We need to show the good side of our face, while they hide under the hoods” (*Danas*, May 26th).

Only in May can we see *Informer* and *Danas* following the same topic, namely the report of the Ombudsman on the Herzegovina demolition. *Danas* religiously wrote about the report, calling for accountability for unlawful actions (*ibid.*). Here we also see the repetitive narrative of corruption, but not populist, rather one that preserves political institutions from corruptive influences.

In the aftermath of the *Informer* campaign, we identify a romanced, biased reportage in the September 30th issue of *Danas*, reminiscing on the heroic resistance of the people during the anti-Milošević protest in the 1990s. This period was a cultural code for *Danas* readers, connecting the BW protests with struggles for democracy and against authoritarianism. In the main text of the issue, NdB activist Radomir Lazović provided a reaction to the *Informer* campaign:

During this period, we have been targeted more than 40 times just in *Informer*... The editors and journalists of these so-called media have literary drawn targets on our heads... We are HERE to say to all who are afraid and who are oppressed that they are not alone! Civic fronts are expanding... (*Danas*, September 30th)

Compared with the campaign led by *Informer*, we conclude that, by the end of July, ideological polarization was completely entrenched on both sides. Although *Danas* kept the subject of urban redevelopment in focus and connected it to the democratic cluster of struggles for free institutions and the rule of law, the consequences of the negative campaign were that the protests outgrew the initial local actions, adopting political connotation.

Mapping the superstructure of ideological polarization in Serbia: media content and discourse analysis of pro-gov TV Pink and pro-civic TV N1

In this section, the authors apply media content and discourse analysis to pro-gov *TV Pink* and pro-civic *TV N1*, i.e. their central news broadcasts (“Nacionalni dnevnik” and “Dnevnik u 19”). The central news broadcasts have a great impact in Serbia, often having top shares compared to other TV programs, significantly shaping the opinions of the voters, often with a key role in the polarization process.

The analysis of the *TV Pink* central news broadcast (“Nacionalni dnevnik”) shows that it was congruent with the three phases of *Informer*’s activity. *TV Pink* covered the protests in a similar tempo and intervals, putting the focus on the texts from *Informer*, and buttressing the claims made by the tabloid in each phase.

Before the May 10th protest, *TV Pink* ignored Savamala events or reported about them obscurely. *Pink* started reporting only with Vučić’s “complete idiot”

news bomb. The background of their reports was *Informer*'s narrative on corrupted elites, framing the BW protests as part of colored revolutions.

Pink soon adopted the structured form of reporting. The news about the BW protests was never backed up by reports from the site of the events, only TV packaging and voiceovers related to the topic were delivered. As an example, let us look at the news from May 25th, when *TV Pink* reported on the death of Savamala night watchman, commenting that his passing was being "used for new trickery and political abuse". This news was delivered without connection to the factual context, that is, to the demolition events on April 24th. The output was mostly negatively connotated, connecting protests with hooliganism, corrupted elites, violence, foreign financing, etc. In Gramscian terms, *TV Pink* ignored the real structural conditions of the protests, taking *Informer*'s propaganda as facts, and presenting ideological and legitimization superstructure to the viewers.

This matrix was most visible at the peak of the protests in June. On June 11th, *TV Pink* had 5 TV packages and voiceovers related to Savamala, but none was related to the BW protest itself. The main news consisted of offs and quotations from Vučić's text in the tabloid *Srpski telegraf*, which took up 4 minutes of the program. Vučić's main thesis was that the Savamala events were "used to destabilize Serbia", with a promise that the protesters "will not succeed" (*TV Pink*, June 11th). *TV Pink* had no mention of the civic character of the protests, framing them exclusively as political and opposition protests.

In the same central news broadcast, Vučić's claims were backed up with "facts" put forward by *Informer* regarding the foreign financing of the protests. *TV Pink* also added that *TV NI* "draws a target" for the editor-in-chief of *Informer* and its journalists by daily analyzing the texts from this tabloid. In the context of polarized media, this case of cross-referencing between daily print and electronic media demonstrates synchronized media action that entrenches attitudes pro and against the government, which is the most fertile political ground for populism to thrive.

Once ideological positions were entrenched, *TV Pink* changed its strategy and actively ignored the protests from mid-June to the end of September. Following SNS codes, reporting turned to more positive images of the BW project, showing the newly built Savamala promenade, reports on the construction progress, etc. For example, there was no media coverage of any sort for the protest on June 25th. The only mention of the protests that we found in this period was on July 18th, when the mayor of Belgrade Siniša Mali was attacked.

A comparison of pro-gov media and the timing of their actions leads the authors to the conclusion that it was Aleksandar Vučić's "complete idiot" statement that started the polarization avalanche. When we cross-compare this with the dynamics of the protests, we infer that the motivation for protesting was negatively

structured, i.e. Vučić's defense of the demolition process, rather than the actions of the protest organizers, mobilized both media and voters to put focus on the protests.

Unlike *TV Pink*, critically oriented *TV NI* adopted a more linear and consistent strategy of reporting from the protests. Similar, but not directly connected to *Danas*, *TV NI* reported from the site of the protests with on-screen time that was proportional to the protests' scale. Also, in the case of *TV NI* reporting, we can identify the three phases of ideological build-up, although not as delineated as in the case of *Informer* and *TV Pink*. The goal was the opposite: to justify the civic character of the protests. We determine that major attention was first dedicated to the protests on May 11th, when they were the headline news, coinciding with the "complete idiot" news bomb. Before that, *TV NI* also didn't report extensively on the BW events: e.g., in the central news show on April 25th, the day after the demolition, none of it was made news. The first live broadcast of the protests was in May with a reporter from the site delivering a factographic report.

During the May 25th protest, we identified the first ideological relativization, where reporters from the site of the protest insisted several times that "several thousands of people gathered". Although the report was mostly factual, the first signs of taking sides were starting to appear. The reporter insisted that the protests were civic and not political, and stressed the organizers' (NdB) claim that "idiots from the government can't agree on who is to blame for what happened in Hercegovačka Street".

The research marked the same peak in reporting as with *TV Pink*, i.e. the June 11th protest. *TV NI* dedicated three stories to the protest, with narratives opposite to the ones that *TV Pink* viewers had a chance to see. We find now a repetitive local coherence form: the reporter insisted that this was a "third civic protest". The factual approach was still dominant in these reports, but the focus was on the omission of the police during the demolition, with a strong background in the Ombudsman's report on the Savamala demolition. The order of news on *TV NI* is opposite to the one given on *TV Pink*.

During this protest, we can see that *TV NI* responded to *TV Pink*'s and *Informer*'s framing of the protests by giving a chance to the organizers to set a grassroots narrative. In *TV NI* reports, NdB was always portrayed as an anti-political organization. This grassroots narrative remained a counterweight to what *TV Pink* and *Informer* were asserting about the political motives of the BW protests.

The last example of ideological relativization we found during the July 18th protest, when the mayor of Belgrade was attacked. *TV NI* openly asked whether this was about "the crowd's commotion or an attack on the mayor"? The report included a statement from the mayor (same as the one on *TV Pink*) but also of the protesters, claiming that the commotion was caused by the mayor's security personnel. The

story was then connected to another report on the Ombudsman case. Finally, in the last protests from the sample (September 29th), there was only a factual report, without any significant ideological input.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

As the main findings of this research, the authors derive four elements of populist media image framing in the response to civic contestation in the case of the BW protests:

1. Both pro-gov and critically oriented media participated in shaping the ideological codes of “political” vs. “civic”, contributing to the ideological polarization in which SNS positioned themselves as a populist balance. Once the protests were put in a polarization matrix, SNS and Aleksandar Vučić could limit the extent of the protesters’ influence, declare them as enemies of the true people, and direct their voter’s attitudes toward new civic movements, i.e. political options.
2. The peak of the ideological build-up was reached during the June 11th protest, where we can see a polarized synergy of the press and electronic media, one side appraising the SNS and the BW project (*Informer* and *TV Pink*), and the other contesting the project and giving media space to civic or grassroots movements (*Danas* and *TV NI*). The peak was the result of SNS’s negative campaign that agitated and motivated citizens to go out and protest.
3. The structure of the populist response to the contestation of the BW project was shaped through the writings of *Informer*. Electronic media were used only during the peaks of the protests, but strongly leaning on *Informer*’s writings, taking their articles and opinions as facts. While *TV Pink* ignored the protests from mid-June, *Informer* remained SNS’s watchdog throughout. In this synergy of press and TV, the ideological standpoint of SNS became very clear to their voters, providing them with negative codes to decipher the actions of the protesters (foreign financing, violence, leftist hooligans, etc.).
4. The ideological structure of the civic engagement in the protests was not constructed in the media, instead it was drawn from the trends of the global social movements’ strategy (e.g. Rights to the City movement), and as a defense strategy to preserve the grassroots gentrification of Savamala. For this reason, the reports of *Danas* and *TV NI* were mostly factual, while the ideological shaping came as a response to *Informer*’s and *Pink*’s politicization of the protests, emphasizing their grassroots origin.

The aftermath of the BW protests was like a self-fulfilling prophecy of tabloid journalism. NdB was transformed from a grassroots civic movement into a political

movement in 2018, running for seats in the Belgrade local assembly. They became part of the national parliament in 2022, with official registration as a political party in 2023 under a new name: Green Left Front (“Zeleno levi front”). In that sense, the BW protests woke up left movements from their “transitional slumber” (Štiks, 2015), counterweighting the populist center occupied by SNS. Regardless, SNS managed to hold uncontested power in the national parliament.

This research demonstrates that populism thrives in a context of polarized media space. Such structural context offers a binary orientation for Serbian voters: one is either for SNS or against it. In a polarized society, populist codes such as corrupted elites, victimization discourse, or anti-national narrative are not difficult to maintain, since the voters have available media toolkits to decipher new political options.

What remains as a question for further research is whether the structure of populist action that we delineated in the case of the BW protests is evolving and adapting in time, and whether it works only in the Serbian case, with Serbia being, traditionally, an ideologically divided society (Russell-Omaljev, 2017). The methodology we used in this research could be applied to sufficiently similar cases of protests in the last 7 years in Serbia. We also believe that similar patterns could be found in other post-communist societies where populism is a dominant ideological standpoint, since the cultural matrices are sufficiently similar.

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Press and Media Sample

Danas (2016) May 12th

Danas (2016) May 26th

Danas (2016) September 30th

Informer (2016) May 10th

Informer (2016) May 12th

Informer (2016) May 27th

Informer (2016) June 9th

Informer (2016) 'Special Weekend Double Issue', June 11/12th

Informer (2016) July 19th

Informer (2016) September 30th

TV NI (2016) 'Dnevnik 19', May 11th

TV NI (2016) 'Dnevnik 19', May 12th

TV NI (2016) 'Dnevnik 19', September 30th

TV Pink (2016) 'Nacionalni dnevnik', May 10th

TV Pink (2016) 'Nacionalni dnevnik', May 25th

TV Pink (2016) 'Nacionalni dnevnik', Jun 11th

TV Pink (2016) 'Nacionalni dnevnik', July 18th

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