

# THE STATE AWAKING OR STEALING? REVERSE EFFECTS OF DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN THE CROATIAN PUBLIC SPACE – A CORPUS-ASSISTED STUDY

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**IVANA NARDELLI DEBAČ**

Zagreb

The 2020 parliamentary elections in Croatia were held in an atmosphere marked by fear and anxiety because of negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, and riddled with other unresolved socio-economic and political issues. Therefore, choosing appropriate political slogans that would reflect positive messages of hope, encouragement, and safety to the Croatian people seemed of utmost importance. This paper identifies and discusses political discourse strategies behind the creation of selected billboard slogans used in the pre-election period by different political parties and platforms. Taking into account the results of the elections, the research focuses on the negative reactions to the content of the slogans in the Croatian public space. For this purpose, a corpus of readers' online comments was built and subjected to a computer sentiment analysis. The results show that the majority of citizens in the research sample created negative mental images of political agents and the policies they promote. Further investigation of the reasons for the negative perception and evaluation revealed that the politico-historical and situational contexts play a significant role in shaping the public opinion, specifically in times of crises and threats to public health and wellbeing.

Keywords: political discourse strategies, billboard slogans, pre-election period, sentiment analysis, reverse effects

## INTRODUCTION

According to a well-known Slavic proverbial saying, it is fairly easy to be a general after the battle (i.e., hindsight is always 20/20). The saying naturally applies if we were to turn back the hands of time to discuss the results of the Croatian parliamentary elections held

on 5 July 2020. Although the outcomes of the pre-election campaign in many instances seemed uncertain at the time, after the election day, many would agree that the choices voters had made were rational, logical, and expected. Consequently, two words come to mind – safety and security.

In an atmosphere marked by fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic of COVID-19, and the densely populated Zagreb area additionally affected by the consequences of the terrible earthquake that hit the city and its surroundings on 22 March 2020, the most prominent slogan was *Sigurna Hrvatska* (Safe Croatia) which, together with its variants around the key term of safety, was used by the winning *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* (HDZ; Croatian Democratic Union). As noted by Badurina (2020), no one could have anticipated that the fear of the coronavirus pandemic would enter the narrative scope of contemporary fears, raising “questions about comparisons between the current situation and the wartime memories of life in isolation [...] and in constant fear for one's own life and the lives of one's family members” (Jambrešić Kirin 2020: 157).

Considering the socio-political, cultural, and situational context of the pre-election period, one could assume that fear and uncertainty had a strong influence on the shaping of political messages which the candidates running for Parliament delivered to Croatian citizens. Thus, this paper will identify discourse strategies used in the pre-election period by different political parties and will investigate the effects of their slogans on the electorate. Moreover, we will examine the reasons for the negative assessment of the pre-election slogans by the public, by combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)<sup>1</sup> and the socio-cognitive approach (van Dijk 2008).

Chilton's statements on political discourse (2004: 201–205), describing types of political behaviour and interaction among participants “in the political game”, served as a methodological basis to distinguish discourse strategies used by the Croatian parties in their political communication. According to Fetzer and Weizman (2006), this process involves three categories of participants: politicians, journalists, and citizens-voters, whose social roles are discursively constructed in the media, either implicitly through textual strategies or explicitly through meta-comments. This paper will cover different aspects of textual strategies through selected corpus examples,<sup>2</sup> with special attention given to citizens as

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<sup>1</sup> Critical Discourse Analysis – an interdisciplinary research movement and a qualitative analytical approach to the study of language, with a special emphasis on the relation between language and power. The CDA programme was developed in the late 1980s, with a wave of diverse theoretical and methodological approaches to political discourse, primarily among anglophone authors such as Norman Fairclough (the media and political discourse), Ruth Wodak (the discourse-historical approach), Teun van Dijk (manipulation in political discourse), Paul Chilton (cognitive aspects of political discourse), and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (political-social semiotics). More recently, the subject of analysis has become the political speech of ordinary people in everyday situations (Blommaert 2005).

<sup>2</sup> We built a research corpus of forty online articles and subsequent comments produced in a period from 1 June 2020 to 4 July 2020. The sample of the press media that included pre-election slogans was drawn from printed and online versions of *Jutarnji list*, *Večernji list* and *Novi list*, *Slobodna Dalmacija* and *Dalmacijadanas.hr*, *Net.hr*, *24sata.hr*, *Index.hr* and *Dnevno.hr*.

the recipients of political messages. Notwithstanding the fact that they cannot respond directly to a political text as such, citizens/readers can react indirectly by commenting on parts of the political discourse or by exchanging opinions with other recipients (cf. Fetzer and Weizman 2006). However, the aim of this study is not only to establish citizens' negative criticism of political slogans, but also to examine the functioning of the pre-election discourse on shaping public communication, and to see if the selected slogans could legitimise the parties' political programmes.

Recent studies on the dynamics of political discourse (Coe et al. 2014; Berlin and Fetzer 2015; Jamieson et al. 2017) have shown that in the online space common people feel on a par with politicians, and often express their opinion on the current political agenda, simultaneously using colloquial and sometimes even inappropriate language. In this sense, Berlin and Fetzer (2015) studied the functioning of the so-called follow-ups or comments on various aspects of political discourse. They found enhanced engagement of everyday readers participating in political discussions on online portals and suggested that these activities mostly occur because readers could use fictitious names, allowing them greater freedom to criticise politicians and their rhetoric.

Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014) specifically analysed readers' negative comments of politicians' statements and found that, although negative characterizations could be harmful to the public image, increased involvement of citizens in the media reinforced the overall development of political discourse. Following this idea, when analysing the linguistic data in the article, we lay emphasis on language functioning as a mediator between the social and individual reality, i.e., on recipients of the political message. We compiled 742 online comments and analysed them using the SentiStrength<sup>3</sup> computer programme.

Given that SentiStrength is primarily intended for text analysis in English, the programme had to be adjusted to analyse online comments in Croatian. In addition to a standard lexicon in English, lexicons of Arabic, French, Greek, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Swedish, Italian, and Welsh appear among text documents in the programme. Since Polish, as a Slavic language, is morphologically closest to Croatian among the offered languages, the Polish lexicon was taken as a starting point to mark words with a positive (values between 2 and 5), negative (values between -2 and -5) and neutral (1, -1) sentiment. Instead of Polish words, we inserted Croatian words of the same or similar meaning, and other words from the selected corpus were added together with the appropriate classifier of sentiment. The resulting Croatian lexicon used in the programme comprised 1,100 words marked with positive, negative, or neutral sentiment. The analysis showed that there were 408 comments marked with negative sentiment, which represents 55% of the overall number of comments.

In the following sections, we will present and discuss fourteen different slogans from public billboards, as well as give selected examples of negative reactions to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://sentistrength.wlv.ac.uk/> (accessed 5 February 2021).

## SAFETY VERSUS INSECURITY AND US VERSUS THEM IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

While language is always clearly central  
to political discourse, what shifts is the balance between  
linguistic analysis and political comment. Distinguishing  
the direction of this balance, however, is not always straightforward.  
(Wilson 2001: 400)

In contemporary political discourse, binary terms or oppositions are unavoidable wherever there exists a need to describe the concepts of power and domination, of establishing and maintaining powerful positions in society, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Wieczorek (2013) asserts that opposite relations build mental models of a common language, thus showing beliefs, information, values, and assumptions people share about one another. Binary terms are also used by politicians to legitimise programmes and strategies of their parties, and to delegitimise opponents and their work. In addition to frequently employed pronouns *we* and *they* or *us* and *them*, opposites of various nouns and adjectives could represent contrasted policies as well.

According to studies into the tendencies of political parties in Croatia to diverge from one another and the emergence of new cleavages in the Croatian society (Raos 2015, 2020; Grbeša and Šalaj 2017; Henjak 2017, 2018), a relatively stable bipolar structure of parliamentary competition was shaken by the appearance of new political platforms like *MOST nezavisnih lista* (Bridge of Independent Lists), *Domovinski pokret* (Homeland Movement) and *Živi zid* (Human Shield, lit. Living Wall), specifically during the 2015 and 2016 elections. However, Raos (2020) claims that the 2020 parliamentary elections led to other cleavage processes, and new political actors were consequently distributed to either the left, centrist or right part of the ideological spectrum. According to Henjak (2017), new parties emerged as a result of citizens' reactions to economic problems, and the inability of previous governments to deal with corruption rampant throughout the state.

All these issues emerged as new campaign topics, such as crisis management, public health, and the expected negative effects of the quarantine on economic growth and unemployment (cf. Raos 2020). Building an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, enhanced by people's legitimate fear of getting infected by the still unknown virus, undoubtedly prompted Croatian political parties to adjust their pre-election slogans in order to attract voters with positive messages which would reflect hope and safety, both with regard to health and the economy.

As indicated in the introductory part of the paper, we selected slogans printed on the campaign billboards of political parties and candidates for several reasons. They represent an important pre-election tool, and in addition to political, they have "a strong communication, design and graphic component" (Skoko 2020). One should not underestimate their simple, but effective capability to convey political values and visions, and the power

of persuading voters, especially in parts of the country where the influence of the media and social networks is not so salient.

Let us start by examining two slogans: *Budućnost dočekujemo sigurni* (Let us meet the future in safety) and *Ne bojte se za mirovine* (Do not fear for your pensions). They have a common feature perspective for the future. The first one belongs to the group of slogans around the core term of safety and the leading phrase “Safe Croatia!” as the centre of HDZ’s campaign. Their programme aimed “to ensure the safety of our citizens, their lives and health, but also to deal with the new economic challenges that lie ahead”.<sup>4</sup> The second slogan was part of a number of encouraging messages launched by the Bandić Milan 365 – *Stranka rada i solidarnosti* (Party of Labour and Solidarity), targeting specifically the majority of citizens approaching their retirement age, as can be seen in Figure 1.

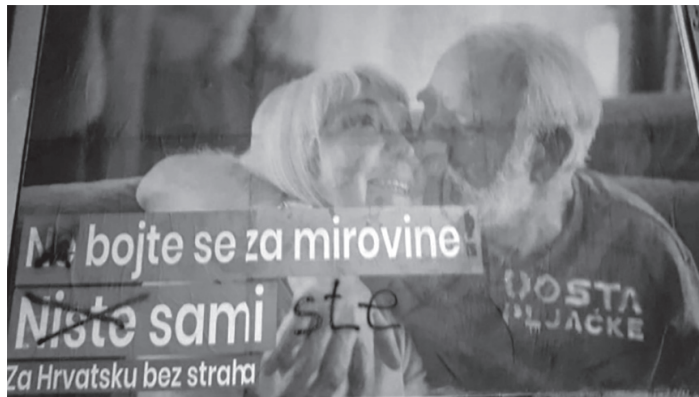


Figure 1. Pre-election billboard slogans by Bandić Milan 365 – Party of Labour and Solidarity<sup>5</sup>

In addition to focusing on future developments, the semantic component of both slogans was created on the principle of opposites – in the first case, the adjective *sigurni* (safe) stands in contrast to everything that voters might deem *unsafe*, *uncertain*, or *insecure*, and in the second example, the use of the negative imperative form of the verb *to fear* is strongly contrasted with the relevant social and psychological context of anxiety and stress that Croatian citizens were constantly facing.

The discourse strategy seen in these examples can be described as a compound of binary conceptualization and modal properties in the service of political interaction. Specifically, since languages have “grammaticalized modal expressions attached to concepts such as: social obligation–compulsion, certainty–doubt [...] and ways in which

<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/hdz-otkrio-novi-slogan-za-izbore-evo-sto-cete-vidati-po-plakativama-diljem-zemlje/> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.sesvete-danas.hr/hrvatska-i-svijet/zagreb/u-zagrebu-unisteno-stotinjak-predizbornih-plakata-galerija-fotografija-11180> (accessed 7 January 2021).

any propositional attitude can be formulated” (Chilton 2004: 202), a political strategy in the Croatian pre-election campaign established “future truths” (author’s comment) by recruiting linguistic mechanisms which would “lead to hearers making mental models that are binary in character” (Chilton 2004: 203).

The two political parties obviously had the same goal – to attract voters by evoking mental models of safe and untroubled future life, and to reassure them that the government would take good care of its citizens. Although the described strategy was clearly directed and well poised, we wanted to explore some of the negative effects in the public space and communication, which were particularly visible from photos and comments in the online media. The photo in Figure 1. was extracted as an example of the strategy of counter effects, where the binarism of positive mental images had been reversed to negative aspects. Thus, the printed text of the slogan *Ne bojte se za mirovine* (Do not fear for your pensions) was transformed using a graffiti spray in a way that *Ne* was crossed out, making the slogan read *Bojte se za mirovine!* (Fear for your pensions!) with an addition of the exclamation mark. The second slogan on the billboard, *Niste sami* (You are not alone) was re-written in a similar manner: the first part of the phrase was crossed, and the 2nd person plural of the Croatian verb *to be* was added behind the adjective, changing the meaning of the message to *Sami ste* (You are alone).

Furthermore, a stencil graffiti was applied on the billboard, with the note *Dosta pljačke* (Enough with the looting), rounding off the unknown author’s statement of resentment towards the pre-election slogans. The bottom slogan *Za Hrvatsku bez straha* (For a Croatia without fear) remained unchanged, but for any onlooker sufficiently interested in analysing the photo, there is a strong contradiction between expecting a state of non-fear and the present warning (enhanced by the imperative nature of the exclamation mark) that citizens should be frightened for their futures and ensuing pensions. Finally, the graffiti plea “to stop the looting” is in correlation with the public opinion research in Croatia, where citizens expressed their discontent with the economic problems in the country, and one cannot disregard the feeling that this message was sent to the majority of the Croatian political establishment, not only to the party in question.

The next example of binary opposition places the two parties in contrasting positions, in line with the well-established political strategy of positive self-representation and negative other description (cf. van Dijk 2015). The HDZ billboard slogan read *Neki će delati, a mi ćemo obnoviti.* (While some talk about working, we will finish the reconstruction.) with a negative allusion to the previously published slogan of the Bandić Milan 365 – Party of Labour and Solidarity *365 delamo!* (We work for 365 days!). This kind of strategy is also rather symptomatic if we consider the situational context in which it occurred. As was indicated at the beginning, the city of Zagreb and its surroundings were hit by a devastating earthquake in March 2020, making reconstruction one of the key issues fuelling multifarious political battles between the parties running in the parliamentary elections. According to van Dijk (2006), it is precisely in times of crisis that a legitimization strategy becomes

necessary to consolidate power, to self-affirm governing parties and their institutions, and to delegitimise potential challengers.

The binary process of legitimization-delegitimization usually focuses on the pronouns *we* and *they*, or *us* and *them*, on “what we did well, and they did not” (van Dijk 2006: 340). Crisis management strategy is often accompanied by various difficult issues such as unemployment, corruption, human rights violations, and the like. The most important role of this ideological division into what is good and what is bad, as Kopytowska (2012) points out, lies in the construction and legitimization of political identities that are always opposed to each other, and fluid. Thus, the goal of HDZ’s slogan was to legitimise their political identity as the leading party who will restore all that was ruined.

From a linguistic point of view, the contrast between the semantic components of the words *delati* (work) and *obnoviti* (reconstruct) was emphasised by the use of a red-coloured comma and a full stop. The redness of these punctuation marks strikes the eye, and whereas the comma after *delati* implies that the opposing party is busy with a drudgery that will take a long time and will not have positive effects, the full stop leaves a convincing impression that the party in charge will finalize the painstaking reconstruction process. The use of the unspecified pronoun *neki* (some) opposed to the authoritative strength of the pronoun *mi* (we) further stresses the slogan author’s intention to portray their political rivals as incompetent.

The same principle of delegitimation and building a negative image of others is applied in the slogans *Sjever se voli prevarom birača* (Loving the north means deceiving the voters) and *Bero nije rješenje* (Bero is not the solution). The first billboard slogan was created by the *Narodna stranka – Reformisti* (People’s Party – Reformists) as a reaction to the slogan *Sjever se voli radom* (Loving the north means working) by the *Hrvatska narodna stranka – liberalni demokrati* (Croatian People’s Party – Liberal Democrats).<sup>6</sup> The message to voters was composed in such a manner as to make a clear distinction between members of one party who remained truthful and members of the other party who are deceitful primarily to their constituency in the northern part of Croatia. A similar strategy can be seen in the slogan *Bero nije rješenje* (Bero is not the solution), especially if we consider the comparable background of splitting one party into several branches. In this case the billboard slogan was designed by the coalition of *Demokrati i Hrvatski laburisti* (Democratic and Labour Party) spearheaded by Mirando Mrsić who was expelled from the *Socijaldemokratska partija* (SDP; Social-Democratic Party) in March 2018.<sup>7</sup> Mrsić continued to run a negative campaign against SDP’s president Davor Bernardić (i.e. Bero) by criticising his qualifications, programme, and achievements (cf. Winberg 2017). This is particularly visible from the

<sup>6</sup> The People’s Party – Reformists was established by the former president of the Croatian People’s Party – Liberal Democrats, Radimir Čačić in September 2014. Since then, Čačić has been in perpetual conflict with the remaining members of the Croatian People’s Party (Nikić Čakar and Raos 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/mirando-mrsic-izbacen-iz-sdp-a-bernardic-u-završnom-govoru-nadam-se-da-je-ovo-zadnji-put-da-sdp-nekoga-izbacuje-iz-stranke-7166355> (accessed 12 January 2021).

simple political expression where he declares that *Bero* is not the solution, without referring to him by his full name but by mockingly using his nickname instead.

This type of pre-election strategy can also be described as an *ad hominem* attack of underestimating someone's character, directed specifically at an individual (cf. Winberg 2017). The use of *ad hominem* arguments does not represent a novelty when campaigning, and as Kišiček (2013: 12) points out: "Humiliating, discrediting one's political opponent is the most frequent rhetorical strategy in Croatian political discourse". Thus, by using *Bero* on the campaign billboard, the author's intention was to present the SDP president as a irrelevant politician, and to tarnish his political image.

In the previous sections we have seen several political strategies mostly based on binary models of positive self-representation and negative depicting of the opponents. Now we turn to how the Croatian public responded to such political advertising. As could be seen from Figure 1, some citizens expressed their negative reactions by graffitiing over the slogans directly on the billboards, and we will present several more samples of similar unnamed written outcries. Other reactions refer to online comments collected during the period of the campaign for the Croatian parliamentary elections in 2020. These comments were subjected to a computer SentiStrength analysis, which helped in determining positive, negative, and neutral reader attitudes toward the slogans.

The reason for the choice of an internet-related corpus lies in the fact that media websites are primarily characterised by interactivity, nonlinearity, connectivity, immediacy, and originality (cf. Benković and Balabanić 2010). According to Bebić (2011: 30), the emergence of the online media "as a tool of political communication encourages research and debate on the potential of the Internet in election campaigns". Recent studies (Nithyanand et al. 2017) also show that online user comments are useful in the analysis of the pre-election discourse because social media networks represent a valuable source of data for discourse analysts. Today, most printed newspapers are published in an online format as well, which means that traditional models of editing materials for publication are adapted to the new media. We should point out yet another important characteristic of web portals, and that is encouraging the public to join all sorts of public debates and writing comments on the published articles.

As a representative sample, we extracted the following five online comments,<sup>8</sup> which were marked as having a negative sentiment, with values ranging from -2 to -4:

(1) *Bolje pristaje Sigurna Korupcija* (Safe Corruption fits better)

(2) *Neš ti slogana i programa, njihov slogan može biti "Samo mi imamo pravo da vas pljačkamo, konkurenciju ne trpimo"* (A pitiful slogan and programme, their slogan could be "Only we have the right to rob you, we don't tolerate competition")

<sup>8</sup>Sources: <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/hdz-otkrio-novi-slogan-za-izbore-evo-sto-cete-vidati-po-plakati-tima-diljem-zemlje/>; <https://www.24sata.hr/news/zagreb-plakati-preplavili-grad-697763/komentari>; <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/plakati-bivseg-sdpovog-ministra-bero-nije-rjesenje-hdz-je-unistenje/2189762.aspx> (accessed 14 January 2021).



(3) *Umjesto za izbore novce su mogli iskoristiti protiv korone i pomoći potresenom Zagrebu. Možda je to nekom palo na pamet pa je anemičar odlučio potrošiti novce na izbore i političke stranke, a ne na korisne stvari i poslove.* (Instead of spending money for the elections, they could have used it to fight the coronavirus and to help the quake-stricken Zagreb. Perhaps it occurred to someone, so the anaemic one decided to spend the money on the elections and political parties rather than on useful stuff and jobs.)

(4) *Kad nemaš nikakvo rješenje onda pluj po drugom da uzvisiš sebe. Kontraproduktivno* (When you have no solution, just spew at others to elevate yourself. Counterproductive.)

(5) *Iako smatram da "Bero nije rješenje" Miranda isto tako nije. Bezobrazni plakat koji drugog vrijedja da bi sebe uzdigaa!? Tako rade samo najgori ljudi u politici.* (Although I believe that "Bero is not the solution", neither is Miranda. A rude poster insulting someone else to elevate oneself!? This is what only the worst people in politics do.)

According to van Dijk (2016), while reading the newspapers or online articles, people create mental models of the political elites and parties based on general, sociocultural knowledge about politics, policies, and governments. "By the explicit and persuasive expression of underlying attitudes and ideologies", readers will form or reinforce their own negative opinions and attitudes towards specific policies and agendas, or in other words, they will develop personal mental models (van Dijk 2016: 23). Thus, the examination of the negative comments (1)–(5) shows that readers' expressions of negative opinions about the leading and other competing parties are based largely on their politico-historical knowledge of the last thirty years of Croatian history. The commenters' mental models of political structures mostly evoke corruptive practices and stealing money from those in need, and despite the ambitious and carefully planned discourse strategies anchored in promises of safe and untroubled future life, it will probably take many years until Croatian citizens gain the necessary trust in their political leadership. As we can see from example (3), the situational context played an important role in shaping the public opinion on the necessity of pre-election campaigns. The citizens were more worried about the ways in which public funds would be spent in critical times of the coronavirus pandemic, and in the local context, on how the City of Zagreb and its surroundings would recover from the consequences of the devastating earthquake, so that the multitude of billboard slogans in the public space seemed somehow redundant and their messages annoying for a part of the electorate.

Moreover, when we go deeper into what might have sparked negative online comments, it seems that the readers mostly resented politicians' polarizing strategy between "positive US (ingroup) and negative THEM (outgroup)" (van Dijk 2016: 17). Although negative campaigning has always been part of modern election campaigns, in public opinion polls respondents usually express disapproval of negative portrayal of opposing candidates (cf. Lakoff and Sachiko 2005). This is explained by the fact that in most cases people are sceptical of the idea of tarnishing someone's reputation in public. However, in the case of the Croatian parliamentary elections, voters were also very sensitive about the reliability of the source of information, given the fact that they had lost confidence in the ethical standards of politicians who were attacking their opponents.

In this section, the positive us – negative them tactics was examined through examples of one party or candidate versus another party/ies or candidate/s, and in the next section we will review other discourse strategies, when politicians try to appeal to voters by presenting themselves as being in the same boat as the common people, and the state is either hostile or friendly, depending on the point of view of the observer.

## WHEN STRATEGIC REASONING BECOMES METAPHORICAL, AND EMOTIONS POLITICALLY RELEVANT

In political discourse metaphors are often not just embellishments  
of literal propositions, but modes of reasoning about, for example, the future  
and about policies.  
(Chilton 2004: 203)

In pre-election campaigns, political parties and their candidates use metaphorical representations as a practical means of bringing diverse political issues closer to voters, as well as expressing their political views. The socio-cognitive approach to metaphor is crucial to CDA research interests, and a similar method will be applied when analysing corpus examples of slogans below. An important feature of metaphorical expressions is that we imperceptibly and successfully adopt them and unquestioningly accept them as general facts as we develop; an instance of such a metaphor is *Life is a journey* (cf. Chilton and Lakoff 1995). In other words, metaphors represent a way of understanding one experience through another, so they must always be recognizable.

One frequent metaphorical representations in political discourse is when a state is referred to as a person. In this representation, it has a body and a personality, and – as we all know – a person can grow, develop, deteriorate, be healthy or sick and so on (Chilton and Lakoff 1995). For this analysis, we have selected two metaphorical representations of the Croatian state in the pre-election billboard slogans: *Hrvatska se budi!* (Croatia is awaking!) by the political platform *MOST nezavisnih lista* (Bridge of Independent Lists) and *Država van iz naših novčanika* (Get the state out of our wallets) by the coalition of parties *Stranka s Imenom i Prezimenom, Pametno, FOKUS* (Party with a Name and a Surname, Intelligently, FOCUS).<sup>9</sup>

“MOST joined political life on the national level, trying to maintain a position of an outsider, of an agent who does not belong to the field, or at least does not accept the old, inefficient and hypocritical rule” (Falski 2019: 36). Taking the same approach, and with fresh impetus from their success in the parliamentary elections of 2015, they retained their strategy of opposing old politics and policies, and created a political programme with the goal of “establishing a system where corruption is unprecedented, instead of the

<sup>9</sup> Source: <https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/#/app/parlament-2020> (accessed 5 January 2021).

current system where it drives everything”<sup>10</sup> Thus, in their vision, Croatia epitomizes its each and every citizen who, just like in the film *Matrix*, has been forced to sleep (literally and figuratively) without realizing that the system has been oppressing him/her, and is now awaking to fight for a righteous and orderly state. The power of this metaphorical representation is that it allows the running party to introduce important political issues by applying familiar concepts and presenting themselves as “right thinking” (Charteris-Black 2011: 36).

The slogan “Croatia is awaking” also had a pragmatic and a strategic function, since its creators highlighted only the positive and desirable features of the political agenda through the conceptual image of *the awaking* (cf. Štrkalj Despot 2016). On the other hand, some researchers (Marot Kiš and Palašić 2012) indicate that it is more appropriate to describe the primary function of a metaphor in political discourse as deceptive, because many politicians produce catchy slogans to conceal the actual state of affairs, whilst designing an illusion that they have control over the situation. In this sense, the authors of the other slogan “Get the state out of our wallets” used quite the opposite technique, representing the social situation so that it appears as close to reality as possible and in order to depict the Croatian state as the enemy of its citizens, stealing their money.



Figure 2. Pre-election billboard slogans by *Stranka s Imenom i Prezimenom*, *Pametno*, *FOKUS*<sup>11</sup>

According to Chilton and Lakoff (1995) metaphors are not just mere words, they are concepts that significantly represent our reality. In reality, as well as in political discourse, the strategies of legitimization and delegitimization are based on the usual divisions between *us* and *them*, and between *good* and *evil*, and in this process, metaphors serve as an ideal means of emphasizing political opposites. Nevertheless, in the “wallet slogan”,

<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://hrvatskasebudi.com/program/> (accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/malo-smo-analizirali-kakvu-nam-sutrasnjicu-s-pred-izbornih-plakata-nude-stranke-uznemirujuca-je-a-pomalo-i-strasi/> (accessed 15 January 2021).

antagonism is not directed at other states, as is commonly the case in contemporary political discourses, but the state itself is portrayed as hostile towards its citizens. The coalition of parties which uses this idea promotes its political agenda and tax policy as citizen-friendly. This type of “metaphorical scenario” (Musolff 2020: 289) helps readers to integrate the difficult concept of finances into a “frame” of familiar experience and the desirable prospect of having a wallet full of banknotes, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The binarism of *financing citizens / stealing from citizens* remained crucial throughout the campaign, which is particularly visible in public reactions to the slogan *Hrvatska se voli radom* (Loving Croatia means working).



Figures 3. and 4. Pre-election billboard slogans by the Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats<sup>12</sup>

Although the discourse strategy used in the creation of this slogan was based on evoking the *specific* emotion that has political relevance (Chilton 2004: 204), judging from the written reactions of unnamed authors who graffitied the billboards, the effect was the very opposite. Stressing that Croatian working people feel love for their country was not viewed favourably by some of the citizens; rather they were annoyed and irritated by the slogan. Figure 3 shows a graffito proposing that “love for the Croatian people should be shown by giving them better salaries”; and in Figure 4, the word *radom* (“working”) was changed to *krađom* (“stealing”) suggesting political cynicism behind the slogan’s original message. In both cases, citizens’ discontent with the socio-economic situation in the country is evident, as well as their perception of the existence of corruption sponsored by the state.

Another example of “affective-discursive practices” (Breeze 2019: 27) and of “activating emotion-laden and value-laden schematic concepts and concomitant emotions” (Chilton 2017: 592) is present in the slogan *Zato što svoje volim* (Because I love my own) by the *Domovinski pokret* party (Homeland Movement). They aimed at “including all those

<sup>12</sup> Sources: <https://www.dnevno.hr/izbori-2020/foto-krenuo-rat-predizbornim-plakatima-neki-ce-delati-a-mi-cemo-obnoviti-1480993/>; <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/politika/marketinski-strucnjaci-za-slobodnu-analiziraju-izborne-plakate-za-sada-im-se-najvise-svida-hdz-ovo-rjesenje-izgleda-primjereno-trenutku-1026746> (accessed 18 January 2021).

who care about the well-being of the Croatian Homeland” and emphasised that “the only reliable coalition partner for their Movement will always be the Croatian people”.<sup>13</sup> It is precisely in the populist context, as Breeze (2019) asserts, that affective/emotive aspects of communication take on particular importance, and the authors of this slogan employed the politically relevant emotion of love towards one’s homeland and the nation to attract voters. The power of this ideological use of language lies in the fact that it engages citizens’ deepest feelings towards the state they consider their own, which means fighting for common interest.

A similar strategy of employing powerful but opposite feelings towards a state that tends to be deceitful to its people is evident in the slogan *Za birače koji se ne daju zajebavati!* (For voters who don’t let others fuck around with them!) by the Independent List of Stipe Petrina.<sup>14</sup> According to Cavazza and Guidetti (2014) appropriate use of swear words brings politicians closer to people because it is perceived as informal use of language. Consequently, the f-word in the slogan was used as a rhetorical tool “by the source in order to intensify the discourse, and to define an informal and friendly relationship with the receiver, thus reinforcing social connections” (Cavazza and Guidetti 2014: 538). Furthermore, the message of the slogan was to persuade the voters that the party in question sides with the people and against the state stealing from its citizens (the additional slogan on the billboard was “Enough with the looting”).<sup>15</sup> The party also emphasised its policy-oriented approach with a reduced ideological charge, and with a readiness to face new challenges at the national level. The criticism of the governing system was based on issues related to the management of economic resources and on issues of general interest, such as reducing unemployment, economic growth, etc. (cf. Čular 2004).

However, readers’ reactions to these slogans were negative, and a representative sample of online comments<sup>16</sup> below contains the sentiment scale ranging in values from -3 to -5:

(6) *Kad se Hrvatska konačno probudi, u njoj će ovakvi likovi moći prosipati svoje mudrolije samo u lokalnoj birtiji.* (When Croatia finally wakes up, such characters will only be able to dispense their pontification in a local pub.)

(7) *Drzavu su vec ukrali, sad krađu narod* (They have already stolen the state, now they are stealing from the people)

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://www.domovinski-pokret.hr/> (accessed 11 January 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Stipe Petrina is the mayor of the Primošten municipality, who, in his 2020 pre-election programme, offered to apply the successful model of the local self-government unit to the whole of the Republic of Croatia (Source: <https://stipepetrina.com/>, accessed 19 January 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/izbori/vijesti/predizborna-kampanja-stipe-petrine-ponovno-izaziva-paznju-pogledajte-sto-porucuje-s-plakata-15004164> (accessed 19 January 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Sources: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/anketa-domovinski-pokret-vs-most-ciji-vam-je-slogan-bolji-1410048/komentari>; <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ovo-su-najdebljnije-reklame-u-kampanji/219462.5.aspx>; [https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/skoro-predstavio-svoj-program-zato-sto-svoje-volim/2189287.aspx?index\\_ref=read\\_more\\_d](https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/skoro-predstavio-svoj-program-zato-sto-svoje-volim/2189287.aspx?index_ref=read_more_d); <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/nacelnik-primostena-ovim-plakatom-pozvao-svoje-birace-na-izbore/2192456.aspx> (accessed 20 January 2021).

(8) *Hrvatska se voli radom; vi je volite, mi ćemo ju krasti!* (Loving Croatia means working; you keep loving Croatia, while we keep robbing it!)

(9) *ništa ne obećavamo i to ispunjavamo – stranka istine* (We promise nothing, and we keep this promise – the Party of the Truth)

(10) *Već viđeno u ranim godinama nezrele nam Hrvatske. Političari profiteri, takozvani poduzetnici, koji svoje vole obmanjivati najviše sve zbog vlastite koristi, na štetu radnika i umirovljenika u domovini.* (This has already been seen in the early years of our immature Croatia. Profiteering politicians, the so-called entrepreneurs who like to deceive people for their own profit, to the detriment of workers and pensioners in the homeland.)

(11) *Pitajte ga što ima sada a što je imao kada je došao za načelnika! Lako je srat... pizditi i biti serif* (Ask him what he has now, and what he used to have when he became mayor! It's easy to bullshit...be pissed off and be a sheriff)

(12) *da da, a ti jadan posten, neokrunjeni kralj vec 20 god* (yeah yeah, and you're a poor honest soul, an uncrowned king for 20 years already)

The attitude to slogans promoting love for one's country displayed in these comments is similar to the attitude expressed on graffitied billboards, where the key term of *work* was contrasted with the notions of *robbing*, *stealing*, or *looting*. Specifically, the metaphorical image of the Croatian state as a being who is awaking, or an entity whose citizens breathe life into, was met with ironic distrust and a “switch of evaluation” (Partington 2007: 1565) from a favourable mental model of a country with diligent people to an unfavourable representation of a robbed nation.

Readers' ironic and sarcastic observations are particularly recognizable in examples (6), (8) and (12), where evaluation reversals show that a part of the Croatian electorate has no confidence in or appreciation for the words and actions of party representatives. The reversal effect is extended to the strategy aiming to utilise the popular US/THEM opposition (i.e., the state vs. citizens), again through “echoic sarcasm” (Partington 2007: 1567) visible in example (9), when a commenter refers to “the Party of the Truth”, which signals that s/he does not believe that politicians will keep their promises such as cutting taxes. Indignation and resentment toward pre-election messages are amplified to such a degree that in a number of comments, commenters use vulgar and inappropriate expressions (in this section this happens in example (11)).

According to Malenica's research (2007), low trustworthiness rating of newly established parties, especially after the year 2000, can be explained by the fact that they were generally perceived as groups of citizens who joined parties or political platforms solely to serve their own interests. Therefore, voters do not recognise them as sufficiently professional and politically competent to deal with huge economic and social challenges.

Twenty years later, it seems that criticism for “unrealistic” political messages has grown so high that the electorate has become openly hostile and suspicious of a party's motives, even if they verbally express their concern for the nation's wellbeing and address the public with categorical statements based on strong sentiments for the country and their people.

This affective dimension of the pre-election discourse will be discussed below with regard to the use of a specific dialect or language variety, as well as the use of geographical names.

## LABOURING THE RIGHT NAME

Recent studies of pre-election rhetoric (Mustapić and Hrستیć 2016) have shown that Croatian political candidates in most cases declare themselves as not belonging to political elites and as being consistent in representing the demands of the people. Simultaneously, they adapt these demands, with varying success, to the socio-political, economic, and cultural context in which the campaign is taking place, endeavouring to convey political messages which are as authentic as possible. In this section, we will outline some of their attempts of achieving linguistic and patriotic credibility through their pre-election slogans, and look into the possible causes of their negative reception by online readers.

The first example refers to the slogan *365 delamo!* (We work for 365 days!) by the Party of Labour and Solidarity, and the second one was created by The Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS-DDI)<sup>17</sup> and published in Italian as *Sempre Avanti* (Always Forward). Both slogans represent strategic effort of the respective political parties/groups to express solidarity and affinity with particular parts of the electoral body “by choosing to speak one language rather than another, choosing a regional accent, or accent associated with a social class” (Chilton 2004: 201).

From the socio-cognitive perspective, slogans can also be viewed as *context models* – the term was introduced by van Dijk (2008: 71–74), who analysed various types of addresses by British politicians and observed how they adapt their text and talk to communicative events or situations. For instance, standard language and accent was used in the Parliament, and in situations during election campaigns, an informal variant served to bring politicians closer to their constituency. The two Croatian examples work according to similar principles. In the slogan *365 delamo!*, the verb form *delamo* (we work), which belongs to the Kajkavian dialect and to the local Zagreb vernacular, was purposefully used instead of the standard Croatian form *radimo* (we work) to attract population from the vast area of Zagreb and the surrounding towns and villages. Moreover, this dialectal version of one of the most common verbs in many languages has a stronger semantic impact, around which a strategic context model is carefully built – a vivid image of a laborious group of dedicated individuals who work hard every day to keep the country prosperous and its institutions operative. *Delamo* in the first-person plural, as the pronoun of solidarity, manifests the politicians’ intention to declare themselves united and sharing the same pressures as the rest of Croatian citizens. Overall, the general idea of the slogan indicates the still present perception of labour or work as the essential part of our lives, or in the

<sup>17</sup> *Istarski demokratski sabor – Dieta democratica istriana* is a Croatian political party primarily operating in the Istria County (source: <https://www.ids-ddi.com/program/istra/>, accessed 21 January 2021).

words of Bagarić (2020: 111), “work is still present as a total social fact although it no longer guarantees a stable place in the world and historical progress [...] work becomes a dispersive phenomenon that pervades selfhood and all aspects of life”.

The second slogan *Sempre Avanti*, emphasising that the County of Istria is always one-step ahead compared to the remaining Croatian counties, was obviously directed only to the bilingual (Croatian-Italian) electoral body in Istria. Thus, the linguistic choice of an old Italian motto and later a war slogan on posters<sup>18</sup> revealed the IDS-DDI party's programmatic goal to maintain Istria as a separate region and emphasise decentralization of Croatia as an absolute prerequisite for any economic progress.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of highlighting smaller territorial units within a sovereign state was also used in the following two slogans: *Poštenim ljudima dovoljno je ime, a moje je Dalmacija* (To honest people, the name suffices, and mine is Dalmatia) and *Samo jedno ime je slavno, Slavonija* (Only one name is famous, Slavonia) by the coalition of parties *Stranka s Imenom i Prezimenom, Pametno, FOKUS* (The Party with a Name and a Surname, Intelligently, FOCUS). The discourse strategy behind these examples is based primarily on human spatial cognition and the notion that “territoriality is an intrinsic part of the socio-political instinct” (Chilton 2004: 203).

According to Gold (2019), territoriality as a concept has three elementary functions: it serves as a form of communication, a social memory, and to express difference. Dalmatia and Slavonia, in this sense, represent territories associated with demarcated spaces from which their inhabitants derive identity and a sense of belonging (cf. Gold 2019). Furthermore, the text of the slogan with the toponym *Dalmatia* emphasises regional differences between Croatian citizens as well as their personal characteristics, implying that only honest people value the programme ideas of the party in question. In the case of their slogan for Slavonia, it seeks to evoke particular social memory in the minds of Slavonia-born citizens or those who still live in the region, related to the glorious days of the past, when “Slavonia in the Middle Ages represented a historical force, which was reflected in the process of it being suitably named in all the relevant languages” (Zett 2013: 495).

Nevertheless, as evidenced from selected online comments,<sup>20</sup> some of the citizens' reactions contrasted with the belief that these pre-election messages would be well accepted, and the comments in this representative sample were marked with negative sentiments of -3 and -4:

<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/15696> (accessed 14 January 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/izbori/vijesti/ids-kritizirao-aktere-kampanje-cim-izbori-zavrse-istra-vise-nije-bitna-15005921> (accessed 25 January 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.24sata.hr/news/zagreb-plakati-preplavili-grad-697763>; <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/ids-donio-odluku-na-izbore-idu-s-restart-koalicijom-1407895/komentari>; <https://www.dalmacijadanas.hr/misteriozni-plakati-osvanuli-po-splitu-moje-ime-je-dalmacija/>; <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/da-je-kampanja-pocela-najbolje-se-vidi-po-ovom-prizoru-na-prometnicama-1406305/komentari> (accessed 27 January 2021).



(13) *365 dana mita i korupcije* (365 days of bribery and corruption)

(14) *Autonomna pokrajina Istra. Strašno. Građani Hrvatske budite pametni, dok ovi drogeraši i lopovi Istre ne odu s vlasti.* (The autonomous province of Istria. Horrible. Citizens of Croatia, be sensible until these drug addicts and thieves from Istria leave their offices.)

(15) *E onda bi ispalo da se nezna tko pljacka i krade. Ali narod znade svi LOPOVI LOPINE imaju ime i (bezime) prezime.* (And this would mean that nobody knows who is doing the robbing and stealing. But the people know that all THIEVES CROOKS have a name and a (no-name) surname.)

(16) *Obnavljanje autonomaških tendencija može biti jako štetno za jedinstvo Hrvatskog naroda* (Restoring autonomous tendencies can be very harmful to the unity of the Croatian people.)

The analysed comments reveal a rather low level of reader confidence in politicians' intentions to present the concerns of their parties as associated with the everyday concerns of the Croatian people. There is still a prevalent opinion that most politicians are corrupt and incompetent at establishing a functional system for the protection of social and economic rights. We also noted readers' resentment towards questionable slogan messages claiming that the "right" name is sufficient for successful leadership of the country. Moreover, a number of comments exhibit criticism and suspicion as to the claims that some Croatian regions should be more exclusive than others. This is yet another adverse effect of the popular belief that regions are being exploited by the central government authorities, and that they are economically and socially underdeveloped compared to the state as a whole. However, according to Maldini (2014), regional policy in Croatia has proved inconsistent and inefficient, and consequently, this was reflected in the process of regionalization which did not achieve uniform regional development, but actually contributed to the increase of socio-economic and demographic regional disparities.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study focused on a specific segment of political advertising in the 2020 Croatian parliamentary election campaign – pre-election billboard slogans. Analysing the content of a sample of the slogans, we identified and interpreted political discourse strategies which were employed. They were primarily based on binary oppositions and modal properties, metaphorical conceptualizations, stimulating emotional centres in the brain, indexicality and spatial cognition. Besides attracting voters, the overall goal of slogan strategies was to legitimise party programmes and to delegitimise rival candidates and their agendas.

However, our analysis of public reactions to the slogans indicated that Croatian citizens generally created negative mental models of political structures and their underlying policies. This is particularly evident in readers' online comments, which point to numer-

ous problems in the socio-political and economic situation, for which the citizens blame the entire political establishment that subordinated the welfare of the state to their own interests.

The aim of the study was to examine the influence of pre-election strategies on public communication. We found that the majority of readers strongly resented polarizing strategies of delegitimation and had a low level of trust in politicians' intentions. The influence of negative campaigning is particularly visible in online discourse, where citizens used inappropriate remarks and vulgar expressions. Overall, the study shows that the situational context greatly shaped the public opinion, not only throughout the summer campaign, but also for a much longer period of anxiety and insecurity, mainly caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the consequences of the March 2020 earthquake.

At the time of writing, Zagreb and the Sisak-Moslavina County have been facing the aftermath of yet another series of earthquakes, the strongest of which hit the area at the end of 2020. The atmosphere in the first quarter of 2021 has additionally been burdened by the fearful expectation of the "third wave" of the coronavirus epidemic sweeping the country and causing new problems in everyday life. It seems that the strategy of conveying positive messages, especially those based on the key concept of safety, has survived and has been carried forward in various forms. Let us just, at the end, single out one new slogan, "Safe stay in Croatia", advertising Croatia as a safe destination for the upcoming tourist season. With this in mind, we hope that the reflections and findings discussed here will be a starting point for future studies, possibly taking a discourse-historical approach to investigate in more detail the application and development of the strategy of "safety" on a larger scale.

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## DRŽAVA KOJA SE BUDI ILI KOJA KRADE? ISPITIVANJE SUPROTNIH UČINAKA DISKURSNIH STRATEGIJA NA KORPUSNIM PRIMJERIMA U HRVATSKOM JAVNOM PROSTORU

Parlamentarni izbori u Hrvatskoj 2020. godine odvijali su se u okruženju opterećenom strahom i tjeskobom zbog negativnih učinaka pandemije koronavirusa te usred drugih neriješenih društveno-gospodarskih i političkih pitanja. Stoga je bilo izuzetno važno odabrati prikladne političke slogane koji bi hrvatskom narodu prenosili pozitivne poruke nade, ohrabrenja i sigurnosti. U radu se raspravlja o strategijama političkoga diskursa u okviru kojih su nastali izabrani slogani na reklamnim panoima i kojima su se u predizborno doba služile razne političke stranke i platforme. Uzimajući u obzir da su rezultati izbora već poznati, istraživanje je usmjereno na negativne reakcije u vezi teme i sadržaja slogana u hrvatskom javnom prostoru. Za potrebe rada sastavljen je korpus mrežnih komentara čitatelja, koji je zatim podvrgnut računalnom programu analize sentimentata. Rezultati su pokazali da je većina građana u istraživačkom uzorku stvorila negativne predodžbe o djelovanju političara i programima koje promiču. Daljnje ispitivanje uzroka njihove negativne percepcije i procjene otkrilo je da političko-povijesni i situacijski kontekst imaju značajnu ulogu u oblikovanju javnog mnijenja, posebice u vrijeme kriza i prijetnji za zdravlje i opću dobrobit.

Ključne riječi: strategije političkoga diskursa, slogani, predizborno razdoblje, analiza sentimentata, suprotni učinci