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DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE POLITICS OF NOISE: CO-OPTATION AND NARRATIVE FLOODING IN SERBIAN PROTESTS

ABSTRACT

Contemporary electoral autocracies increasingly rely on information abundance rather than censorship to maintain control. This article explores how infotainment has emerged as a key battleground in Serbia's protest politics (2024–2025), serving both as a tool of resistance and as a mechanism of soft authoritarian control. Utilizing a combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of six media outlets, three pro-government (*B92*, *Informer*, *Pink*) and three independent (*Danas*, *Južne Vesti*, *N1*), the study traces how the regime constructed a divisive discourse by splitting students into two opposing camps: "ćaci" (a viral misspelling co-opted to represent innocent non-political youth) and "blockaders" (a pejorative for those protesting). The analysis reveals a structural asymmetry: while pro-government outlets aggressively deployed emotive frames and mockery (labeling student protesters as "fascists" or "foreign agents"), independent media were relegated to a reactive role, attempting to debunk these narratives. This discursive aggression is identified as a calculated prelude to the physical violence observed since the summer of 2025. Ultimately, the study concludes that modern authoritarianism thrives not by hiding the truth, but by burying it under layers of irony and manufactured conflict.

KEYWORDS

Digital
Authoritarianism,
Soft-Censorship,
Media Capture,
Co-optation, Framing

Introduction

Building upon the institutional vulnerabilities of Serbia's transition period, the SNS's (Serbian Progressive Party/*Srpska Napredna Stranka*) solidification of power in 2014, catalyzed a shift from democracy to electoral autocracy, as noted by the country's downgrading in global indices (Papada et al., 2023: 40). However, a decade later, the regime is a resilient electoral autocracy: one that retains the formal shell of democratic institutions while systematically hollowing out their substance.

Bieber (2018) and Castaldo and Pinna (2018) pointed out early in the transition that this version of competitive or electoral authoritarianism differs from that of the 1990s, although some actors remain the same. The incumbent authorities do not want to risk isolation (*ibid.*) and draw legitimacy from foreign investments and the stability they allegedly provide to the population (Šterić, 2021). Nevertheless, the consensus is that the media, along with the extraction of public funds for personal gain, is a particularly important pillar supporting the fragile balance of external and internal legitimacy in an autocracy that holds elections (Pavlović, 2019; Castaldo, 2020).

In this sense, democratic backsliding in Serbia is not unique. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) compared autocratisation in 182 countries from 1900 to 2017 and concluded that contemporary autocracies are, on average, far less violent than their historical counterparts. Modern autocrats combine soft censorship and institutional co-optation that, in most cases, make violence redundant (Schneider and Maerz, 2017: 225–227). However, this is precisely what makes autocracies today more flexible and durable (*ibid.*). Simply put, economic advancements (Maerz et al., 2020) and access to citizens' data (Keremoğlu and Weidmann, 2020), paired with constant propaganda and soft public service co-optation (Heydemann and Leenders, 2011: 650–651; Maerz and Schneider, 2021), sustain contemporary autocracies through several election cycles, scandals, and even months-long protests.

Nevertheless, the ongoing student-led protests in Serbia, which began in November 2024, pose a new threat to the ruling party. This article discusses the ruling party's media response to this challenge through qualitative and quantitative content analysis of over 4,000 articles on the protests across six outlets, including three propaganda mouthpieces (*B92*, *Informer*, *Pink*) and three independent outlets (*Danas*, *Južne Vesti*, *NI*) for balance.

Although the 2024–2025 protests were not the first major continuous protests in Serbia to turn into movements, they were the first to be youth-led. Groups of mostly working adults led other protests and focused on specific issues, like “*Ne Davimo Beograd*” against the Belgrade Waterfront project (Wielan, 2019) or the “1 in 5 million” movement (Pešić and Petrović, 2020), against violence towards opposition parties. Although each of these protests raised awareness of widespread corruption and misuse of authority, SNS successfully diverted attention from them through media capture, convincing the rest of the country that the protests were about a single city or person.

However, this wave of protests has now surpassed all previous ones in terms of longevity and citizen engagement. Attendance at some events was even higher than on the 5th of October 2000, when Milošević was toppled (Maksimović and Popović, 2025). Therefore, the ruling party in Serbia is now employing new tactics to maintain its legitimacy, which will be discussed in this article: mimicking and co-opting protesters' language. Humor has always been intrinsic to resistance in Serbia (Popović, 2015; Petrović, 2015), but what happens when an autocratic regime tries to be funny?

Humor and wordplay play a significant role in the ongoing student protests in Serbia: (1) to subvert and ridicule political authority, (2) in constructing collective identity, and (3) in fostering solidarity both within the student community and across broader societal divides (Lalić-Krstin and Silaški, 2025: 142). Moreover, during these protests, humor was also used to establish symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups: those who participate in the wordplay and those who are its targets (*ibid.*: 150). As such, student memes and discourse became a threat to the incumbents for two overlapping reasons: they dismantled the regime's ideological claim to the future, and they disrupted its strategic use of humor to mask authoritarian control.

First, the student resistance directly contradicted the SNS's primary legitimacy narrative. For over a decade, the ruling party has campaigned on slogans such as "For Our Children" and "For the Future" (Obradović and Vujović, 2022; Bogićević, 2025: 56), framing itself as the sole guarantor of a better future for the country's youth (Nedeljković, 2022). Consequently, student mobilization constituted more than a policy disagreement; it represented a fundamental rupture in the regime's hegemonic claim to be the sole architect of the nation's future.

Second, the students' "meme war" disrupted the SNS's strategy of using humor to mask control. For example, during the 2022 election campaign, the president, Aleksandar Vučić, was in an infamous commercial which attempted to reframe his authoritarian hyper-visibility as benevolent care. The joke was that he is everywhere, so much so that he might step out of the fridge, which he does in the commercial, and then proceeds to talk about all the great things he plans to do for young couples. (Nedeljković, 2022: 32–35). However, when the student counter-memes stripped away this relatable facade, the regime faced a tactical dilemma. Standard instruments of repression, such as economic pressure (Freedom House, 2022) and smear campaigns (Vladislavljević et al., 2019), prove ineffective against students; verbally abusing young adults risks alienating the public and shattering the apathy that sustains the regime. Furthermore, because electoral autocracies rely on external legitimacy (Bieber, 2018), the state cannot resort to mass violence against youth without jeopardizing its standing.

Theoretically, this article connects the proliferation of infotainment in post-Yugoslav media (Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo, 2020) with the adaptive strategies of third-wave autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Infotainment, as a combination of information and entertainment in news production, is becoming increasingly popular in online media; however, there are concerns that reducing news to actors and punchlines can have negative implications for democracy by sensationalizing serious topics (Mellado et al., 2023). However, in non-democratic societies, humor is an important tool to disseminate information (Smirnova, 2014), especially when the media is already captured (Dragomir, 2018; Castaldo and Pinna, 2018), and groups opposing the incumbents cannot reach the masses through traditional media. Therefore, I argue that the Serbian regime engages in a specific form of discursive co-optation: rather than simply censoring criticism, the state appropriates the language of the protests, effectively neutralizing it through irony and re-contextualization.

Meme War: Context

The catalyst for the 2024–2025 protests was the tragic collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy on November 1st, which killed 16 people. Initial demands for accountability quickly escalated into university occupations and widespread blockades by mid-December (Gec, 2024). Tensions peaked when President Vučić dismissed record-breaking turnout, saying that the crowd was so small it did not even require the use of “Cobra” special forces to “throw [students] around” (Bender, 2025). This remark triggered the first wave of student memes, framing the regime’s threat as absurd rather than frightening.

However, the official beginning of the meme war is late January 2025, when a pro-regime graffiti appeared, intended to read “Students [back] to school” (*Đaci u školu*), which contained a spelling error, reading “Ćaci” instead of “Đaci.” In Serbian, changing “Đ” to “Ć” turns the word into complete nonsense. Lalić-Krstin and Silaški (2025) note that students immediately weaponized this error, adopting “Ćaci” as a symbol of the regime’s illiteracy and incompetence. For Lalić-Krstin and Silaški (*ibid.*: 147–148), the misspelled graffiti is one of the main micro-events that, in a protest setting, gains significance through its recontextualization and repurposing.

Crucially, the regime did not retreat; it adapted. In a strategic act of co-optation, then-Prime Minister, Miloš Vučević, shared “I’m a Ćaci too” on his Instagram around mid-March (N1, 2025). This was not the first time an insult aimed at government supporters was used by incumbents as a positive. For example, “bots” and “sandwich-eaters” are two similar insults tied to different micro-events that get reused and recontextualized, but it was the beginning of the widespread use of “Ćaci” as positive across propaganda channels, not just a few throwaway remarks and social media posts.

In early April, the president posted a video of himself in a shirt that reads “I’m a Ćaci too,” endorsing the growing counter-student movement (B92, 2025). This marked a pivotal shift in the information war: the regime began using “Ćaci” as a positive term for good, non-political youth, while rebranding actual student protesters as “blockaders” (violent obstructionists).

Given the regime’s shift from ignoring the protests to actively co-opting their language, this article investigates the mechanisms of this discursive struggle. Specifically, the study aims to understand how authoritarian actors utilize infotainment and information overload to reframe political reality. To guide the combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this article poses two central research questions:

RQ1: How does the disparity in article volume function as a mechanism of “information flooding” to obscure protest demands and displace traditional censorship?

RQ2: In what ways are the contested identities of “students”, “Ćaci”, and “blockaders” characterized and framed across pro-government and independent media?

Methodology

To investigate the shift from traditional censorship to information abundance and discourse co-optation, this study employs combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis. This dual approach was selected to address the specific challenges of analyzing modern authoritarian discourse: while computational methods are necessary to measure the sheer volume of information overload, they are often insufficient for detecting the nuance of irony and humor (Riloff et al., 2013) used to co-opt protest narratives (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013).

Therefore, the research design proceeds in two stages to answer the central research questions: quantitative content analysis (addressing RQ1) through automated text mining in Python, used to establish the macro-patterns, volume, and visibility across the media landscape, plus a qualitative content analysis (addressing RQ2), a closer reading of the main frames pushed by the incumbents. Although the “memes” are a part of the digital sphere and protest placards, this study is about how the narrative was captured by the incumbents. Therefore, the empirical material for this research consists of online news articles. These articles show how memes, meant to take power away from the regime, were co-opted by it and subverted into something positive. The population for this study includes the textual output of six major Serbian news portals, selected to represent the polarized media spectrum (three pro-government and three independent outlets). The unit of analysis is individual news articles published between late January and mid-November 2025.

Data Collection and Cleaning

Using Python, web scraping was automated to include every article published under the “ćaci” and “blokaderi” tags between late January and mid-November 2025 across six outlets. Initially, the code included all data under these tags, which led to some false positives. For example, if the website did not recognize the difference between the characters ć, ċ, and c, the tag would inadvertently include news about “dećaci” (English: boys). This resulted in a final corpus of 4,646 articles.

Group 1 (pro-government media): (1) *B92* was a student-led radio founded in the late 1980s that gained prominence in the 1990s, supporting the anti-Milošević protests. After Milošević, the radio expanded to broadcasting and online, becoming one of the most popular commercial news sources in the country. However, in the early 2010s, it was sold and slowly changed all content to pro-government. At some point in 2017, all programs and almost all the staff were changed (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: B92). (2) *Informer* is a daily newspaper founded in 2012 as a pro-government tabloid (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: Informer). (3) *Pink* was one of the first entertainment-oriented commercial television stations in Serbia, founded in the 1990s. The owner has strong ties to SNS, both personal and financial, and the channel slowly

switched from pure entertainment to commentary-style news in the 2010s (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: Pink).

Group 2 (independent media): (1) *Danas* is a daily newspaper founded in the late 1990s. Although I classified it as independent, it is worth acknowledging that it is owned by United Media Group and is known to have a liberal bias (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: Danas). (2) *N1* started as a commercial 24h news owned by the same media group, United Media (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017: N1). According to the Digital News Report, *N1* was the most used online news source in Serbia weekly (Milivojevic, 2025). Unfortunately, United Media Group's publications are at risk of having their independence compromised, as the majority state-owned *Telekom Srbija* is in the process of acquiring the company's assets (Danas, 2025). Finally, (3) *Južne Vesti* is a digital-native news portal based in South Serbia but has gained national prominence for quality reporting. According to the Digital News Report (Milivojevic, 2025), about 12% of the population reads *Južne Vesti* weekly, making it more popular than *Pink* and *Informer* online. Moreover, as the legacy media faces enormous pressure, these digital-native local news portals might gain greater prominence in the future as perhaps the only remaining independent outlets.

It is important to note that journalism in Serbia has always been commentary-oriented, and this is not just a feature of government mouthpiece media but of the media system (Petrović, 2015; Milosavljević, 2021). Therefore, the label of “independent” in this cultural context does not necessarily mean objective or free of ideology; rather, it indicates that the authorities have not yet compromised the outlet, or that its management is ideologically opposed to the authorities to the extent that there is no financial overlap. Moreover, as the incumbents have captured many industries through friendly private businesses and state funds, the sources of revenue for independent media are severely limited. In this environment, infotainment thrives as a format in Serbia (Milosavljević and Poler, 2018; Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo, 2020: 174–188). Often, journalists and editors feel the need to make serious news a little more entertaining to attract an audience and compete in a harsh environment (*ibid.*).

Quantitative Analysis

The final corpus, containing a total of 1,937,873 words, was analyzed using RStudio. This process required several rounds of revisions to isolate the most used words. In the first stage, over 200 common stop words (e.g., “according to”, “here”, “now”) were removed to find adjectives and insults. This initial sweep revealed the hyper-visibility of the ruling party: the terms “Vučić”, “Aleksandar”, and “President” appeared a total of 10365 times, making the government the dominant subject across all media regardless of the topic (“ćaci” or “blokadéri”). Consequently, to see beyond the main political actors and identify the specific descriptive terms associated with the protests, an additional 350 words were manually removed in a second round of filtering.

The selection of specific thematic frames was driven by an inductive approach, refined by the researcher's contextual knowledge of the Serbian political lexicon. The operationalization of framing here is in the broadest sense: to select an aspect of perceived reality and make it more salient (Entman, 1993; 2007). Moreover, in this sense, a frame defines problems, diagnoses causes, and makes moral judgements (ibid.). The initial reading revealed a wide variety of moral judgements about student protestors, such as: filthy/dirty/pigsty, plenumashi/zborashi (people who participate in plenums and assemblies), idiots/stupid/dumb, Shiptari (derogatory term for Albanians). Three frames stood out as encompassing most insults:

1. **Existential Threat Frame:** Students are not merely protestors, but an existential threat (terrorists).
2. **Fascist Foreign Agents:** A frame used to label students as fascists and traitors. In the local context, Ustaše is the most often used term because it encompasses both foreign interference and fascism. This specific framing is evidenced by the emergence of the regime slogan “Better Ćaci than a Nazi” (appearing 24 times in the dataset), which explicitly positions the regime's supporters as morally superior to the fascist students.
3. **Corrupt Privileged Elite:** This includes terms like “oligarchs” and the local colloquialism “*foteljaši*” (those who “hog the armchair”), implying that students are the children of tycoons who seek to halt Serbia's progress and hoard wealth.

While the three frames above define the protestors' identity, a separate analysis was conducted to assess the predicted consequences of their actions. To gauge the intensity of the alleged threat, the study tracked the specific vocabulary of conflict, distinguishing between “war” and the specific threat of “civil war” to determine the scale of the alleged danger. This analysis showed that pro-government media prefer to vaguely allude to violence rather than specify the kind of conflict students will provoke.

Nevertheless, qualitative interpretation was essential to address the failure of automated sentiment analysis to detect context-specific sarcasm. For example, on the 11th of November 2025, B92 posted “In Kneginje Zorka street, a sign appeared: “The street gives birth to Nobel Prize winners”; “Blockers, who is a Ćaci now? PHOTO”, and the description was pointing out that a street cannot give birth; therefore, the student blockaders are the illiterate ones, a spin on the misspelled graffiti that started it all. The same story and photo were posted by Pink the next day with the headline “WHO IS ĆACI NOW?! Blockaders showed how illiterate they are, a fierce mob in the center of Belgrade (PHOTO).” In turn, when slogans “Better Ćaci than a Nazi” are mentioned in independent media, it is not an endorsement of the statement, but it is news or commentary. Manual analysis was therefore necessary to identify this as a specific strategy of delegitimization.

Finally, there are two important shortcomings of the corpus that should be acknowledged. First, it is only possible to web scrape from sources that have an online news counterpart or are digital-native. According to the Reuters Digital News Report (Milivojevic, 2025), 85% of people in Serbia consume news online, but mostly through social media. TV remains the second-most-consumed source overall, and news websites and apps are third. Therefore, this type of analysis excludes content produced for television or print, as well as posts shared by citizens and students on social media. As such, online news is only a part of the picture of how intense this battle for the meaning of the words associated with protests is. Nevertheless, online news is where infotainment is most prominent and, therefore, a fitting choice for the topic of the co-optation of memes used against incumbents.

Second, technical barriers (e.g., anti-scraping protocols) necessitate excluding certain high-traffic outlets, such as *Kurir*. Therefore, while this study captures the information flooding and infotainment co-optation in the online news, it does not claim to capture the full multimedia spectrum of the regime’s propaganda machine. Overall, the methodology mirrors the dual nature of the regime’s strategy: noise/information overload (quantitative), and co-optation of humor to disarm resistance (qualitative).

**Quantitative Findings:
Information Overload (RQ1)**

As shown in Table 1, production volume is heavily skewed toward pro-government outlets. *Pink* alone published 1,757 articles, more than all three independent outlets combined (1,650). Moreover, *Pink* accounts for 37.8% of all articles.

Source Media	blokaderi	caci	Total Articles
pink	1588	169	1757
b92	607	39	646
informer	510	83	593
danas	787	481	1268
n1	18	310	328
juznevesti	36	18	54
TOTAL	3546	1100	4646

Table 1: Number of articles

Source Media	Topic	Peak Week Start Date	Max Weekly Articles
b92	blokaderi	23/06/2025	49
b92	caci	20/10/2025	8
informer	blokaderi	27/10/2025	122
informer	caci	20/10/2025	29
pink	blokaderi	11/08/2025	335
pink	caci	03/11/2025	43
juznevesti	blokaderi	03/11/2025	7
juznevesti	caci	17/03/2025	3
juznevesti	caci	24/03/2025	3
n1	blokaderi	11/08/2025	4
n1	caci	03/11/2025	53
danass	blokaderi	20/10/2025	98
danass	caci	03/11/2025	36

Table 2: Weekly Peaks of Posting per outlet

The week around the 11th of August, when students joined forces with eco movements to protest the lithium mine in Serbia, *Pink* published a whopping 335 articles about blockaders, more than any other outlet published on this topic at its peak, combined across both groups. In traditional autocracies, the goal is to prevent information from reaching the public, but in modern autocracies like Serbia, the goal is censorship through oversaturation and confusion. This is evident in the asymmetry shown in Table 2.

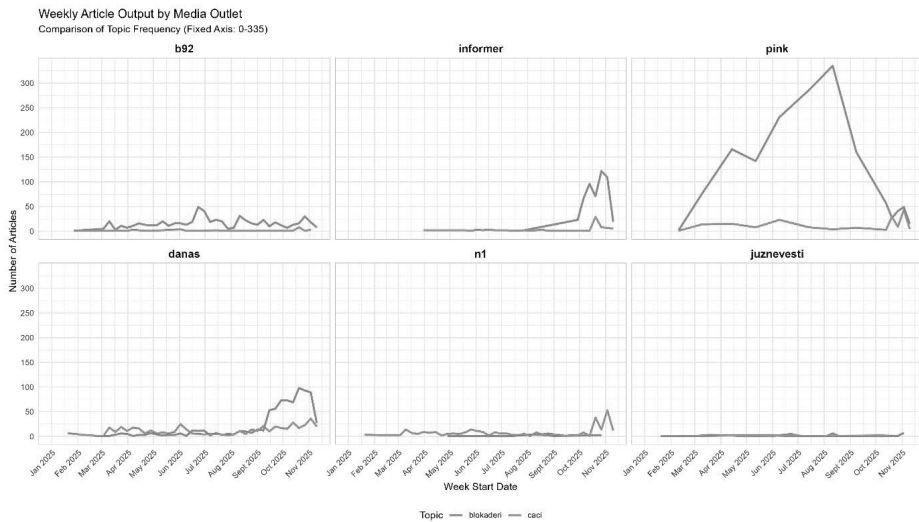
When *Pink* published a staggering 335 articles on “blockaders” in a single week, this was, on average, 48 articles a day on a single topic, effectively two articles every hour, around the clock. Meanwhile, independent outlets are short-staffed, due to a mix of funding constraints (advertising, subscriptions, subsidies) and the general decline in the prestige of the journalism profession. These outlets simply cannot devote the energy and funding to generate 48 articles on something that is not essential. The sheer volume indicates that these articles are not necessarily news, but *Pink* is oversaturating the information space with a dominant government narrative about who the students are (a threat).

Unfortunately, there is no database in Serbia to consult for the average output of the six outlets used in the study, and automating analysis would be too complex because most of these websites do not have sections for all news.¹ On the 21st of January 2026, while revising this article, it was possible to go back two to three days to count the outputs of *B92*, *Informer*, and *Danas* using the “latest news” tag, which contains only up to 50 pages. Out of the three, *Informer*

¹ Instead, most news portals split news into broader categories such as politics, society, and sports.

has the highest output, with around 500 articles a day, followed by *B92* with 233 and *Danas* with 227.

Although data was not available for *Pink*, it is odd that a commercial broadcaster is leading in content output. For example, in the United Kingdom, even the most prolific tabloids, like *The Daily Mail*, would publish close to 1,500 articles a day, compared with *The Guardian's* just over 370, the *BBC's* average of 200, or *Sky News's* 127 (Press Gazette, 2023). Therefore, it is expected that tabloids like *Informer* will produce more content than daily papers like *Danas* or television broadcaster portals like *Pink* and *N1*, in line with a global trend. However, this is not the case in Serbia, where an entertainment-based commercial broadcaster is leading. In more democratic systems, like the UK, not even news-oriented, privately owned channels like *Sky News* are as prolific online, and even in Serbia, for a pro-government public broadcaster, like *B92*, 48 articles a day would be over 20% of daily output.



Graph 1: Weekly Article output per media outlet

Conversely, as mentioned, independent media is reacting to these frames rather than using this harsh language to describe student protests. For reference, when generating web scraping code for keywords, there were fewer than 20 pages on *N1* for both “ćaci” and “blokaderni”; meanwhile, the “studenti” tag that was not scraped would be 159 pages of articles as of mid-November 2025. Similarly, on *Južne Vesti*, the two tags had around 20 pages combined, while “studenti” had over 200. *Danas* is the most prolific outlet in independent media, and yet the two keyword searches combined have as many results as “studenti” (around 700 pages). Therefore, these outlets do report on the protests and their coverage focuses more on the actors than on the insults and memes.

Meanwhile, if we search for the word “student” in the pro-government media, almost all articles are also about blockaders. For example, in January 2026, on *Pink*, there are 68 pages of news about students, and 67 about blockaders, and this is without web scraping and cleaning the data by date, as on their website, one page can contain news from three hours ago, along with news from four months ago.

From the volume and peaks of posting, it is already clear that there is an asymmetry between pro-government and independent media, with one side more proactive in controlling how student protests are received. However, it is not yet clear how bad these blockaders are in the eyes of the pro-SNS media. As briefly mentioned in the methodological section, both sides, the pro-government and independent media, used similar words and, in both, the ruling party and the president were hyper visible.

Initially, I thought it would be possible to pool the most common words to find patterns. However, this approach yielded no fruitful results. Only *B92* showed clear patterns, and only about who the “ćaci” are; among the top 10 words are “students”, “want to”, “learn”, and “work” (see: Table 3 below). Or, for example, on *Informer*, interest in “ćaci” peaked, likely because of a fire in the counter-movement camp, and this aligns with the main words being “Anđelković”, the main suspect, “October”, and “attack”.

Source Media	Topic	Word	Count	Topic	Word	Count
B92	blokaderi	Vučić	1847	caci	Vučić	175
B92	blokaderi	Predsednik [President]	1028	caci	Ćacilend [Ćaci-land]	98
B92	blokaderi	Mediji [Media]	759	caci	Predsednik [President]	94
B92	blokaderi	Studenti [Students]	640	caci	Hoće [Want to]	78
B92	blokaderi	Aleksandar	585	caci	Uče [Learn/Study]	74
B92	blokaderi	Protiv [Against]	580	caci	Rade [Work/Do]	69
B92	blokaderi	Nasilje [Violence]	572	caci	Deca [Children]	65
B92	blokaderi	Žele [Want/Wish]	558	caci	Mnogo [Many/A lot]	62
B92	blokaderi	Novom [New] ²	532	caci	Šatora [Tents]	62
B92	blokaderi	SNS [Ruling Party]	522	caci	Skupštine [Assembly]	58

Table 3: An example of keywords around “ćaci” and “blokaderi” after removing 200 stop words

As explained, the president and the party were over-represented in both camps; however, this is to be expected in autocracies, especially when the leadership is trying to build a cult of personality. Instead, the goal of this paper was to determine what connotations were used to delegitimize students and co-opt the joke that the ruling party and its supporters are illiterate and incompetent.

2 This could also refer to Novi Sad the city.

Therefore, additional data cleaning was necessary to identify exact words and adjectives. Even after cleaning over 350 additional stop words to exclude main places like Novi Sad or Belgrade that are bound to be mentioned, and variations of “president” or “assembly”, which dominated the discourse, most media across the board discussed “students”, “citizens”, “attack”, “police”, “violence”, “government”.³ Therefore, on the surface, there appears to be a consensus regarding the central actors and topics. However, this lexical overlap obscures the divergent framing strategies employed by opposing outlets.

The next step was to analyze the main words in relation to each other, and there was a clearer pattern (See Table 4 below). For pro-government media, mostly *Pink* and *B92*, violence is against citizens. Moreover, of the 3077 times “attack” or “assault” is mentioned, *Pink* and *B92* are in the lead, with over 1000 mentions each. Meanwhile, as mentioned, the data on independent media is skewed because it does not include the student tag. *Juzne Vesti* and *N1* have almost no peaks in usage of the six main words. However, *Danas* used the word “students” the most, close to 5,000 times, more than any other outlet in any other group, followed by “police” and “government”, used over 2,000 times, and “faculty”, used over 1,000 times. Therefore, although similar words are used, these two groups of outlets do not appear to be discussing these events in the same way.

Outlet	Strongest Connection	Frequency
B92	Citizens and Violence	80
Informer	Citizens and Attack	7
Pink	Citizens and Violence	374
Danas	Citizens and Students	587
N1	Police and Students	36
Juzne Vesti	Police and Students	53

Table 4: Strongest connections between terms, table made by the author

Qualitative Findings: Bad Students and Good Counter-Students (RQ2)

While the quantitative analysis establishes that pro-government media differentiate between “innocent” “ćaci” and hostile “blockaders”, it does not fully capture the intensity of the delegitimization directed at the latter. To determine frames, the dataset of over a million words was reduced to a qualitative sub-sample of 300 snippets that contained at least three high-frequency

³ The honourable mention that appears and disappears from the top 10 is “media.” For example, on *B92*, *RTS* (PBS) is mentioned in the top 10 at some point; for *Informer*, *N1* is one of the top words; and for *Juzne Vesti*, *BBC*.

keywords (e.g., police, government, violence). For example, a snippet from *Pink*: “AN ACT OF MADNESS, FOR EVERY CONDEMNATION! SNS leader Vučević on the attack on party premises in Novi Sad! He also sent a clear message to the blockaders: Enough of terror and madness, you will never defeat us with violence!” contains three keywords: blockaders, violence, and attack.

As explained in the methodology, the selection of specific thematic frames was driven by an inductive approach, refined by the researcher’s knowledge of the Serbian political landscape. Three frames were chosen because they encompassed multiple insults pro-government media hurled at the students. The two most common frames are that students are existential threats (terrorists) and fascist foreign agents, and interestingly, although they are often portrayed as corrupt privileged elites, this is not the most common frame. Furthermore, while pro-government media consistently frame the protesters as instigators of violence and disorder, they are not always portrayed as calling for a war/civil war, but just as prone to violence in general. More importantly, from analyzing the peaks of posting of these insulting frames, it is clearer that pro-government media leads with student delegitimization and co-opting their criticism, while the independent media is reacting.

1. Existential Threat Frame

In total, there were 671 mentions of terrorism, the main word chosen for this frame, but only 394 unique articles, because some articles used the word more than once. *Pink* had 197 articles on the topic, followed by *Danas* with 105, and *Informer* with 34.

Outlet	Date (Week starting)	Number of Articles
Pink	April 13th	24
Pink	May 11th	19
Pink	June 8th	25
Pink	July 13th	35
Pink	August 10th	38
Pink	September 14th	10
Danas	October 19th	19
Pink	October 19th	23
Danas	October 26th	17
Pink	October 26th	13

Table 5: Weekly peaks of posting: Existential Threat, chronological

Some examples of headlines on *Pink* from April 2025 are: “THE TERROR CONTINUES! STUDENT BLOCKADERS STILL IN FRONT OF RTS: For more than 9 hours they block all entrances! RTS said: This is violence!” or “BLOCKADERS’ PLAN TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE FLIGHT AND CARRY

OUT A TERRORIST ATTACK HAS FAILED. The guests of the special show agree: We have shown democracy, we should show that we have a state!” Some examples from late October are: “SPECIAL SHOW ON THE OCCASION OF THE TERRORIST ATTACK IN SERBIA! Mrdić: Everything that happened was ‘pumped’ by the blockaders. Is this a policy that is good for Serbia?!” or “Jovanov for Pink: The attack on the camp of students who want to study is a pure example of terrorism.”

Meanwhile, on *Danas*, despite the word “terrorism” and its variations being mentioned, it is not because the students protesting are labelled as a threat; rather, articles offer commentary and context on the overall adversarial politics in Serbia. For example, a snippet about terrorism in April is in an article with the headline “What does Ćaci-Woodstock bring?”, where the snippet containing the word is “...to impose the impression that the country is collapsing, near the end of the video, the psycho⁴ says that he can’t fight terrorists...” Similarly, in April, an article about the new call for members of the commission of the state regulatory body for media (REM), contains a snippet that explains that some candidates are called all professors and deals who participated in the blockade, terrorists. Newer content, from late October, has headlines like “My protest diary: How much Serbia has changed in a year” with the snippet “...numerous accusations of police brutality, which the government denies and largely shifts the blame to the demonstrators, accusing them without evidence of terrorism...” Therefore, this is more of a reaction to the word “terrorist” associated with students than framing them as such.

2. Fascist Foreign Agents

There were 1265 snippets containing words relating to fascism, Nazism, and foreign interference in some way, especially from Croatia and Albania. After cleaning by headlines and dates per outlet, 576 articles remained containing these words. *Pink* had 234 articles, followed by *Danas* (229), and *B92* (58). However, looking at the posting timeline, *Pink* (and SNS) is once again leading the discussion, and *Danas* is reacting (see Table 6 below).

Outlet	Date (Week starting)	Number of Articles
Pink	April 13th	20
Pink	May 11th	17
Danas	June 1st	21
Pink	June 8th	38
Pink	July 13th	47
Pink	August 10th	48
Pink	September 14th	27

4 In reference to Miloš Pavlović, one of the leading figures of the pro-government student movement Students 2.0, also known as Ćaci.

Outlet	Date (Week starting)	Number of Articles
Danas	October 19th	17
Danas	October 26th	18
Danas	November 2nd	23

Table 6: Weekly peaks of posting: Fascist Foreign Agents, chronological

A snippet of some of the first articles in April on *Pink* was summarizing sentiments from one of SNS's high-ranking officials, Ana Brabnić: "Pressure groups from Nova [a United Media channel] keep promoting fascist ideology. They say that all of us are ćacis, and we are all the same: pure fascists. And they are proud of this." Some of the newer snippets from early November are: "Tonight, they continued their fascist celebratory attacks on Pionirski Park Ćaci-land, which proved to be an impenetrable barrier in the defense of our Serbia and the dignity of students and citizens."

Meanwhile, on *Danas*, this was a snippet from a June column: "...between desires and possibilities, fueling intolerance, he [Vučić] pushes his followers to shout that it is better to be a Ćaci than a Nazi. He lives in the hope that this social instability that he caused himself will somehow end on its own..." And another more recent one from November: "...he [Vučić] called us cowards and bullies, he said we were nervous because we failed. Imagine, all these people gathering in Novi Sad [for the anniversary of the tragedy] and he thinks that was a fiasco..."

3. Corrupt Privileged Elite

Contrary to my assumption, this framing, even with the inclusion of "foreign mercenaries" and the variations, is the second smallest in volume: only 206 unique articles and 265 mentions overall. However, it is most prevalent in the pro-government media: 118 articles in *Pink*, followed by 39 in *Informer*, 26 in *Danas*, and 21 in *B92*. Moreover, when it comes to spikes in postings, only *Pink* crosses the threshold of at least 10 posts per week on the topic, with the highest spike being on the week of May 11th with 27 articles, followed by the 8th of June with 21 articles, and the 10th of August with 17 articles.

From the first spike in May on *Pink*, there are snippets like: "These two statesmen [Vučić and Vučević] stood as a strong wall against the onslaught of crimes that the opposition, blockaders, taycoon media, haters of Serbia, and all those who want a weak and docile Serbia..." or "...blockaders, *foteljaši*, attacked people in the streets in the most gruesome way just because they think differently." *Informer* wrote at the end of May: "Vučević visited students who want to study: I hope that normal life will return to Serbia", but most articles are from October, like, "GOSI reports: Foreigners, representatives of embassies and blockaders at a "secret meeting" in Belgrade: see who is among them" or "What's in store for November 1st? The terrifying threats of the blockaders echoed: I'm afraid of what will happen."

4. Civil War vs. War

For “civil war”, there are a total of 164 mentions of the term, but 125 articles. *Pink* used this term the most, 73 times, followed by *Danas* (21) and *B92* (14). Since the base is small, the smallest one analyzed, there are only two *Pink* posting peaks: the 8th of June and the 10th of August. In June, *Pink* wrote: “THEY ARE CALLING FOR MURDER! The special show revealed the preparation of violent actions against Serbia: Blockaders want radicalization and blood on the streets,” and in August, a snippet says: “Such an attitude is what the public expects from institutions in the moments when there is a threat of a civil war. However, a picture from Novi Sad, where the greatest violence took place, the premises of SNS were destroyed and members of the elite unit Cobras were injured...” A headline from August says: “BLOCKADERS ANNOUNCE NEW CHAOS: They are bringing balaclavas, they are doing everything to cause a civil war in Serbia.” Some more recent snippets from November are: “they won’t succeed in breaking Čacilend, the symbol of resistance. They won’t break up our Serbia and start a civil war.”

On *Danas*, a snippet in May says: “now they are trying to stir up people by force and spreading the most terrible propaganda according to Goebbels’ methods, Janko Veselinović SNS is provoking civil war by sending activists to Novi Sad.” Another snippet from August says: “...the revolution is not a horror film, even though it is the only genre that makes sense today. But the revolution is neither a “babaroga”⁵ nor a civil war, and after all, only the favorite of the ideologue of the regime, Dragoslav Bokan, calls for it.” Again, this is more a reaction to the statements than anything else.

However, the situation is a little different when it comes to “war” alone, a word mentioned 721 times across 421 unique articles. Again, most frequently on *Pink* in 183 articles, followed by *Danas* (141), and *B92* (54). The same pattern persists: *Pink* leads in terms of peaks from mid-April to mid-July, with 15 to 27 posts a week, while *Danas* only has its first peak the week of the 10th of August, with 10 posts, but *Pink* has 28 that same week. *Danas* then has the most articles from late September to early November, with 13 to 14 posts a week.

On the government side, the snippets and headlines are a bit more abstract. For example, this snippet from *Pink* in May says, “Electronics faculty blockaders announce Serbia has always been anti-fascist. One million Serbs died at the hands of the Nazis in the Second World War. Serbs were victims of a genocide in the Independent State of Croatia. The blockaders know that, and they spit on Serbian victims of Nazism.” This statement, for example, is entirely nonsensical. The headline also says blockaders spit on the victims, but does not explain how. Another headline from May is how blockaders attacked a man who fought his whole life for Serbia (unclear in which war), but he was saved by war veterans (again, unclear from which war).

Other snippets over the summer are even more vague, like one from June that says: “journalists and journalism were first to be attacked. Whatever happened

5 Scary mythical creature in Serbian folklore, a witch-like figure

in war dramas is still happening today in the colored revolution that is happening now.” Or this one from August, where the headline is about blockaders joining forces with Croatians, but the snippet is “... even if Bulgarians joined them, we cannot be blind, similar alliances are being made before a war. We must be aware of the intentions of others; they are not doing this just to eat shrimp.” It is unclear what the role of shrimp is in this alliance.

On the side of *Danas*, many articles are calling for accountability, like an article from mid-March that explains that one of the “students who want to learn” is an ex-commander of the gendarmerie who famously participated in the Kosovo war. Similarly, an opinion piece from October recalls Šešelj’s contributions to the 1990s war as he becomes a more frequent guest on the *Informer* television program. Nevertheless, on both sides, the memory of the Second World War seems to be a sore spot in different ways. In *Danas*, Niš was mentioned multiple times as an example, once in June, when a swastika appeared on the Fortress along with the sign “Better Ćaci than a Nazi”, reminding readers that in no context should the swastika appear anywhere in this city near one of the worst concentration camps in the region. Then again, in August, an article said that Niš deserves a better mayor, one who would not call their compatriots Nazis.

Many of these frames overlap, but the goal of the government and allies goes beyond simple name-calling; it is a process of erasure. Originally, the term “Ćaci” was coined by the protesters as a demand for accountability; it was a critique of the ruling elite’s incompetence, illiteracy, and questionable credentials. However, the regime responded not by engaging with this critique, but by burying it under an avalanche of noise. By co-opting the term and flooding the public sphere with hundreds of articles redefining “Ćaci” as humble, patriotic defenders of Serbia, the government effectively hollowed out the word’s original meaning.

Meanwhile, independent media is continuously starved of resources. They cannot compete with the output of outlets like *Pink*, whose owner does not have to pay debts owed to the state for managing the media empire (Milivojević, 2020; Tomić, 2022). Ultimately, the government’s strategy is twofold: co-optation of language depriving the student movement of their primary means of mobilization: humor and wordplay (Lalić-Krstin and Silaški, 2025), while oversaturating the public space with their version of the story. In this environment, censorship occurs through sheer noise, making it impossible for the average citizen to sift through the distortion without significant investment on their part, namely, time and the skills needed to filter information.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the role of infotainment and linguistic co-optation in the struggle for narrative control during the 2024–2025 student protests in Serbia. By employing a combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of over 4,000 articles from pro-government and independent media, I have demonstrated that the ruling SNS party does not rely solely on traditional

censorship. Instead, the regime employs a sophisticated strategy of co-opting infotainment, traditionally used to sustain independent media in a rough economic environment. The goal is for ridicule to flood the information space, neutralize dissent, and legitimize state narratives.

Regarding the evolution of regime strategies, the “meme war” for the meaning of “ćaci” shows this evolution in the regime’s response to youth resistance. Initially, the regime utilized a strategy of co-optation, transforming the ridicule of the misspelled graffiti “ćaci” into in-group loyalty. By establishing “Students 2.0” and “Ćacilend”, the incumbents successfully muddled the waters, creating a counter-reality where the regime-backed counter-protesters were framed as the true students who are studious, patriotic, and constructive. This effectively displaced the genuine student movement, reframing them in the pro-government media not as young citizens exercising their democratic rights, but as disruptive blockaders who impede the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

However, the findings indicate that this infotainment strategy was merely the first phase of a more dangerous discursive shift. As the protests persisted, the quantitative data showed a marked escalation in aggressive rhetoric within pro-government outlets (*Pink*, *Informer*, *B92*). The linguistic transition from “blockaders” to existential threats, notably, terrorists and nazis, marks a critical turning point. As the framing analysis shows, these terms were not used sporadically but systematically during peaks of protest activity to dehumanize the student movement.

This rhetorical escalation serves a dual purpose. First, it empties the signifier “student” of its sympathetic connotations, replacing it with the image of a violent foreign agent. Second, and more ominously, it is a prelude to permission to initiate repression. By framing student blockades as acts of terrorism or fascism, the regime moves from “soft” authoritarian co-optation to justifying the physical violence that has been documented since the summer of 2025. The hyper-visibility of President Vučić in the corpus, alongside the consistent framing of the police as victims of student violence in pro-government media, reinforces the narrative that the state is the sole guarantor of stability against chaotic, radicalized youth.

Moreover, this study showed that *Pink*, a privately owned entertainment-oriented television channel, leads in information overload and framing, warranting further exploration. Most often, the public service broadcaster takes on the propaganda-mouthpiece role, and tabloids are seen as the most brutal in their insults. However, in this instance, the regime speaks through a privately owned business with clear ties to the ruling party but separated from it on paper. There are several avenues future studies can explore here: from how symbiosis with the private sector creates an illusion of pluralism, because on the surface, the conflict is not between the party and citizens, but between different societal groups which co-exist in every democracy to comparing Serbia to other cases of dramatic democratic backsliding, like perhaps the USA, where the incumbent party speaks through Fox News (also tied to an entertainment empire).

Nevertheless, this study was restricted to digital news and online republications of print and broadcast media, and as such, does not cover the full multimedia spectrum of the regime's propaganda, information oversaturation, and narrative flooding. Therefore, in subsequent studies, it would be worth examining the original sources of these frames: on the one hand, social media, where memes are spread, and on the other, the speeches, slogans, and visual propaganda that are merely disseminated or discussed in online news. Moreover, while the study identifies how student protestors are dehumanized as blockaders, terrorists, and fascists in the online news (textually), this does not account for algorithmic amplification of such narratives on social media, or the visual evolution of how they are presented.

Ultimately, the case of the Serbian protests demonstrates that contemporary electoral autocracies are highly adaptable. They engage in humor and memes not only to diffuse tension but to manufacture it. As the line between infotainment and propaganda blurs, and the capacity of independent media to counter these narratives is eroded by resource asymmetry, it is imperative to develop new tools and strategies to counter the growing arsenal of contemporary digital autocracies, such as Serbia.

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Ana Jovanovic-Harrington

Digitalni autoritarizam i politika buke: Kooptacija i narativno preplavlivanje na protestima u Srbiji

Apstrakt

Savremene kompetitivne autokratije se u cilju održavanja kontrole sve više oslanjaju na preplavlivanje informacijama umesto na cenzuru. Ovaj članak istražuje kako je info-zabava (*infotainment*) postala ključno bojno polje u protestnoj politici (2024–2025), služeći istovremeno i kao oruđe otpora i kao mehanizam meke autoritarne kontrole. Koristeći kombinovanu kvantitativnu i kvalitativnu analizu sadržaja šest medija, tri provladina (B92, Informer, Pink) i tri nezavisna (Danas, Južne Vesti, N1), ova studija prati kako je režim konstruisao diskurs podela razdvajajući studente u dva suprotstavljena tabora: „ćaci“ (viralna pravopisna greška kooptirana da predstavlja nedužnu, nepolitičku omladinu) i „blokade“ (pežorativni naziv za one koji protestuju). Analiza otkriva strukturnu asimetriju: dok su provladini mediji agresivno koristili emotivno uokviravanje i ismevanje (etiketirajući studente demonstrante kao „fašiste“ ili „strane agente“), nezavisni mediji su potisnuti u reaktivnu ulogu, pokušavajući da demantuju ove narative. Ova diskurzivna agresija prepoznata je kao uvod u fizičko nasilje od leta 2025. godine. Na kraju, studija zaključuje da moderni autoritarizam ne opstaje tako što skriva istinu, već tako što je zatrpava slojevima ironije i konstruisanog konflikta.

Ključne reči: digitalni autoritarizam, meka cenzura, zarobljavanje medija, kooptacija, uokviravanje