

# THE DISCOURSE OF BANNER MESSAGES AT STUDENT PROTESTS IN SERBIA (2024–2025)

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**DOI:** 10.5937/cm20-62183

***Abstract:** Student protests in Serbia have been ongoing since December 2024 and grew out of public gatherings in November 2024 calling for political responsibility after the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which killed sixteen people. In response, students held a daily memorial at 11:52am (the exact time the canopy fell on November 1, 2024), lasting sixteen minutes, that is, one minute of silence for each victim. In late November, several participants in these memorials were hit by cars in multiple locations in Belgrade, and in some cases the drivers who endangered them were found to be connected to Serbia's ruling parties. All of this contributed to students' decisions, from December 2024 onward, to suspend classes and block university facilities, while, at pre-defined time periods, organizing mass protests in various Serbian cities throughout 2025. At those protests a wide array of banners were displayed to focus public attention on the messages students wanted to send. Because of that, this paper discusses the discourse presented in those messages. In order to elaborate in appropriate manner the stated research question, the methods of multimodal semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis were used. The results show that the discourse of the messages on banners concurs with values such as freedom, responsibility or the fight against corruption, values that are promoted at protests themselves. The dominant discourse relied on allusive and ironic elements, often inspired by public statements by government officials, by popular culture elements (song lyrics, and film or TV lines), and by the "re-branding" of slogans from the 1990s protests, with the intent to evoke parallels and to link Aleksandar Vučić's rule to that of Slobodan Milošević.*

**Keywords:** discourse, banners, protests, students, Serbia.

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## 1. Introduction

On November 1, 2024, the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people. A part of the public deemed the political response inadequate, as several days passed before the Minister of Construction, Goran Vesić, and the Minister of Transport, Tomislav Momirović, resigned. The reaction of that dissatisfied public took the form of a daily silent vigil commemorating the victims, held at 11:52am, the moment the canopy fell, and lasting sixteen minutes, since 16 people died. In late November, several participants in those actions, most of them young people, i.e., students, were intentionally struck by cars. This was followed by the blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) and, shortly thereafter, the involvement of other faculties at the universities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and Novi Pazar. Besides campus blockades, large rallies were organized at different times in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac. Meanwhile, governing elites sought to contest and discredit the protests in various ways, and it was not rare that senior state officials at times threatened different forms of coercion. These dynamics inspired protesters to create banners, which became one of the defining features of the 2024–25 student movement in Serbia. This paper addresses the research question: what kind of discourse was present in the messages conveyed by those banners?

It is worth mentioning that Serbia has a tradition of student protests occurring at almost regular twenty-eight-year intervals. The first major protest in Serbia arose amid the wave of student unrest across Europe in mid-1968. In former Yugoslavia, students step out with demands for the abolition of social privilege, greater equality, democratization of society in general, particularly within the rulling Communist Alliance, improved university funding, etc... That protest culminated in the famous statement by Josip Broz Tito that “the students are right” and that they had been “neglected by the socialist system” (Jakšić, 2020). The next large-scale student protests came in late 1996, after authorities annulled opposition victories (led by Zoran Đinđić) in Belgrade and other big cities. Lasting four months, those protests called for: (1) an independent commission to determine the true election results; (2) the resignation of the rector of the University of Belgrade; and (3) the resignation of the student pro-rector (Popadić, 1999). The outcome was that the Socialist Party of Serbia recognized defeat in Belgrade and Zoran Đinđić became city mayor. History suggests that

student protests in Serbia have often achieved a certain level of success. The last ones, organized since December 2024, advanced several demands:

1. Full public disclosure of the documentation concerning the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station;
2. Confirmation by competent authorities of the identities of all persons reasonably suspected of assaulting students and professors, and the initiation of criminal proceedings against them, including dismissal if they hold public office;
3. Dropping criminal charges against detained or arrested students and discontinuing ongoing proceedings;
4. A 20% increase in budget funding for public universities<sup>2</sup>.

Student organizers reported that, by their criteria, only the fourth demand had been met. Government representatives, on the contrary, asserted that all demands had been satisfied. Another consequence was the January 2025 resignations of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and Novi Sad mayor Milan Đurić, justified as an act of “political responsibility” after activists of the Serbian Progressive Party exited their party offices in Novi Sad and physically attacked several young protesters outside.

## 2. Contemporary Political Expression in Serbia Through Protests

Citizens can participate in social and political life in many ways. A common classification in political theory distinguishes: (1) participation in elections by voting; (2) participation in the electoral process via campaign activities; and (3) protest politics formulation – demonstrations, petitions, strikes (Norris 2007, 628) – which are often categorized as non-institutional participation. Factors shaping individual participation typically fall into three groups: (1) socio-demographics (age, gender, education, etc.); (2) the level of political information and personal interest; and (3) institutional context, e.g., compulsory voting (Almond & Verba, 1989: 91). One of the methods could be a protest. Protest may be defined as “a form of political action aimed at influencing one or more policies or states of affairs” (Lipsky, 1968: 1146). As investigated, in the period from 2006 to 2020, the Europe and Central Asia region saw 806 protests, with

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<sup>2</sup> <https://studentskizahtevi.rs/lat/>

France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Spain, and Ukraine among the most protest-prone countries (Ortiz et al 2022: 14). The dynamics and modalities of protest vary with regime type; protests tend to be more frequent in established and partial democracies (Ortiz et al, 2022: 15), whereas in authoritarian or poorly democratized contexts they more often assume violent forms (Spore, 2022: 57). Other approaches suggest that violent protest is more prevalent on the periphery and amid ethnic or religious groups, while non-violent protest appears in more homogeneous and urban settings (Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013: 390).

In recent years, Serbia has been described as a “competitive authoritarian” or “hybrid democratic” regime (Levitsky & Way, 2020: 59), a mixture of democratic and non-democratic elements (Muftić 2018: 112), with insufficient representation of diverse groups and interests within institutional channels (Lončar & Spasojević, 2022: 232). Citizens therefore seek alternative avenues to voice their views. This is most often reflected in different types of protests that have been held in Serbia since 2017 almost continuously, in different forms and for different topics. The first major protests that occurred during the Serbian Progressive Party’s rule since 2012 were the “Protests against the Dictatorship” that took place in April 2017, immediately after the presidential elections in which Aleksandar Vučić won in the first round. The next protests that were organized were in 2018 in response to the physical attack suffered by Borko Stefanović, one of the opposition politicians. The protests started under the name “Stop the bloody shirts”, and later continued under the name “One of five million”, whose name came from the statement of President Aleksandar Vučić that he would not fulfill any of their demands, even if there were “five million at the protests”. During the COVID pandemic, after the parliamentary elections in 2020, a large protest was held against the reintroduction of curfew and the eviction of students from their dormitories. At the end of 2021, several large protests were organized against the exploitation of lithium in Serbia and the activities of the company “Rio Tinto”, which intended to lead that project. The tragedies at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” elementary school, as well as the ones that followed, in Orašje and Dubona, were the reason for the protests that were organized during the spring of 2023 under the name “Serbia against violence”.

The last major protests were held in winter of 2023, after the parliamentary elections, when a group of citizens believed that the election results did

not fully reflect the electoral will of the citizens. The characteristic of all those protests is that they were the product of threats to various fundamental social values such as democracy, environmental protection or security. The strategy of the ruling structures in Serbia when all these protests were organized was similar. Two arguments almost always appeared, namely: (1) labeling protests as violent, despite limited incidents (mainly on 2020 protests, as well as in some singular occasions); and (2) attributing them to foreign influence (most often “the West”). Such framing seeks to heighten political abstention by casting politics as “dirty” or “immoral,” while a disciplined ruling-party electorate maintains an advantage, which is illustrated by their continuous electoral result in previous years, enlarging the gap between them and the opposition actors (Balunović, 2022: 34). These recurring mobilizations and the rhetoric of both government and opposition actors illustrate the instability of Serbia’s political system, heightened further by the 2024–2025 student protests, which brought polarization to a new level.

A positive development amid these events is growing interest, especially among youth, in various forms of civic and political participation. Protest activity often involves critique of representative democracy, experimenting instead with direct-democracy practices such as student plenums and citizens’ assemblies, a trend some scholars link to declining trust in institutional channels like elections (Kaase, 1999: 12). In Serbia, however, recent survey data of National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS, 2025) indicate the student protests increased youths’ willingness to vote to roughly 90%, nearly 20 percentage points higher than a year earlier<sup>3</sup>. The student movement is thus best situated within the broader wave of “new social movements,” with distinctive organizational forms and communication practices worldwide (Bačković & Petrović, 2017: 431). Those social movements function in an atypical way when it comes to political organization, and one of the specifics is the way of communication. Notably, this is the first student protest in Serbia without formal leaders; communication about actions has run primarily through social media, while on-site messages are communicated above all through banners – a communication channel that is only left, given the narrowing of space for public debate.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/411672/Istrazivanje-KOMS-Vise-od-90-odsto-mladih-bi-izasllo-na-parlamentarne-izbore.html>

### 3. Methodological Framework

As already stressed, the research subject of this paper is the discourse of messages on banners on student protests held in different Serbian cities, starting from December, 2024. The biggest rallies were organized on different occasions in Belgrade (on December 22nd, January 27th, March 15th, and June 28th), in Novi Sad on February 1st, in Niš on March 1st, and in Kragujevac on February 15th. Precisely the banners appeared on those rallies made the sample for the research analysis. However, it should bear in mind the researching limits, meaning that only those banners entering the public discourse thanks to traditional and social media were analysed.

In this research it is applied the qualitative methodology of multimodal semiotic analysis which starts from assumption that the messages on banners used in protests, inherently, are multimodal communication artefacts, which make their meanings through the interaction of verbal, visual and typographic elements. Fully, multimodal semiotic analysis puts in focus the messages on banners in micro discourse unit of the wider one – protest discourse, which at the same time articulate the political demands, collective identities and affective attitudes of the participants of the protests. Banners are seen as a specific form of political and protest discourse that functions simultaneously as a text and a visual symbol defined by the political and social situation. The main possibility that multimodal semiotic analysis provides is to equally interpret the visual message that is sent, along with the language one (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). Thus, the multimodal method realize the contemporary communication as a product of several related modalities such as the use of language, visual elements, social and political context, etc. More precisely, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) believe that there is a connection between the discourse, the design, the production and the distribution. “Multimodality can afford not just a new way to make meaning, but a different kind of meaning” (Hull & Nelson 2005: 255). The application of multimodal semiotic analysis enables a systematic observation of messages on banners as dynamic political texts that simultaneously function as a mean of political articulation, symbolic resistance and collective identity.

The analysis itself is carried out through different levels that are interconnected. First of all, semiotic modes are defined, which include: 1) verbal mode such as slogans, expressions, quotes, and similar; 2) visual mode: drawings,

photographs, use of colors...; 3) typographic mode: text layout, emphasizing, font size and others. At the next level, intra-modal analysis is developed. At this level, it is examined the way the meaning is constituted within individual modes. In verbal analysis, lexical choices, syntactic structures, metaphors, irony and intertextuality are considered. Visual analysis includes symbolic representations, color contrasting and degree of visual salience. Typographic analysis relies on font size and layout in relation to text and visual effects. Then, an inter-modal analysis is developed. Inter-modal analysis examines the relationships between modes, that is, the ways in which verbal and visual elements complement, reinforce or contrast each other. Special consideration is given to cases in which the meaning of the banners does not derive from one dominant mode, but from their synergy, which as a result have complex and often ambiguous messages. At the last level, there is a complete semiotic analysis that is based on three main principles: 1) iconicity - when visual or typographic elements imitate or symbolically represent content of the protest; 2) indexicality - when the banner refers to specific social actors, events or the spatio-temporal context of the protest; 3) discursive import – when elements from other discursive domains (pop-culture, media, history, internet meme) are transferred into the protest discourse.

As an auxiliary method in this work, the critical discourse analysis is used. Critical discourse analysis examines the use of language in “the framework of the social context in which it is placed, and examines the connections between language and social conditions, ideology and power (Wodak 1996: 17). It takes into account all relevant aspects such as political, historical, cultural and others (Huckin 1997: 87-88). More precisely, through critical discourse analysis, language is not perceived as a neutral mean of communication, but as a social practice through which they are articulate, reproduce and contest relations of power, ideologies and political interests. The banners are seen as condensed forms of political discourse, in which complex social problems and political demands are articulated in the public space, often as short but affectively toned messages. In accordance with Fairclough’s (2023) three-dimensional model, the discourse is analyzed simultaneously as a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice. This approach enables to perceive messages from banners not only at the language structure level, but also in context of their production, distribution and social meaning. Within textual analysis it is explored the lexical use

of words, stylistic figures, the strategy of naming and marking social actors (the distinction between “us” and “them”), the presence of explicit or implicit ideological attitudes, and the special attention is paid to ways of promoting the protest values and demands. The process of production and circulation of banner messages is analyzed through discursive practice. Discursive strategies such as calling for legitimization and delegitimization of opponents, polarization, emotionalization and moralization can also be observed within it. At the macro level, the banners are interpreted as a part of the wider socio-political context of Serbia. It is analyzed how protest messages: 1) reflect existing relations of power and domination; 2) challenge institutional authorities; 3) articulate collective identities and forms of resistance; 4) participate in the process of political mobilization and public deliberation.

#### **4. Rebranded symbols from the nineties**

At the first protest that was organized in December in Belgrade, there was a big banner: “Belgrade is (again) the world”, which completely resembles the banner from 1996, when it was written “Belgrade is the world”. In this way, the students wanted to connect the current protest with the protest from 1996 and draw a parallel with the nature of the current government, which was personified in Aleksandar Vučić, and the government led by Slobodan Milošević. Also, a noticeable similarity with the 1996 protest was the banner: “Sonja, marry me.” During the protests of the nineties, one of the leaders was Čedomir Jovanović, who was popular among the female population, and for this reason, quite a few female students wore badges with the message: “Čeda, marry me”. This time, Sonja was chosen not without reason, because she is a student of the Faculty of Law who was hit by a car during a traffic blockade due to a 16-minute memorial to the victims in Novi Sad, and it can be considered that she was one of the people who later led to the suspension of classes at the faculties of almost all universities in Serbia. Another comparison to the period of the 1990s was also seen on the banner: “The time has come, as Sloba to pass.” The message was sent to Aleksandar Vučić, linking it to the end of Slobodan Milošević’s rule. Symbolism with protests from the late nineties of the last century is also noticeable in the “Ferrari” flag. According to the media, that flag also attracted the attention of the Italian public, and it ended up at the protest quite by accident,

as a sign of recognition in the crowd<sup>4</sup>. Given that it has become a symbol of a time and struggle, the same owner of that flag decided to bring it to the current protests that are happening in Serbia.

## 5. Answers to the statements of government representatives

The President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić, said before the protest in December in Belgrade: “If I were to go out and insult them, if I were to go out and fight, if I were to bring out the *Cobras* and scatter them all, it wouldn’t take six or seven seconds, nobody thought of it.”<sup>5</sup> The *Cobras* represent the elite police brigade. Based on this, a banner was created: “Bring out the Cobras, we are anacondas.” Apart from the elements of rhyming when this message is spoken in Serbian, the students wanted to make an allusion that they are stronger than the authorities, because anacondas are the largest and heaviest representatives of snakes and therefore stronger than cobras. Allusion represents a stylistic figure in which the meaning is realized in an indirect way, more precisely by referring to some other known meaning (Maširević, 2007: 421).

At the celebration of Serbia’s State Day (February 15th), President Aleksandar Vučić spoke about the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik: “Now I think, something important is happening for calling me, I’m leaving the meeting. Since he likes to hide that phone, and whenever I see that the phone number is hidden, I know it’s Mile. I go out, then answer, because I don’t answer the other hidden ones. And now I think he has something important to say, and Mile says: Just to hear you, to see if you are in a good mood, how are you?”<sup>6</sup>. The answer to that was a banner with a ringing phone that read: “Mile - hidden number”. The absurdity is noticeable here, because it is impossible to know who is calling from a hidden number and the participants of the protest presented Vučić’s absurd statement only in a graphic way. In their statements, representatives of the authorities often challenged the students that they are “idle” and that they “don’t get up before high-noon”, and in response to that a banner appeared with the message: “They say we don’t get up before

<sup>4</sup> <https://resetka.rs/sta-predstavlja-ferari-zastava-na-protestima/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2025/1/3/vucic-kobrama-prijeti-studentima>

<sup>6</sup> <https://direktno.rs/vesti/drustvo-i-ekonomija/586986/aleksandar-vucic-milorad-dodik-skriveni-broj-poziv.htm>

noon, but here we are at 11:52”. It is no coincidence that the emphasis is on 11:52 am, because at that time the canopy fell in Novi Sad.

During the duration of the student protests, counter-transparencies appeared on which only the middle finger was drawn, and the public has not yet found out who was the creator of those transparencies. Basically, in response to that banner, the students in the blockade made a banner that read: “You give us the middle finger, we give you the index finger - everyone has what they got from school.” The „student index“ is what characterizes every student in Serbia and it is record of grades and other pre-examination activities and achievements.

What can be heard very often in the government’s narrative in recent years is that Serbia is developing economically, and the term “economic tiger” has been used several times for this purpose. For this reason, during a protest in Belgrade, a banner called “Animal Farm” was found on which there was a picture of a tiger – because Serbia was called an “economic tiger” several times by representatives of the ruling majority; a cobra – because, as already said, President Vučić threatened the participants of the protest that he could send special police forces “Cobras”, and bison because there is a vulgar nickname for the representative of the Serbian Progressive Party Vladimir Đukanović, as “Đuka Bison”. The symbolism of this banner should also be connected with George Orwell’s famous “Animal Farm”, which describes a society ruled by animals. Among the animals, a giraffe was used as an illustration with the caption “It’s up to my throat, too.” In the Serbian language, when it is said that it has come “to the throat” it means that it has come to an end. A giraffe that has a long neck and needs a lot “up to the throat” was deliberately taken. Also, the giraffe was a symbol of the government of Dragan Marković Palma in Jagodina, who was a coalition partner of the Serbian Progressive Party, because more than ten years ago he built a zoo in Jagodina where a male giraffe first “moved in”, and since then the giraffe has become the symbol of that zoo.

The Speaker of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, told the public that during her official visit to Venezuela, she had the opportunity to find out in the conversations she had with “ordinary” people in that country that they only had words of praise for Vučić and that they called him “amigo”. This was used for the creation of the banner „Hey Vučić, amigo, your people has risen“ (*Vučiću amigo, narod ti se digo*). The abbreviated form of the verb *dići* (raise, go

up) was used, in order to have a certain kind of rhyme with the first part of the sentence, so that effect was also achieved, with a clear allusion to make fun of Ana Brnabić's statement.

Immediately before the Vidovdan protest on June 28, Aleksandar Vučić announced that the official promoter of the EXPO exhibition, which will be held in Belgrade in 2027, is the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt. In response to that decision of the current government in Serbia, a banner followed at student protests that read: "Bolt will not serve, this is a marathon", wanting to point out the fact that they are ready to persevere in protests as long as necessary and that the entire situation in Serbia from November 2024 represents a kind of "marathon" in which the ruling structures and students in the blockade are fighting. During the protests Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that he would write a book "how he defeated the color-revolution" and that he would "promote that book on Vidovdan" (June 28)<sup>7</sup>. However, that did not happen, and then it served to be found as part of the transparent messages at the protest that was held on June 28 in Belgrade. One banner read: "You have issued everything, except the book." The verb "issue" in the Serbian language can have several meanings, in the specific example it refers to the fact that he *betrayed* the national interests, and in the second part of the message, which refers to the book, it is explained that he has not yet *published* the book he said he would write. As another of the unfulfilled promises, the students in the blockade pointed out the non-construction of the Belgrade metro by the long overdue deadline through the banner "Whoever is bothered by the blockades should take the metro".

## 6. Neologisms on banners

"Neologisms are words that have appeared in a language in connection with new phenomena and concepts, but have not yet entered the active vocabulary of a significant part of the original words of that language" (Behera & Mishra, 2013: 26). When a neologism is accepted in speech, it becomes known (Bulatović, 2010: 110). A noticeable neologism on the banners is "I will expode". That neologism is composed of two words. The first part refers to the EXPO exhibition, which the current government in Serbia talks about

<sup>7</sup> <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-spremam-se-da-do-vidovdana-napisem-knjigu-kako-sam-pobedio-oboenu-revoluciju-u-srbiji/>

very often and is therefore part of the discourse at the protests, while, on the other hand, a large part of the money has been allocated for various objects that are being built on that occasion in a completely non-transparent manner. The second part of the word refers to the slang use of the word “explode”, which is used in the sense that someone is nervous because he does not have a solution to his problem, and it is clear that this is addressed to Aleksandar Vučić. At the same time, given that it is used in the first person singular future, it can be interpreted that the participants of the protest suffer such feelings if certain social and political changes do not occur through the current protests that are being organized.

Another neologism that emerged from the protest is the word *ćaci*. That word was created on the basis of the word *đaci* (pupils). Namely, a photo of a banner put up by supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party with the message: “Pupils in school” having an orthographic mistake, was published in social media. In the Cyrillic script, there is indeed a similarity between the letters “Ć” (Ђ) and “Đ” (Ђ). Regardless, such a banner became the object of a joke and the word *ćaci* became a new word that began to denote sympathizers and members of the Serbian Progressive Party, as well as a certain level of incompetence possessed by certain cadres of the Serbian Progressive Party. One of the banners created on the basis of this neologism is: “You are either a sonorous Đ or you are a silent Ć”. In the Serbian language, there are phonetic changes that can lead to different wording of the same word depending on the case in which they are used or whether the word is singular or plural. One of the phonetic changes that exists in the Serbian language is the equalization of consonants by sonority, and this is exactly what was used as the main motif on the banner, with a clear allusion that the students in the blockade are “sonorously Đ”, and members and sympathizers of the Serbian Progressive Party are “silent Ć”. In addition, since the end of February, a group of students that calls itself “Students who want to learn” and opposes the blockades of the faculty, has been in the center of Belgrade between the Presidency building and the National Assembly.

They pitched their tents there. That is why the following banner appeared during the March 15 protest in Belgrade: “Four Ćaci in Ćaci-land are kneeling and tweeting”. In all the words in this banner, except for the word *Ćaciland*, the letter Ć is used instead of Ć. This banner represents a modified speeder similar to: “Four squibs on a squib crouching squishy”. A similar banner in which Ć

was used instead of Č was also the one: “Man, it cannot go like this anymore”<sup>8</sup>. The number four (4) should also be noted, which should show how many students are opposed to the protests. We should also mention the banner: “Ćaci, Ćaci, you are here in/ex patri”. An ambiguous message that wants to say that the *ćaci* are foreigners in this country, and that at the same time they are members of the party (Serbian Progressive Party)<sup>9</sup>. Also, another banner that used the word *ćaci* was the one that illustrated a Google search, with the inscription “What *ćaci* search” and the first column is: “Difference between Đ and Ć”. Another transparent message read: “Ć as *ćorka*”. The slang language was used here and the *ćorka* means prison. The following banners can be seen in a similar context: “*Ćaci u ćorku*” and “Puna škola *ćaka*”.<sup>10</sup>

## 7. Popular culture as inspiration

Popular culture can be defined as something that “appeals to a large number of people” (Storey, 2015: 76). There are different positions in the theoretical study of popular culture. On the one hand, it is said that popular culture produces mass media, and they all together reduce the possibility of rebellion and critical reflection (Keane, 1995: 97). However, there is also an approach within which it is considered more common “products” of popular culture represent a struggle against the system (Labaš & Mihailović, 2011: 101). When looking back at the situation in SFR Yugoslavia, which had a one-party system, the only way to express criticism of the society at that time was through films and music, which are one of the most common elements of popular culture. The creators of such content had to take care to make latent allusions to the malignant elements of the society at that time so that their content would not be censored. Therefore, it is not surprising that song lyrics or modified lines from movies and series were frequent inspirations for writing posters during the current protests in Serbia.

One such transparency is an illustration from the movie “Cold Dead” with one of the main characters portrayed by actor Nenad Jezdić and his line in which he says: “It’s not nice that you lie.” It is clear that this message was sent by the demonstrators to President Aleksandar Vučić. However, from this time

<sup>8</sup> or. „Više ne ide ovako *ćoeće*“, using Ć double times, instead of Č

<sup>9</sup> Note also the word PATRI which is similarly pronounced as PARTY, making another allusion

<sup>10</sup> The riddle in its original form reads: “A school full of students, a door from nowhere”

distance, it remains questionable whether the protesters would carry a banner with the actor Nenad Jezdić on it, because he's one of the actors who refused to give public support to the protests after the performance by carrying a student "index" when greeting the audience. Also, a banner was spotted: "Dunjica, it's me - Blockade". This banner represents a line from the series "The sin of her mother" when the main character says in one episode: "Dunjica, it's me - Neda". That replica gained its popularity thanks to social media and is more popular than during the premieres of the original series.

A special inspiration was the series "Love, Habit, Panic", which has reached its greatest popularity in the past few years, also due to social networks. In addition, it should be emphasized that the main heroine in the series is played by actress Jelisaveta Seka Sablić, who is one of the most prominent artists who criticizes the current government in Serbia. So many of her replicas from that series were modified into banners such as: "I have something to say to the *ćacis*, you burned our country and took 30 euros, and I will burn you whole and for nothing." In addition to representing her reworked quote from the series, one should also note the desire for those individuals who do not support the protests to be associated with the "destruction" of the state and receiving money for promoting an attitude that is uncritically directed towards the authorities. Another modified replica from this series is the banner: "Baby, are you ready? Let's pump." By the way, the word "pump" has become one of the main features of the protests, and you often hear exactly that chanting at protests, and banners with such a message are also common.

A banner with a quote from the series "The storks will return" was often noticed, which was transmitted literally as in the series: "We didn't gather here, we have spread here and we will continue to spread and spread". Also, a scene from the series "The village is burning, and the grandmother combs her hair" was used, only adapted for the protest with the message: "Dad, look how many people are there." Inspiration was also found in the replica from the series "Open Door", which was broadcast during the nineties on the public media service Radio-television of Serbia (RTS), and was a critique of the social phenomena of that time. For this reason, it is not surprising that there are certain motives that appeared at this protest, and specifically the retort "I came to ask you to ride together" was used in the form of "I came to ask you to pump together". From the movie "Who's singing there" the quote "Drill, drill, drill" was modified to "Pump, pump, pump".

The character of Srećko Šojić, played by Milan Lane Gutović, was also very “present” in the films “Tied skin”, which has several sequels, and the series “White Ship”. Gutović was also very critical of the government of Aleksandar Vučić during his life, and the banners used his quotes such as “Comrades, the time of busting is coming” which he utters in “Tied skin”. From the “White Ships” series, Šojić’s quote “What’s up with that *cafficcino*” was reworked into “What’s up with the fulfillment of requests.” Also present was the character of the actor Nikola Kojo from the Serbian version of series and movie “Blackadder”, where he plays Karađorđe - the man who started the creation of modern Serbia by leading the First Serbian Uprising against the Turks. So the character of Karađorđe was not chosen by chance, nor is the fact that he is portrayed by Nikola Kojo, who is another in a series of actors who have criticized the current government in recent years. We should not ignore a similar banner that appears at several different protests in recent years, which is a quote from the movie “Balkan Spy” that says “Tell Đura to block the airport” with the allusion that no one should be allowed to escape from the country.

In the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and especially in Serbia during the last decades of the 20th century, the comic “Alan Ford” was extremely popular, which is characterized by the fact that the authors used sentences that in themselves sound very logical. An example of one such sentence is “If you want to win, you must not lose.” That was almost certainly the inspiration for the “If you want to win, you gotta pump” banner. And again we have to note a wish to emphasize one of the main slogans of the protest “to pump”. Like “Alan Ford” in some past times, the cartoon “SpongeBob” has also been popular in recent years. It was the illustration of SpongeBob and Patrick that served as one of the banners with the inscription “Patrick, let’s hunt for justice.” In this way, a significant value promoted at the protests was highlighted, namely justice and responsibility. A children’s song was also used, which in its original form reads: “Hey you little wolf, you lazy bug, what will generations say...”. In the spirit of protest, it took the following form on one banner: “Hey you little wolf, you bribed bug, what will the generations say.” The verses “Hey you little wolf” were addressed to Vučić<sup>11</sup>, and “bribed bug” that his government is characterized by corruption, which was one of the reasons for organizing the protests.

<sup>11</sup> The surname Vučić has its origin in meaning „little wolf“ or „baby wolf“, which opens a protesters the large field of possibilities to make idioms and language games with it.

Similarly, ten years ago in Serbia, jokes particularly popular were those in which the main hero was the actor Chuck Norris, who always turned out to be the strongest and smartest. The creators of the banners also found inspiration in him: “Chuck Norris, pump harder, conquer Serbia!” and “Noris Chuck, let’s pump harder.” Again, the main motif is “pumping”. It was mentioned to what extent social media created the popularity of certain sequences from movies and series, but definitely that certain contents created exclusively for social networks such as Instagram and Tik-Tok have the effect of being inspirational for writing banners. In recent months, one of the most popular tiktokers in Serbia is an elderly gentleman who often talks about different pleasures in food and drink in a particularly hoarse voice, and is extremely popular among the younger population. He said in one clip, “I can’t straighten up, third espresso in a row.” In the reworked version, the transparent message read: “I can’t straighten, third month in a row a strong block.”

As for the lyrics, the lyrics of Đorđe Balašević dominated, whose songs have been perceived for years as criticism of the government and rebellious, and this is based on his creation during the nineties when he actively fought against the government of Slobodan Milošević. The fact that Đorđe Balašević was the inspiration for the banner is additionally important because he lived in Novi Sad, and the protests started because of the tragic event that happened in Novi Sad. Examples of Balasevic’s verses on banners are: “Live freely”; “And everything by the law, I am the first for that, there would not be this blood if everything was by the law”; “I don’t like schizophrenics and nervous patients, before they were released for the weekend, now they are released right in front of the cameras.” In the second quote, there is a clear connection with one of the basic demands of the protest, which is to prosecute all those responsible for the accident that happened in Novi Sad. The third quote aims to explain the current media scene in Serbia. Criticism of the media in Serbia was also addressed to “Pink” television, which is known for broadcasting reality programs and supporting the current government for many years. That is why the banner “Turn off Reality, look at reality” was sent to them. In addition, the lyrics of some other songs that were popularized through the protests appeared, and lyrics such as “I don’t want to be afraid of the dark” and “This is the country for us” should be singled out.

Apart from Balašević’s songs, the lyrics of some other songs from the nineties were reworked, such as the lyrics from the song “Blue Elephant” by the

group “Twins”. In the spirit of protest, those verses sounded: “Last night, I dreamed of *ćaci* and Vučko, strove their hearts because change is simmering.” Another song that became popular on social networks is “Sleep tight nanny, everything is locked up” got its new form in the form of a banner “Sleep tight nanny, everything is blocked up”. Government representatives have enabled young people to get loans for an apartment on much more favorable terms through a participation of only 1% and lower installments during the first few years of repaying the loan. In response, a banner appeared: “I don’t need your loan and key of an apartment”, which is actually a reworked verse of the hit song “Touch my knees” by the group “Zana”, which says: “Give me your car and the key of an apartment”.

Macedonian singer Toše Proeski and his song “To whom you belong” was also an inspiration, where the original lyrics were left as a banner of Aleksandar Vučić’s message: “Your lips are still tired and everything you say I know it is not”. The motifs of the lips were used because Vučić has prominent lips and the motif of lying, which he wants to attribute to his political activities. Also, a verse from Zdravko Čolić’s song “You look like a doll from Trieste to me” was used as follows: “You look like a mole from Trieste to me”. It was insisted on Trieste because there have been public speculations for months that certain high state officials like Goran Vesić (former Minister of Construction) and Aleksandar Šapić (current mayor of Belgrade) own certain properties in Trieste. Similar elements should be noted in the “After is in Trieste” banner. In Serbia, there is a page on social networks called “After is in Mirijevo”.<sup>12</sup> With that banner, apart from the allusion to the mentioned foreigner, the intention is to show that it will get to Trieste if necessary in order to develop responsibility towards all politicians of the current government.

One of the Serbian singers who in recent years openly supports the government of Aleksandar Vučić through her various public appearances is Jelena Karleuša. Therefore, banners with her image and allusions to her verses and songs were often part of transparent messages. One of these is the one on which she (Jelena Karleuša) and Aleksandar Vučić were drawn with the message “Crime of work” which is, at the same time, the title of one of Jelena Karleuša’s songs, but also the desire to associate the government of Aleksandar Vučić with crime. Also, on one banner Vučić, Karleuša and Ana Brnabić were painted with

<sup>12</sup> Mirijevo is a neighborhood in Belgrade

the message “The Three Musketeers are playing educators”, which indicated the situation that the state of affairs in education wants to be dealt with by those who are not invited to deal with that field. Svetlana Ceca Ražnatović has been seen in public for decades as the main “rival” of Jelena Karleuša. They also had various court cases that they conducted among themselves, and often among those who listen to that type of music, there is a division between fans of one singer and the other. During the spring, when an additional requirement was established in the form of calling elections, and the government representatives rejected such a possibility, another of the songs that became the inspiration for the banners was Svetlana Ceca Ražnatović’s song “The cuckoo bird”. That song is supposed to symbolize someone who is coward, but the title of the song also contains the initials of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, “AV”. However, one participant of the protest declared that he does not support either of these two singers, saying: “We will not watch Ceca<sup>13</sup> and Jeca<sup>14</sup>, we want to hear the children.”

Also, the Croatian pop-singer Severina publicly supported the student protests in Serbia and therefore often “received” banners with her image and messages of gratitude such as: “Seve<sup>15</sup> is by you”. Another singer who received “his” banner is Momčilo Bajagić Bajaga. Namely, in the film “Professional”, which talks about the government and the fall of Slobodan Milošević’s regime, Bajaga performs the song “The Government’s falling down”, which was written for the purposes of that film. In later years, that song became one of the symbols of the fight against any government and is a frequent part of folklore at various protests. After public support for student protests, a banner with Bajaga’s face and a quoted line from the song appeared at one of the gatherings: “What’s that falling down?”.

Therefore, in the framework of popular culture, personalities who criticized the government of Aleksandar Vučić in recent years were chosen, that is, personalities who are perceived as supporters of his government were given a negative connotation in transparent messages. Also, certain elements from foreign popular culture were included, which aimed to draw the attention of the world media to everything that is currently happening in Serbia. There was a presence

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<sup>13</sup> Nickname of Svetlana Ražnatović

<sup>14</sup> Nickname of Jelena Karleuša

<sup>15</sup> Nickname of Severina

of connection with content appearing on social networks, which should not be surprising because the protest is led by young people who are most present on social networks.

## 8. Protest in Niš

The protest in Niš was specific, since Niš is located in the southern part of Serbia, where a different way of speaking dominates. This is most noticeable when using cases, more precisely in that part of Serbia cases are often not used in speech, which leads to a different dialect. That is why the participants of the protest joked in that way through the messages they highlighted on the banners. As the first in a series of banners from that protest, the one with the message “We are not changing cases, but we will change the system” should be mentioned. First of all, it was written incorrectly, that is, the word “cases” was intentionally put in the wrong case. The rest of the message directly expresses what is the goal of all these protest rallies. A similar inspiration was present in the transparent message “We don’t use cases, but we use the head”. Furthermore, it should be noted that the banner with a distinct Niš accent is *Če gi onodimo li?*, which is in complete contradiction to the literary norms of the Serbian language and a large number of Serbian residents would not fully understand this question. However, this style of interrogative form is often used in Niš and other towns in the area. On the other hand, the verb *onoditi* (to pass away, for eg.) has a wide range of meanings and depending on the context of the sentence, it acquires meaning. One of the most famous expressions from Niš is *lele*, which can have both positive and negative meanings, and it is used in the context of a transparent message: *Lele, kuj nas vrača?* It can be concluded that in this context *lele* has a negative meaning. Also, the pronoun *kuj* should be noted, which is also not the norm of the Serbian language, but rather *ko* („who“). The message sent by this is “Who’s cursing us”. When it comes to expressions specific to Niš, the banner “In Niš we don’t say Easy walk, we say *majenje* and I think it’s beautiful” should be mentioned. Probably, this explanation in English is the most similar to the phrase “mingling around”, but it is not too bad to explain this concept further. So, *majenje* is a term used in the southern area of Serbia and means spending time outside the house and socializing without a clear plan. In a similar context, the banner “*Majenje* in Niš does not hap-

pen without pumping” should be viewed. Another in a similar vein was: “AV<sup>16</sup> number one *shuntville*.” It should be connected with a famous video clip from 1999, when FR Yugoslavia was bombed, and one of the locals in the Jagodina settlement said about the president of the United States of America that he was “number one *shuntville*”. By the way, *šuntav* means incompetent and clumsy.

One of the most famous plays from that part of Serbia is “Zona Zamfirova”, in which the Niš-dialect dominates. This was exactly the inspiration for the various banners that were found at the protest in Niš, such as “You will eat a huge silence”. It is a quote from “Zona Zamfirov” that needs to be translated into standard Serbian. It is a saying that means to get a “big beating”. The following transparent message should also be understood in that style: “There will be a great deal of silence if we get stuck in a circle after this!”. The following banner should be understood in the spirit of this message: “Here is expensive money, there is scarcity”. This message describes the current economic situation in the country. A particularly interesting situation was when the Minister of Education in the previous government, Slavica Đukanović Dejanović, was at a ceremony in Niš, and in order to avoid meeting with dissatisfied students, she left the event by going to a side exit. That’s why she got the nickname “Runaway” after the title track from the movie “Zona Zamfirova”, where the main heroine was described in that way.

## 9. Final considerations

The scientific and social contribution of this paper is reflected in the fact that this is one of the first works that deals with the topic of messages on banners at protests held in Serbia and places them in a wider social and political context, that has been developing in Serbia for years. The basic research question that is set at the beginning of the paper was what kind of discourse was present on banners during the organization of student rallies in Serbia in 2024 and 2025. In order to answer the research question as adequately as possible, the methods of multimodal semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis were used.

The analysis of the available banners showed that a humorous discourse prevailed, for which its creators found inspiration in different types of mass culture elements, such as local movies and tv-shows, where different characters

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<sup>16</sup> Initials of Aleksandar Vučić.

were used with real or modified lines, but also verses from many songs that the participants of the protest consider adequate to describe the current state of society or authors who are perceived as critics of the current government. The lyrics of those songs very often remained in their original form, but sometimes some parts were modified. The use of social media wordplays should not be neglected, which shows the extent to which the younger population is present at the protests, but also the desire to target this particular group as a target group for further mobilization, which will see its epilogue with the formation of the so-called Student lists for the first next parliamentary elections. The impression is that they have succeeded, since the interest of young people in political processes and their participation in them, is really growing. The ultimate goal of such messages was the desire to send the basic protest values and demands, such as responsibility, the fight against the corruption, and the persistence that all institutions of the system act respecting their legal frameworks, or to delegitimize government representatives and their political ideas, all that for the purpose of further struggle in the political arena. So it can be interpreted that all the discourses used were in the service of developing certain beliefs in order to expand the sphere of influence and power in political action (Léonard Đorđević & Prieur 2019, 1). For this purpose, paradoxical and condescending statements that could be heard from representatives of the ruling political elites were highlighted. An additional effect of all those messages were drawings and caricatures of various individuals from the sphere of public action. Also, there was a frequent presence of rebranded banners from the student protests during 1996 and 1997, which can be connected to the desire to create in public an image of continuity with those protests, as well as to establish equality between the authorities of Slobodan Milošević and Aleksandar Vučić. Therefore, in all these messages, irony or allusion was used in order to fully develop the effect of humour.

However, certain homonyms, i.e. words that are the same but have different meanings, were used for witty and ambiguous messages. Thus, in the Serbian language there is a word “milieu” which means a piece of crochet cloth that stands on the table as a decorative detail. Also, the same word, pronounced and written in the same way, “milieu”, meaning a part of society, generally in a negative connotation, i.e. that individuals who are classified as “milieu” are unsuccessful and engage in certain illegal activities. As a consequence of these

homonyms, a milieu-shaped banner with the word “criminal” written above was created. When these two symbols are combined, the “criminal milieu” is obtained. At the same time, neologisms were also used, and after many protests we have “new” words in the Serbian language such as “ćaci” or “expode”. It should also be noted that most of the analyzed messages were written in the Serbian language, in the Latin script, which indicates a clear ideological positioning based on the desire for the participants of the protest to address the local public, seeking the legitimization for their further social and political action. It should not be ignored that perhaps to a certain extent, in this way of communication, they tried to prevent the possibility of targeting that they are “foreign mercenaries” and supported by foreign countries for their activities, because such an argument is often used by their political opponents.

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DISKURS TRANSPARENTNIH PORUKA NA STUDENTSKIM  
PROTESTIMA U SRBIJI 2024. I 2025. GODINE

**Sažetak:** *Studentski protesti u Srbiji traju od decembra 2024. godine i proizašli su iz protesta koji su se organizovali tokom novembra 2024. zbog traženja političke odgovornosti za pad nadstrešnice na železničkoj stanici u Novom Sadu koja je usmrtila 16 ljudi. Povodom toga studenti su održavali pomen u 11:52 (vreme u koje je pala nadstrešnica 1. novembra 2024) svakog dana u trajanju od 16 minuta, tačnije minut tišine za svaku žrtvu. Krajem novembra na nekoliko mesta u Beogradu došlo je do udaranja kolima učesnika pomena, a u pojedinačnim slučajevima se ispostavilo da su vozači koji su ih ugrozili povezani sa vladajućim strankama u Srbiji. Sve je to doprinelo da studenti od decembra 2024. organizuju prekid nastave i blokiraju rad fakulteta, a u određenim intervalima organizovali su velike proteste u različitim gradovima u Srbiji tokom 2025. godine. Na tim protestima istican je širok spektar transparentata sa ciljem da se pažnja javnosti usmeri na poruke koje su studenti želeli da pošalju. Zbog toga se ovaj rad bavi diskursom koji je prisutan u tim porukama. Kako bi se istraživačko pitanje na adekvatan način razradilo, korišćene su metode multimodalne semiotičke analize i kritičke analize diskursa. Rezultati pokazuju da se diskurs poruka na transparentima poklapa sa vrednostima poput slobode, odgovornosti ili borbe protiv korupcije, koje se promovišu i na samim protestima. Dominantni diskurs oslanja se na aluzivne i ironične elemente, često inspirisane javnim izjavama državnih zvaničnika, elementima popularne kulture (tekstovima pesama, kao i replikama iz filmova ili televizijskih serija), kao i „rebrandiranjem“ slogana sa protesta iz devedesetih godina, sa namerom da se prizovu paralele i da se vladavina Aleksandra Vučića poveže sa vladavinom Slobodana Miloševića.*

**Ključne reči:** *diskurs, transparenti, protesti, studenti, Srbija.*