

Local Elections - National Themes: Centralizing Personalization of Local Elections in Serbia

Abstract



The 2024 local elections in Serbia are characterized by a campaign in which national themes predominantly occupied a central place while the questions and issues relevant to specific local communities were marginalized. This paper explores various determinants that shape national-oriented campaigns and their impact on voter behavior, with an emphasis on persuasive techniques used in media and the mobilization of public resources by the ruling party. The study aims to comprehend the roots of the nationalization process of local elections and the crucial implications on the democratic process. Using the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) of media coverage (electronic media with national coverage, mainstream printed media, digital editions, as well as prominent local media), the paper offers comprehensive insights into the campaign strategies and their effectiveness. Additionally, the case study of Niš illustrates how national political narratives are strategically performed and amplified directly at the local level, serving as a crucial moment within the media genre chain that both reflects and reinforces centralized power dynamics.

* This paper was submitted on April 25, 2025, and accepted by the Editorial Board for publishing on June 13, 2025.

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Keywords



local elections, national themes, campaigns, media, party

Introduction

Local elections serve as a cornerstone of local democracy, playing a pivotal role in fostering democracy and cultivating a broader participative political culture within society. Local institutions, being more accessible to citizens, have the potential to encourage civic engagement, thereby strengthening civic virtues and enhancing the skills needed for active political involvement. For democracy to be effective, multiple channels of engagement and various opportunities for participation must exist. In that sense, David Held argues that “direct participation and control over immediate locales ... can most realistically advance the principles of participatory democracy” (1996: 269). In the vibrant local political arena, citizens are naturally invested in issues that directly affect their immediate socio-economic environment (Pratchett, 2004).

However, in the Serbian political system, there is a trend of holding parliamentary and local elections simultaneously, which directly impacts the nationalization of local elections. One of the rare exceptions is the year 2004 when the elections were held separately, and partially the elections 2023/4, which are characterized by other specificities that have led to the marginalization of local ones. The main factors include extensive electoral engineering, an intensive ‘functionary campaign’ personalized in the figure of the President, media control, and abuse of public resources. Local themes and issues have faded in the face of loud messages from nation-building and freedom-conquering politics, such as: “Serbs are not a genocidal nation” or “You are destroying the world because of Kosovo” (Informer, 2024).

Therefore, the central focus of this paper is the critical role of media, particularly the pro-government ones, in shaping public opinion during the local elections. The research sheds light on the strategic efforts of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to dominate the public narrative and distort voter behavior, exploring the key pillars of its techniques.

The structure of the paper follows a logical progression that supports the central research question. Following the introduction, the theoretical framework refers to the key concepts related to mediatization and political communications, which inform the subsequent analysis. The paper then contextualizes the Serbian political and electoral system, with an emphasis on the roots of personalization and centralization. This is complemented by a brief overview of recent electoral developments, highlighting the evolving dynamics of power concentration. The methodology section follows, explaining the research design, data collection, and analytical approach used to examine media content. The main analytical section, "Discursive Strategies: Portraying Enemies and Glorifying Charismatic Leadership" focuses on media narratives and communication strategies employed by the ruling party during the electoral campaign. The analysis continues with a case study of the local elections in Niš, which explores how national frames are imposed or challenged in a local setting. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and reflects on their implications for the state of local democracy in Serbia.

Theoretical Framework: Mediatization, Political Communication, and Genre Chains

The conception of media's role within a socio-political reality has undergone a significant transformation, leading to the comprehension that media do not merely function as an objective mirror of that reality; instead, they actively contribute to its construction and (re)creation. (Atlagić, 2019). Furthermore, media are regarded as ideological social institutions (ibid.), one of the crucial agents of political communication with a tendency to discipline and shape public opinion. This dynamic is intrinsically linked to broader questions of legitimacy within the sphere of political power. In other words, power is perpetuated, performed, and promoted through media—captured by the 'three Ps' (perpetuation, performance, and promotion) (Jovanovic, 2018). In that sense, the highlighted 'front-stage performances' have importantly shifted the landscape of contemporary politics. In the context of political campaigns, increasingly sophisticated pre-election self-mediatization and the emergence of new media genres have enriched traditional political communication techniques (Forchtner et al., 2013).

The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) together with its actual leader, Aleksandar Vučić, effectively achieves the recontextualization of discourse and rhetorical elements by combining the classical formats

(such as TV advertisements, newspaper articles, and billboards) with innovative hybrid genres (Reels/TikTok videos, social media campaigns, memes, infographics and data visualizations etc.). This multi-dimensional approach enables them to disseminate the message across various media platforms and public spaces, strategically targeting and reaching different segments of the electorate while maintaining control over the desired narrative. Exploring the idea of hybrid genres, I draw on Fairclough's concept of genre chains, as interpreted by Forchtner et al. (2013). "The latter captures the fact that an election campaign, an event or a chain of events involves a variety of texts which... are skillfully linked and reproduced in a "chain" of different genres" (Forchtner et al., 2013). In that changed type of system, as Grande claims (Grande, 2000), the functionality of political power is no longer rooted in negotiation, deliberation, and governance (ger. *Verhandlungsdemokratie*), but primarily in how political figures manage their media presence (*Mediendemokratie*). Consequently, political achievements or failures are increasingly attributed not to institutional effectiveness or measurable policy outcomes, but to the individual politicians who can (or cannot) successfully navigate the complexities of image and narrative-making within the spotlight (Grande, 2000).

Following these observations, the current Serbian political landscape reflects similar trends, where national political figures, especially President Vučić, dominate public discourse, perpetuating an atmosphere resembling an ongoing electoral campaign. The following result is that local elections and candidates are marginalized by the controlled media-driven narratives centered around these key actors and the issues they prioritize. However, the processes of personalization and centralization in Serbian politics are deeply embedded in the country's political and electoral system, which creates a fertile ground for such an influential media role in these dynamics. This broader institutional design will be contextualized in the following section to better frame the analysis.

Political and Electoral Context in Serbia

The roots of electoral personalization and centralization can be found in both the electoral system and the party system of Serbia, where the combination of closed-list proportional representation and strong party leadership allows for the concentration of political power in the hands of party elites. In proportional electoral systems, the voting base primarily concentrates on the party, resulting in campaigns focusing more on party platforms and ideology. This leads to increased centralization, with a top-down approach where the leadership firmly establishes control (Orlović, 2012). With its focus on a single dominant figure, this system further reinforces the centralization of campaigns, making national party leaders the focal point of the political landscape and overshadowing local candi-

dates and issues. Another essential factor that should be considered is the closed list system. As Bursać claims, the nomination of parliamentary representatives is “under the decisive influence of party elites, often exclusively the party leader” (Bursać, 2024). However, this logic of candidate selection extends beyond the national level, as local party branches are likewise often heavily dependent on central party leadership. Set up this way, the system has two main consequences. Firstly, it affects the candidates and their behavior, as the chance of their re-election is tightly connected to party loyalty. Secondly, regarding voter behavior, trust in a representative democracy is undermined as they do not have any control over the people they are choosing, making this connection between them highly depersonalized. The combination of these two is a clear sign of a “party-dominant and hyper-centralized system” (Vučićević & Jovanović, 2015).

This structure, alongside the presidentialization of the political system through direct presidential elections, strengthens the power of party elites and contributes to the paradox of “extreme political personalization around party leaders while representation itself becomes increasingly depersonalized” (Bursać, 2024). In such a party system, parties themselves and their political programs are perceived through the key party leaders, but most frequently through a single political actor and a personal brand. In some cases, electoral lists are carried not just by leaders’ names, but also by their recognizable nicknames (e.g. Čeda-Boris-Čanak in the 2016 elections), which further emphasizes the importance of personal branding. Additionally, Spasojević and Stojiljković (as cited in: Stojanović, 2022) highlight other concerning trends such as the limited local branches’ autonomy, ultimately concluding that “party leaders are central figures in Serbia’s political system”. Therefore, national party leadership and political trends frequently shape the discourse and outcomes at the local level, intertwining both processes in a way that positions local elections within the broader framework of national political developments.

Acknowledging that the local elections held on the second of June are inextricably linked to the broader electoral landscape of the year before, the main findings in 2023 electoral events need to be explored. Early local and parliamentary elections were held in Serbia on 17 December 2023, continuing the trend of snap elections “averaging one election per 2.5 years” (Pavlovic, 2024). Shortly before the elections, the overall climate was unstable and subsequently triggered widespread protests. A significant number of protestors addressed the issue of the rise of violence on TV channels with national frequency, media control, and inadequate reporting as one of the catalysts of the ongoing violent atmosphere. Criticism mainly focused on the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media –REM as one of the pillars that were supposed to regulate the use of national licenses—exactly those broadcasters were the ones who misused their permits in favor of ruling political elites.

Although protests began to subside, the prevailing societal climate prompted President Vučić to propose early elections, trying to capitalize on the general feelings of insecurity. On the 1st of November, the president dissolved the parliament and called early elections, stating that this response to the opposition's demands. The election race has begun as the Mayor of Belgrade and more than 20 municipal leaders – all from the SNS – have orchestrated their resignations.

As stated in the OSCE report, “overall subdued campaign was dominated by the incumbent president, and was characterized by hardened polarization, aggressive rhetoric, personal discreditation, verbal abuse, and inflammatory language” (OSCE, 2024). The final report, published in late February 2024, acknowledged that although the voting in December was technically well conducted, significant concerns remained. These included the overwhelming influence of the President of the Republic and the inherent advantages enjoyed by the ruling party: biases in media coverage, inequities within the public sector, and the improper use of public resources during the campaign (ODIHR 2024).

Despite the implementation of some of the ODIHR recommendations and the establishment of an official dialogue between the authorities and the opposition, the elections in June were held in an atmosphere of political dissatisfaction among the opposition, fragmented opposition coalition (with some parties boycotting the elections), Furthermore, the continued lack of media pluralism, voter pressures and abuse of public resources were identified. The media environment was polarized, with national issues overshadowing local matters, and dominant narratives creating a referendum-like atmosphere that once again emphasized the national leader (CRTA, 2024).

Having established the political and institutional context of Serbia's electoral landscape, the next section outlines the methodological approach employed in this research.

Methodology

This research aims to explore how the interplay between the discursive strategies of the ruling party, particularly those articulated by President Vučić, and the narrative framing employed by pro-government media, contributed to the centralization and personalization of the 2024 local elections in Serbia. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining:

- 1) A secondary analysis of scientific articles, research, and reports of relevant domestic and international organizations (e.g. CRTA, OSCE), situating the findings within broader academic discussions on media influence and election dynamics;
- 2) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of media content disseminated during the pre-election period. The CDA method is employed to

examine the content of traditional media (e.g. nationally broadcast television and tabloids), as well as new media (e.g. web portals and social media), with the aim of a) identifying the predominant focus on national rather than local concerns and political actors; b) comprehending the process of shaping voter perceptions and behavior through the communication strategies of the ruling party and its main actors. This analytical approach is particularly suited for uncovering ideological bias and power dynamics, allowing for a detailed understanding of how national narratives are constructed to dominate over local political discourse.

To identify the main techniques of media under the control of the ruling party, I analyzed all the front pages of *Informer* published during the official campaign period – from April 26th to June 2nd. Front pages² were selected as the primary unit, given their function in conveying the most prominent and emotionally charged headlines aimed at shaping public perception. The tabloid *Informer* was chosen due to its high circulation and close ties to the ruling regime, making it a relevant case for comprehending the government-controlled media apparatus and its role in the electoral discourse. In parallel, selected posts on President Vučić's official Instagram account are extracted to trace how he strategically built his brand during this period and fostered a referendum-like atmosphere (CRTA, 2024).

In addition to this broader media analysis, the research integrates the case study of the local elections in Niš, which is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, the opposition narrowly lost the local elections, with the minority Russian Party playing a decisive role. According to preliminary data, the opposition received 3,332 more votes overall than the ruling coalition, but due to coalition dynamics and vote distribution, the ruling coalition retained power. The second reason is the significant role and the electoral result (24,5%) of the local citizen group *Dr. Dragan Milić*. Through this case study, the local media coverage is analyzed to investigate whether the local media and actors conformed to the prevailing national narrative or maintained a degree of resistance to the dominant tendencies.

Discursive Strategies: Portraying Enemies and Glorifying Charismatic Leadership

As noted in CRTA's Final Report on Belgrade elections (CRTA, 2024), the discourse of officials from the ruling party, particularly state officials, portrayed both the Belgrade and local elections as a referendum on the President's ability to defend the country's vital interests at a critical moment for the state. His style of governance has proven to be fundamentally linked to the media (Jovanović, 2018), particularly daily tabloids such

[2] 31 pages in total;

as *Informer* and *Alo!*, whose coverage during the election campaign will be the focal points of the following analysis. The mentioned sources have represented him for years both as a) *the unbeatable leader* of the Serbian sovereign nation; and 2) *the greatest victim* who sacrifices himself for the Serbian cause, fighting against numerous visible and invisible, external and internal enemies of the nation. This duality is essential for understanding how emotional appeals to readers distort the perception of political reality, allowing actors to influence the narrative framework through which political events are interpreted. To construct and maintain a preferred version of reality, *half-truths* (a blend of factual and deceptive information) are strategically employed to obscure the full scope of meaning. Although the linguistic techniques used to achieve *discursive deception* (Galasinski, 2000) are diverse, the most common strategy is the one that enables the construction of “*the Other*” (“*Them*”), about which a positive “*Us*” identity is established. This approach draws clear lines between in-groups and out-groups, reinforcing group identity and undermining and discrediting alternative perspectives.

The basic logic behind Foucault’s concepts of *division* and *rejection* (Foucault, 2013) is applied here through the portrayal of “them” (e.g., “opposition bullies”, “Serbophobes”, “tycoons”), what “they” do (“Dilas continues to rape Serbia”, “lobbying for Kurti and attacking Serbs from the Republic of Srpska”), what “they” have done (“raged in the assembly and attacked our people from RS”), or what “they” might do (“hellish plan to strike the state”, “they are threatening civil war” [Informer, 2024]).

Below are a few examples of the linguistic constructions that the pro-regime tabloid *Informer* circulated on its front pages during the pre-election campaign for the 2024 local elections. However, this general pattern of representing opponents (real or imaginary ones) as not just rivals but as existential threats provides discourse that frames the democratic process, political competition, and debate as a high-stakes struggle for the nation’s survival. In that context, the elections on June 2nd are portrayed as “fateful” for the Serbian state, significantly blurring the distinctions between local and national governance, and consolidating the personalizing element, as Vučić is portrayed as the only protector of national interests (CRTA, 2024).

What has affected national interests while marginalizing any significance of local issues and actors during the pre-electoral period? A closer examination of the media coverage reveals that the most prominently communicated topics included:

- Adoption of the UN Resolution on the genocide in Srebrenica: The media framing emphasized a narrative of victimization and existential danger, as evidenced by prominent headlines such as “The West is plotting genocide against us!” and “Serbs face threats of war due to Srebrenica” (Informer, 2024c). President Vučić’s trip to New York was depicted as a pivotal mission to safeguard Ser-

bia's sanctity, freedom, and national dignity, with his actions being portrayed through messianic undertones ("I will fight for Serbia: I fear neither prison nor death") (Informer, 2024r).

...The sanctity you are protecting is far greater than the force attacking you. Serbian people, hold your heads high, we will fight fiercely! Remember my words, Serbia will win! (Vučić, 2024)

- Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe: Kosovo remained an unavoidable topic throughout this period, frequently communicated alongside the overarching issue of the Srebrenica Resolution, as it stands on the front page of *Informer*: "The West does not want peace, but to punish the Serbs – Mad Kurti left without the Council of Europe!" (Informer, 2024q). Additionally, it is noticeable that media framing was linking Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti with the opposition and its leaders: "Opposition haters side with Šiptars: Đilasovci (Đilas' followers) spread Kurti's lies again" (Informer, 2024g). These communication strategies blurred the distinctions between domestic and foreign "enemies," consolidating a narrative of the ruling party as the sole defender of national integrity and leveraging nationalist sentiment to consolidate support, while marginalizing opposition voices in the electoral process.
- The official visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Belgrade: "The whole of China is talking about Vučić and Serbia; We are building the future with China; Steel friendship with China" (Informer, 2024j). A total of 8 posts about the visit were made between May 6th and 12th on President Vučić's official Instagram profile, and he even wished for the Chinese leader to rule for a long time. It seems that Chinese democracy is slightly closer to him than the Western-type one, as:

...For such friendship, respect, and loyalty - only the sky's the limit! (Vučić, 2024).

The communication around the visit bolsters Vučić's image as a global statesman standing "shoulder to shoulder" with Xi Jinping, enhancing Serbia's status as a key ally in the global resistance to Western hegemony. Moreover, this strategic communication goes beyond foreign policy—it implicates the domestic political landscape by framing the opposition as aligned with Western interests, often depicted as traitorous actors working with foreign entities to destabilize the nation and the state. The narrative of Serbia as a bastion of sovereignty, with Vučić positioned as a strong, resolute leader on par with Xi Jinping, further consolidates his role as the protector of national dignity and autonomy.

- The EXPO project: The EXPO 2027 project has been framed as an exceptional opportunity for economic growth, enhancing Serbia's already expanding global image. While actual estimates do not suggest such large-scale earnings, public discourse has played with the projected figures, highlighting potential profit for the state, as well as the substantial investments required for the project's realization. The project has been portrayed as a crucial initiative, not only for Belgrade, where the exhibition will be hosted, but for the whole country, which reflects a communication strategy that emphasizes national progress, even when realistic projections remain uncertain.

The title “Complete madness – Savo: *EXPO should be canceled*” (Informer, 2024aa) fits into the broader narrative of characterizing the opposition as irrational and incapable of understanding or acting in the state's best interest. Such constructions serve to discredit opposition leaders like Sava Manojlović by framing their critiques, particularly of high-profile state projects such as EXPO, as not only unfounded or wrong but as “madness”.

The examined communication strategies transform local elections into a sort of extension of national politics, with Vučić positioned as a near-messianic figure, which further sidelines local democratic discourse. By framing elections around existential national narratives, local candidates lose opportunities to engage with voters on issues that matter most to their communities, reinforcing the top-down, centralized control over the political agenda.

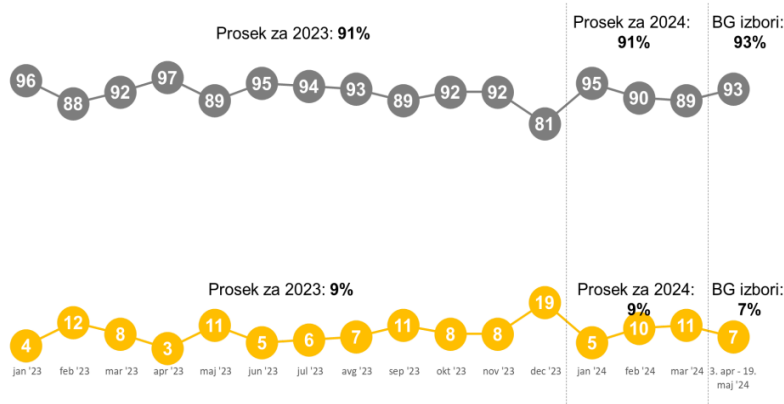
Identification of the Party and the State: Functionary Campaign and Abuse of Public Resources

The identification of the party with the state is one of the crucial mechanisms of SNS to maintain its hegemony within the party system in Serbia and political dominance in electoral campaigns. The media also amplifies this narrative, equating the success of the state and the nation with the success of the party and, more specifically, its leader, Aleksandar Vučić. This fusion is represented in the name of the SNS list on 2024 local elections – “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia tomorrow” (with proper adaptations for different municipalities/cities), which cements the perception that voting against the ruling party is akin to voting against Serbia's future and national interests.

The main findings of the CRTA monitoring mission indicate an almost complete absence of pluralism in the media during the electoral campaign. The average representation of government representatives reached 93%, while the opposition accounted for only 7%. Unlike the

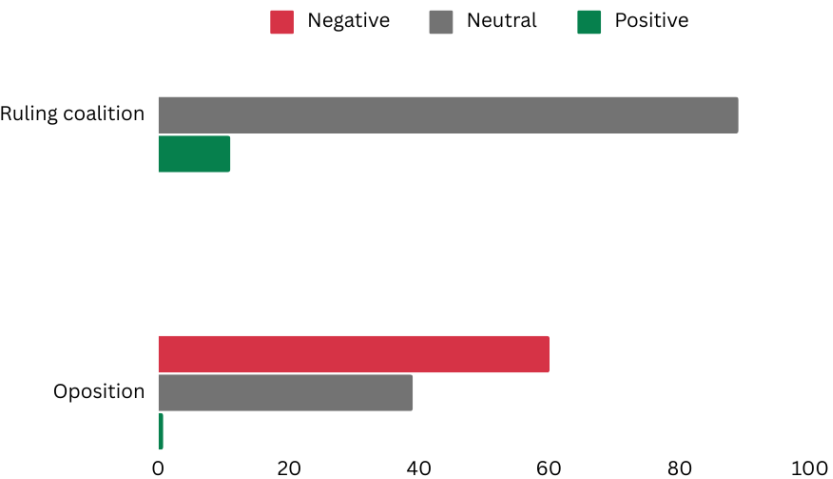
ruling party, the opposition is primarily covered negatively, with neutral reporting following, and positive coverage being very infrequent. All national broadcasters, including public service media, exhibited similar reporting patterns, demonstrating unanimous and unified coverage (CRTA, 2024). Moreover, ODHIR reported that the media landscape prioritized “...the national agenda over local issues, limiting the amount of essential information on local elections available to voters...” (ODHIR, 2024).

Graph 1. Comparison of Media Coverage by National Broadcasters in Central News According to the Representation of Political Actors by Month (January 2023 – April 2024)



Source: CRTA, 2024.

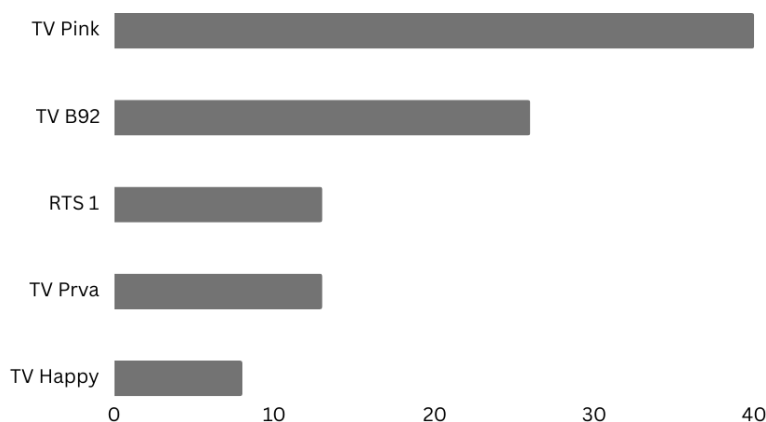
Graph 2. Tone of Reporting on Political Actors in the Main News Programs of Five National Broadcasters during the Election Campaign for the Belgrade Elections



Source: CRTA, 2024.

Although not a candidate, Aleksandar Vučić played a central role in media coverage during the campaign. Over 55 days, he addressed the public via the most influential television channels 55 times, achieving double the airtime in central news compared to all other electoral actors combined. (ibid.) The simultaneous broadcast of the campaign rally for the local elections in Novi Sad, Čačak, Belgrade, and Valjevo across over 20 television stations, and led by President Vučić, underscores the media capture in Serbia (BIRODI, 2024).

Graph 3. Representation of Aleksandar Vučić on National Broadcasters during the Election Campaign



Source: CRTA, 2024.

The overwhelming media focus on the President, even in the local elections context, illustrates the personalization of political campaigns, centralizing the narrative around the national leader instead of local candidates, policies, or concerns. Vučić's statement- "Imagine if I stepped down from the list, how many people would vote for you?" (Istinomer, 2024) implies that political success is tightly linked to his leadership but also serves as a rhetorical strategy to consolidate loyalty among party members and to strengthen his brand. As candidates and officials are positioned as secondary to the leader's image, their ability to engage independently with voters or to develop specific local platforms is undermined.

Additionally, the pre-electoral period is marked by a vast *functionary campaign* (and different other types of public resources abuse. The practice of using officials public profiles of government officials to promote the political party they are affiliated with, while attributing public work and projects to the party on its official accounts, continued throughout the whole campaign. State programs, such as energy efficiency subsidies, free preventive health check-ups on the weekends, housing for ref-

ugees and displaced persons, solidarity packages for pensioners, and vouchers for individuals with rare diseases, were exploited for political promotion of the ruling party and its key actors (CRTA, 2024). In this way, the state institutions are reduced to mere extensions of the party's electoral machinery. As Matić explains (2007), the effect of a functionary campaign is that it establishes a basis for identification with state policy among the public, as well as with the ruling party that is programmatically and personally unified with it (Matić, 2007).

The Case Study of Niš

The city of Niš was selected as a case study due to its status as one of Serbia's largest regional centers, politically contested nature during the 2024 local elections, and the presence of a strong local opposition actor, the citizens' group led by Dr. Milić. This group won 24.5% of the vote, finishing second to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which obtained 44.5%. Following the closure of polling stations, the opposition lists joined forces and proclaimed a victory. Nevertheless, the minority Russian party secured a single mandate and later opted to form a coalition with SNS, ultimately tipping the balance in favor of the ruling party. Interestingly, although the pre-election atmosphere in Niš was tense, local opposition candidates received minimal to no coverage in nationally broadcast media. As Milić stated later:

- *On Radio Television of Serbia, we were given 24 seconds of air-time—exactly the percentage we ended up receiving. I like to say that if we had been given 35 seconds on RTS, we probably would have won 35 percent. So, to achieve such a result while competing against the ruling party—a conglomerate of the strongest and largest parties—and for them to have only a bit less than 20 percent more than us, is simply incredible and fascinating. And I have to say, somewhat humiliating for such a massive coalition (DW, 2024)*

However, unlike many smaller municipalities, Niš has several active local media outlets, including *Južne vesti*, *Gradski portal 018* and *Belle Amie*, which is an additional reason for selecting it as a case study. These provided a solid base for analyzing how centralized political messaging was imposed, reinterpreted, or resisted in a local context. Among them, *Južne vesti* (a critically oriented portal) played the most active role in covering the local electoral campaign, organizing mayoral debates and providing in-depth and inclusive reporting. However, the SNS's candidates consistently refused to participate in these formats. In contrast, *Gradski portal 018* dedicated the least attention to the local elections, and when it did report on them, its content largely reflected the dominant political frame. Similarly, *Belle Amie*, which has a history of favorable coverage toward the ruling party, often covered SNS rallies and

statements by party officials without contextual critique, thus contributing to the amplification of referendum-style messaging.

The following findings are derived from a qualitative analysis of selected articles and video content published on the websites and YouTube channels of these local media outlets during the official campaign period (April 26th – June 2nd, 2024):

– Critical Role of the National Leader in Campaign Messaging

The personalization of the campaign around Aleksandar Vučić was a defining feature of the ruling coalition's strategy. All coalition lists at both the city and municipal levels (including all five of them) prominently carried Vučić's name, despite him not being a candidate nor the formal head of the SNS. As Dragoslav Pavlović, the SNS coalition's mayoral candidate, concluded: "To show who we are, win, and properly represent the head of our list—that is our president, Aleksandar Vučić, because we are using his name. His symbolic presence was reinforced by public speeches and rally appearances, such as his address at the SNS meeting in Niš on May 30, 2024:

It doesn't matter at all which one of them you vote for. The day after the elections, that very evening, they will be united in their hatred against Serbia's progress, in their hatred against any of us (Vučić, 2024)

– Imposition of National Discourse by the Ruling Party

The campaign rhetoric of the ruling coalition, led by SNS, explicitly framed local elections as extensions of broader national and geopolitical issues. For instance, then-mayor Dragana Sotirovski employed stark nationalistic and security-centered appeals to align the local elections with existential threats and Serbia's position on the global stage. Her statements, such as "In Belgrade, Serbia is defended. On June 2nd, we choose between good and bad, between SNS's position and Serbia's place on the world political map and what could happen if the opposition comes to power," illustrates this strategy. Additionally, she invoked security concerns by emphasizing the proximity of Kosovo to Niš, stating: "We are only 85 kilometers from the Albanians in Kosovo, we need to think about that." Such rhetoric not only shifted attention away from local governance issues but also fostered a referendum-like atmosphere, wherein voting (for the ruling party) was framed as a moral and patriotic duty. This nationalization of local elections was further reinforced by coalition partners. Igor Novaković, the Socialist Party of Serbia's candidate, stated: "These elections go beyond the local level because this is not just a list for Niš, but for Serbia of tomorrow." The phrase "Serbia of tomorrow," which also functioned as a central slogan and platform of the SNS at the national level, exemplifies how symbolic national narratives were embedded in local messaging and used to blur the lines between municipal governance and state-level political battles.

– *Reinterpretation or Rejection of National Frames by the Opposition*

Interestingly, certain segments of the opposition mirrored the ruling party's referendum-style framing of the elections, albeit with a distinct tone. For example: "We must invoke a referendum-like feeling; the chance for change in Niš exists despite the polls." While reinforcing the elections' broader significance, this narrative inadvertently echoed the ruling party's approach.

However, the local citizen group led by Dr. Milić resisted this trend by emphasizing the importance of local autonomy. His campaign highlighted the necessity of decentralization and the reclamation of local governance, as reflected in statements like: "Decisions about Niš must be made by the people of Niš, not by political secretaries sent from Belgrade. Niš must and can be a more beautiful, richer, and fairer city". Still, even when attempting to challenge the dominant personalization of the campaign, the opposition paradoxically reconfirmed the centrality of the national leader. For instance, during the final day of the campaign, the lead candidate of the opposition coalition publicly invited Vučić to a live debate, stating: "I invite the candidate who is coming tomorrow to a debate with me, wherever he wants, in the theatre or on television, so we can see who loves Niš more and who knows more about Niš." This example illustrates how difficult it was for the opposition to solve the strategic dilemma and escape the overarching personalization and centralization set by the ruling coalition.

– *Genre Chain in Local Action: SNS Rally in Niš*

To fully capture the centralization and personalization of the local elections in Niš, the SNS rally held on May 30, 2024, in the Čair sports hall serves as a compelling example. The event officially began with the national anthem "Bože pravde", a performative gesture that symbolically framed the local campaign rally as an event of national relevance. At the center of the event was a speech of President Vučić, which fused economic promises (such as average salaries over 1,400 euros and pensions over 650 euros by 2027) with dramatic appeals to national survival: "... They will execute Vučić, they will persecute you". Once again, the local political contest was constructed as a national, but also personal struggle, in which voting for the ruling party appeared as the only rational choice. This narrative is reinforced by visual aspects of the rally: banners with the slogan "We are not a genocidal nation" were prominently displayed, directly responding to national discourse surrounding the Srebrenica resolution and evoking collective identity defense. In this way, the rally in Niš acted as a crucial node within the broader genre chain, with that speech being picked up and amplified by the media eco-system through various formats, while the visual symbols became embedded in the collective political memory and imaginary.

Conclusion

This analysis critically examined political communication strategies for (re)constructing national narratives that influenced the dynamics and outcomes of local elections held in June 2024. The main findings revealed that recurring discursive techniques (emotional appeals, vague slogans, symbolic references etc.), contributed to portraying the local elections as a referendum on power, rather than as an opportunity to address local issues. These dominant discourses were reproduced through centralized and personalized messaging, primarily revolving around the personal brand of the national leader, while simultaneously marginalizing local agendas and opposition voices. The local elections in Niš were selected as the case study not only because of the city's demographic and political significance, but also due to its relatively rich local media landscape. The comparative analysis of different media outlets in Niš revealed varying degrees of editorial autonomy, ranging from actively promoting and disseminating alternative narratives through critical reporting and public debates to passively perpetuating the ruling party's discourse. Furthermore, the SNS rally in Niš exemplified how national political narratives are locally performed and amplified in a strategic way, serving as a key moment within the media genre chain that both reflects and reinforces centralized power dynamics.

Methodological limitations of this research include partial access to media archives, a limited sample of media outlets, and the absence of a more comprehensive analysis of the opposition discourse. However, the focus on the ruling party's communication is relatively justified within the scope of this paper, given its overwhelming media presence and narrative control. Expanding the analysis to a wider set of localities would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how discursive interactions between ruling and opposition structures unfold across different media ecologies. Further research could deepen this perspective by exploring how voters perceive and interpret the competing regimes of truth (Foucault) constructed by polarized media environments, thereby connecting CDA with empirical audience reception studies.

Lokalni izbori - Nacionalne teme: Centralizujuća personalizacija lokalnih izbora u Srbiji

Sažetak



Lokalni izbori u Srbiji održani 2024. godine karakteriše kampanja u kojoj su nacionalne teme okupirale centralno mesto, dok su pitanja i problemi relevantni za specifične lokalne zajednice marginalizovani. Ovaj rad istražuje različite determinante koje oblikuju nacionalno orijentisane kampanje i njihov uticaj na ponašanje birača, sa naglaskom na persuzivne tehnike

korišćene u medijima i mobilizaciju javnih resursa od strane vladajuće partije. Studija nastoji da razume korene fenomena nacionalizacije izbora i ključne implikacije na demokratski proces. Koristeći metod kritičke analize diskursa (CDA) medijskog izveštavanja (elektronski mediji sa nacionalnom pokrivenošću, mejnstrim štampani mediji, digitalna izdanja, kao i istaknuti lokalni mediji), rad nudi sveobuhvatan uvid u strategije kampanje i njihovu efikasnost. Dodatno, studija slučaja Niša ilustruje kako se nacionalni politički narativi strateški izvode i pojačavaju direktno na lokalnom nivou, predstavljajući ključni trenutak unutar medijskog žanrovskog lanca koji istovremeno odražava i učvršćuje centralizovane obrasce moći.

Ključne reči



lokalni izbori, nacionalne teme, kampanje, mediji, partije

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 18th International Conference of the Association for Political Science of Serbia. The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance of Despot Kovačević and Boban Stojanović throughout the research process, as well as the contribution of Nina Pavlović to the development of the section examining the electoral and party system in Serbia.

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