

First Draft

Virtual ASN Convention, New York

May 6-8, 2021

Panel BK 7

Media Populism in Serbia

When you go to any newspaper stand in the country and see all those newspapers at the kiosk, you think you have come to the freest country in the world. But it's just a mirage (Milan Culibrk, 2019).

Dejan Guzina (dguzina@wlu.ca)
Department of Political Science
Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Introduction¹

By all accounts, Serbia is a country with a vibrant media network. A Serbian citizen can choose from more than 1500 media outlets, including half a dozen political weeklies, 200 radio stations, 300 TV stations with local and national frequencies, and many daily papers and tabloids. Also, according to the Serbian Secretariat for Information, most daily papers, news periodicals, and electronic media are in the private hands, which reflects the critical shift in the ownership structure of the Serbian economy since the fall of Milosevic's regime. Moreover, the media in Serbia is supposed to follow high standards of the freedom of the press and the prohibition of censorship, both of which are enshrined in the Constitution as well.

However, to what extent this picture reflects a reality of a fully developed free media market in the country, and to what extent it is just a mirage? There is no opposition politician in the country that doesn't, almost daily, repeat the mantra that the reason why the current President, Aleksandar Vucic, is entirely in control of all aspects of political life in Serbia is due to his complete dominance over the media. After all, according to the latest report of the Reporters without Borders (2021), "Serbia is a country with weak institutions that is prey to fake news

¹ This study adopted the semi-structural in-depth interview method to survey media professionals in Serbia. The interviews were conducted during the research trip to Serbia, February-March 2019. For the list of interviewees, See Appendix 1.

spread by government-backed sensational media, a country where journalists are subjected to almost daily attacks that increasingly come from the ruling elite and pro-government media.” Statements about Aleksandar Vucic’s iron hand over media, however, do not satisfactorily explain how the Serbian President’s regime uses all kinds of formal and informal mechanisms to bypass the constitutional principles of media freedom in Serbia (Svarm, 2019). For, those relying on the pro-government daily papers (“Politika,” “Vecernje Novosti,” “Informer “), commercial TV stations (“Pink,” “Happy”) and the state-controlled television and radio network (RTS), perceive the official narrative as a truthful one. For these reasons, the question of institutional and non-institutional mechanisms of media control is essential.

I argue that the Serbian political system has primarily taken the form of a populist mimicry of genuine democratic processes in society. From this perspective, it is not in the Serbian government’s interest to openly undermine the freedom of media. Instead, the Serbian government’s main objective is to marginalize them. By doing so, the regime achieves two related goals. First, it presents itself to the European Union’s interlocutors and the Serbian public as pro-democratic; and second, it provides the Serbian people with the appearance of choice among so many competing media outlets, such as dailies, periodicals, radio, and TV stations. The first section of the paper conceptualizes the relationship between media logic and populism. The second part provides some tentative answers to the following questions: can the media be held accountable for the rise of populism in Serbia? How populist leaders use media? And, how successful are media outlets that present themselves as “pockets of resistance” to the mediatization of populism in Serbia?

Populism and the Media

When describing a modern democratic nation-state, much attention is placed on the governmental institutions and actors. The media is an often overlooked yet fundamental aspect of the contemporary political sphere, even more so with the rise of populism in many countries across the world. However, one of the central challenges facing liberal democracies is the relationship between the two; that is, to what extent populism, in the words of Nadia Urbinati (2014), “disfigures democracy?” And, relatedly, is there something in the way the media operates that makes it a populist bedfellow?

Traditional news outlets tend to pride themselves on presenting an unbiased and truthful presentation of current affairs as exhibited by slogans such as CNN's "The World's Most Trusted Name in News." However, despite the appearance of a pure unbiased presentation, numerous factors exist which tarnish this constructed identity, notably pressures and expectations from advertisers, and ownership structures, and, in the context of Serbia, political entrepreneurs. Moreover, in many countries, we see a trend towards the concentration of the media and entertainment industry, which holds equally true for the USA as for Serbia. In the United States, for example, nearly all mainstream news media outlets are owned by five major media conglomerates: Fox Corporation, News Corp, AT&T, Viacom CBS, and the Walt Disney Company, as well as one public player, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). In Serbia, there is a similar number of providers of media content. These broadcasters depend on viewer/readers/listener engagement to remain profitable, especially with increased competition from newer leaner digital outlets, the so-called media 2.0. News outlets have a desire to maintain credibility and foster trust with audiences. But a popular method of achieving this goal is to position the media as though they are on the side of the ordinary citizen, a term which is vastly contested, depending where one stands on the left-right political spectrum. By using a populist style of rhetoric, news media outlets are adept at fostering trust among audiences while discouraging trust in other sources. This leads us back to the question: who is at the driver's seat: the media or populist politicians?

To answer the question, we must define populism first. Despite the mushrooming literature on populism, there is no consensus about how best to define populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Indeed, even though many different theories have been advanced, populism has consistently proven analytically challenging to grasp (Weyland, 2019). Of these manifold scholarly interpretations, two will be helpful in this paper. One perspective is presented by Kurt Weyland. He argues that populism is best defined "as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, non-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland, 2019, 75). The emphasis here is that populism is dependent on a charismatic and personalistic leader that unifies supporters. Furthermore, this conceptualization focuses on what populists do and less so on what they say, as populist rhetoric is often used to garner support but, this alone is not enough to separate populists from other politicians (Weyland, 2019, 75). As a result, Weyland's

perspective focuses most on the leaders, their actions, and the extent to which they rely on institutional support. The less they rely on the system's institutions, the more populist they will be in their representation of the "will of the people" (Weyland, 2019, 75-76).

Overall, Weyland presents the perspective that populism should be approached as a political strategy used by charismatic leaders of all stripes to gain public support. In contrast to Weyland, Cas Mudde presents populism as a "thin ideology" that typically attaches to other more encompassing ideologies. More specifically, Mudde (2004, 543) defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." In essence, populism is more of a thin ideology that is not as extensive as other traditional ideologies like liberalism, conservatism, or socialism. Instead, populism can be used alongside these ideologies, and it can be equally on the right and the left. This ideational approach to populism relies on discursive techniques of analyzing populist rhetoric and is often used to study the relationship between the media and populism. Moreover, as Mudde maintains, one cannot automatically dismiss populism as antithetical to democracy like so many liberal scholars of populism tend to do (Urbinati 2019, 2014; Mueller, 2016). In other words, the extent to which populism can negatively influence liberal political institutions, including the media, is primarily an empirical question.

So, what is the relationship between the media and populism? There is nothing problematic in a claim that media quite often serves as a "powerful mobilization tool for populist causes (Mazzoleni, 2008: 51)." But the media is neither an independent nor dependent variable in its relationship to populism. It should better be approached as an intervening variable (also, see Pauwels 2010, 1022). This implies a certain symbiotic relationship between populism and the media. On the one side, populist leaders rely on the seductive power of the media. At the same time, on the other, the media is complicit in legitimizing populist movements and their leaders by giving them free TV minutes and print space. In the words of Beata Ociepka, "[T]he relationship between the media and populist politicians is reciprocal. Both sides in the relationship are conscious of possible manipulation, but at the same time are fated to cooperate (2005: 223)."

Some authors describe this relationship in terms of media populism (Mazzoleni and Shulz, 1999; Moffitt, 2016; Manucci, 2019) in recognition that the political landscape has been deeply mediatized. That is that political communication had to adopt its public performance and language to the needs and requirements of an increasingly commercialized mass media. This change is evident in the context of TV presentations of political events that are mixing the so-called serious reporting with sensationalism and entertainment, the phenomenon that is known as the infotainment society (Kellner, 2003). The downside of this process is that one cannot easily separate “real” populists from the “fake” ones. Mainstream politicians are forced to imitate their more populist colleagues to keep their media personalities popular enough for the electorate. Hence, as the result of the mediatization of politics, we are witnessing “the populist contamination of the mainstream political discourse (Mazzoleni, 2008: 57).” But this also means that the boundaries between the so-called serious press (also known as the uptown newspapers) reporting and the tabloids become ever more blurred since they both cover politics as a form of a spectacle. Or, as Italian philosopher, Remo Bodei, has argued in the context of TV coverage of political events: “the protagonists of political competition take on the same elements (of being likable or not, of inspiring ‘fans’ to be for or against them) that surround the other heroes of the small screen (qt. in Mazzoleni, 2008: 53).” One may add that closely following one’s political candidate during the electoral campaigns is identical to cheering for one of the participants in any reality TV show.

All this implies that without recognizing the role of the media as a central stage for contemporary politics, one cannot fully understand the attractiveness of populism (Moffitt 2016). As Hjarvard has argued (2008: 113), certain spheres of social life, such as politics and culture, became “submitted to, or dependent on, the media and their logic.” Such logic can best be described in terms of the various storytelling techniques that the media relies upon to attract people’s attention (Stromback 2008: 233), On his part, Moffitt (2016: 75) has collected the following list of such techniques in the political communication literature:

- simplification, polarization and stereotypization of political events,
- antiestablishment attitude,
- negativism and sport-based dramatization of social events,
- triumph of a style over substance,

- focus on scandals and conflicts, and
- privileging of the visual (TV) over other senses (print media).

Moffit (2016: 76) argues that those aspects of media logic closely correspond to populism as a political style. Thus, prioritization of conflict, sport-based dramatization of political events and antiestablishment attitudes feed into the appeal to the ‘right’ kind of people (dismissal of the expert knowledge and dichotomy between ‘people’ and ‘elites’). Stereotypization, personalization and emotionalisation find its support in populist support for ‘bad manners’ such as political incorrectness and disregard for appropriateness. Finally, simplification and focus on the scandal have their counterpart in the populist obsession with crisis, threat, or breakdowns of the system, which leads to the instrumentalization of politics (usually expressed as populist calls/demands for decisive actions and their distaste for complexity).

However, it would be a mistake to present a populist relationship with the media only as if they reinforce each other. No matter how much the populist logic aligns with the media logic, populists of all stripes also rely on the various techniques of controlling the media. After all, even though there are certain similarities in how populism and media operate, populists are fully aware that they lack full control over the media landscape. Hence, those who are not supportive or critical of their political platform are often labelled as ‘elite,’ ‘establishment,’ or ‘liberal’ media. For these reasons, Mudde (2007: 249) has characterized the media as both the populist ‘friend’ and a ‘foe.’ Hence, the populist government are not shy to engage in various techniques of media control if they do not like what they see or read in multiple media. In his evaluation of the media control in Latin America, Waisbord (2012) has identified three approaches to make the media more friendly: “strengthening the media power of the President, bolstering community media, and exercising tighter control of the press through legislation and judicial decision.” One can easily add other techniques to this list, as will be further elaborated upon later in the paper in the context of Serbia.

Overall, there are no easy answers to the question of the relationship between the media and populism. Even though “the populist style corresponds so closely to the media logic (Moffit, 2016: 89),” that does not mean that it is the default position of the media to support populism. Equally important, empirical studies do not support the ‘gloom and doom’ theoretical claims in the literature that the contemporary media developments, combined with the rise of populism,

will lead to the corrosion of the foundations of liberal democratic institutions. However, what is certain is that the classic media model according to which politicians first generate messages, and the media then filters them to the audience, is replaced with the ‘mediatization of the politics’ model. According to this model, media actors can influence the agenda of political actors and the content of their messages. In final analysis, what has been filtered to the audience as an ‘interesting’ or ‘understandable’ message is the result of a “trade-off of the two actors involved [political actors and media actors] (Manucci, 2019: 470).”

Serbia represents a stimulating case since many of the relationships between populism and the media that scholars identified can be traced. In the following section, Serbia will be showcased to provide some tentative suggestions regarding the possible links between the media and populism and the extent to which those connections undermine Serbian fledgling democratic institutions.

Serbian Media: Surviving Vucic’s Democracy

The massive revolt against Milosevic and the implosion of his regime in 2000 raised hopes that Serbia has finally entered its *annus mirabilis* - 1989. Indeed, the infamous Law on Information from 1997 that stripped journalists of all protection and imposed severe penalties for not ‘reporting’ affirmatively about the government was soon replaced by the legislature that finally opened the space for free media (Cenzolovka, 2021). And yet, since 2012, media analysts of Serbian trends have identified deterioration of Serbian democratic institutions, and along with them, an increase in pro-government reporting, sensationalism, and what is known as celebrity journalism at the expense of serious independent reporting. It is worth recalling the Freedom House’s annual reports on press freedom that employs the following criteria: (1) laws and regulations that influence media content (which count for 30% of the assessment), (2) political pressures and controls on media content (including harassment or violence against journalists or facilities, censorship, self-censorship etc. 40%), and (3) economic influences over media content (30%). These expert reports rated Serbia in relevant years as partly free, while their latest report is the most critical of the media freedoms in Serbia since 2012 (Freedom House, 2021).

The latest BIRODI (Bureau for Social Research, Belgrade) report on the media coverage of Serbian politicians in the period from December 2020 to April 2021 has corroborated Freedom House’s critical assessment of the media in Serbia. It has shown that the President of Serbia,

Aleksandar Vucic, recorded a 38% higher presence in the media than the entire Government of Serbia combined, including the Prime Minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabic. Somewhat surprisingly, Vucic has been even more present in the media than during the election period in 2020, which can be explained by his efforts to presents himself as the saviour of Serbia during the Covid 19 crisis in the country.

Not surprisingly, and similarly to previous BIRODI media reports for the past few years, Vucic was portrayed positively 84% of the time. Moreover, there was no single news containing a “trace of a negative connotation” on his account on five televisions with national coverage. The only exception to such content was by N1, the cable TV and the affiliate of CNN in the Western Balkans, that presented the media image of President Vucic more critically. The report concludes that the mainstream TV and print media regularly presented the opposition parties unfavourably and that the Party of Freedom and Justice and its leader, Dragan Djilas, were under constant media scrutiny (read, media attacks).

The language being used in major pro-regime tabloids and privately-owned TV stations with national frequencies shows the same ‘us-them’ logic that dominated Milosevic’s period. The most important characteristic of this either/or logic of representation is its flexibility in easily replacing one type of target with the other. However, what remains the same is the language of accusation, based on the dichotomous differentiation between what is ‘acceptable’ and what is not ‘ours.’ Accordingly, in the period from 2012, RTS commentators only substituted the Milosevic’s matrix of anti-westernism for the matrix of skillfully blending pro-European rhetoric with constant dismissal of Serbian pro-democratic opposition. However, the matrix of representing the opposition as enemy has not been changed (Milivojevic, 2019; Skrozza 2019).

Perhaps the most revealing finding is Vucic’s successful framing of his political opponents as the members of the ‘corrupt’ and ‘lazy’ elite that did not do anything for the country and its people during their stay in power (2000-2012). This message is being constantly amplified on private TV stations such as “Happy” and “Pink” and in the relentless, daily tabloid attacks on the personal lives of Vucic’s opponents. “Informer” is undoubtedly the most important in this regard given that this is a daily newspaper with the highest number of sold copies in the country (anywhere between 80,000 and 100,000). Hence, through the us-them rhetoric in the media or Vucic’s public speeches and TV monologues, one can easily identify a populist matrix that Cuss

Muddy refers to as a thin ideology. At its heart is not so much presenting the leader of the Serbian state as a liberal, conservative, or a socialist, but rather as somebody who stands for the interests of the people against both internal enemies (those who want to continue to deprive Serbia of economic resources) and external ones who wants Serbia to recognize Kosovo as an independent state and give up on protecting of Serbs living in Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia.

Hence, even though Milosevic's authoritarian political regime no longer survives, the previously legitimized nationalist, conservative geopolitical rhetoric emphasizing Serbian political anxieties endures and remains remarkably adept and influential within the official democratic discourse of the post-Milosevic's era. Nevertheless, the democratization of Serbia in the past twenty years has opened the space for the voices of resistance to this type of rhetoric. The previously marginalized discourse of the so-called pro-democratic "Other Serbia" became much more prevalent in the media providing a more civic interpretation of the Serbian identity, which is true not only for most of the independent media but for some mainstream media as well (RTV 1 and 2). The most appropriate way to describe those conflicting media interpretations of Serbian identity is to use the monikers that one Serbia uses to describe the other: "cosmopolitan," "rootless," "treacherous," pro-European Serbia vs. "conservative," "nationalist," anti-European, pro-Russian Serbia (Russell-Omaljev 2016). However, the critical media does not have the same reach as the one supported by the government, and one cannot talk about the fair competition between various media channels. Major independent political weeklies, "Vreme" and "NIN" and daily, "Danas," together are not sold more than 20,00 copies (Brajovic, 2019). Similarly, the independent cable TV station - N1, does not reach the audience throughout Serbia the way "Pink," "Happy," or RTS1 and 2 do. Moreover, an average Serbian citizen still relies on the RTS network for the news far more than any other TV station. "Pink," on the other side, is the most popular entertainment TV, while "Happy" is well known for its very popular tabloid style TV program, *Cirilica* (Cyrillic).

In the final analysis, the us-them media presentations of Serbian people vs. the elites reflect the conditions of liminality in which the Serbian state and society have found themselves in the aftermath of Milosevic. Also, in a somewhat ambiguous fashion, the imagery that competing media present to the Serbian audience share one commonality. Even though they offer radically different pictures of Serbia, they are both examples of essentializing discourses that represent

Serbia as static and monolithic. For, as Russell-Omaljev (p. 240) succinctly argues, the choice that is put forward to Serbian citizens “is a choice between absorption of modernity presented as alien by Other [civic minded] Serbia and return to the simulated authenticity of (ethnic and religious) origins as seen by First [nationalist] Serbia.”

At the political level, however, these discourses are not separate. Instead, as much as Vucic and state-friendly media rely on the populist logic of representations, many opposition politicians and some journalists working in the independent media outlets try to respond in kind. Thus, the media space seems to be plagued by the populist logic of representation. Whatever one reads, listens to, or watches, the main stories are scandals and affairs of the other side. Moreover, as the result of the unresolved Kosovo question, one can readily recognize elements of both discourses in the speeches and political decisions of the leading Serbian politicians in the 2000s, irrespective of their political stripes. At one point or another, all governments and almost all Serbian parties have engaged in pursuing these different, mutually incompatible political objectives as illustrated in the slogan espoused by practically all parties – “both, the EU membership and Kosovo in Serbia.”

The same type of confusion can be identified in the media coverage as well as the media is characterized by two parallel media currents with their respective media channels - that of the state-controlled media with commercialized private network and economically struggling and weak independent press. One of the most harmful consequences of the lack of the integrated media in Serbia is the lack of social consensus over the fundamental social and political values in society (Vucenic, 2019). In the conditions of the weak and fractured civil society in the country, this implies that the independent media is the regular target of the political regime, but also of the nationalist opposition trying to influence the independent media with its visions of political correctness.

The independent press tries its best to avert the influence of both the government and the opposition parties (notably, openly nationalist opposition parties and movements). But sometimes this leads to the situation that independent dailies and weekly periodicals fail to cover the events in an unbiased and objective manner. Instead, they err in two ways: a) either they “present political contenders according to the principle “they are all the same (Vucenic, 2019; Beckovic 2019);” or b) they end up openly supporting the opposition program against the

government as some media analysts reproach a well-known independent daily, “Danas” (Brajovic, 2019).

Overall, the relationship between the Serbian media and the illiberal populist regime of Aleksandar Vucic revolves around three distinct aspects:

1. The way the media covers Aleksandar Vucic and other Serbian officials.
2. The way the media represent the political opposition.
3. The way the government influences or control the media itself.

The first two aspects are closely related to how the populist style corresponds to the media logic (Moffitt, 2016). The Serbian case has shown a proximity between the populist appeals to the people, identifying the political others as members of the corrupt elites, on the one side, and the corresponding logic of media presentation (simplification, sensationalism, focus on scandals, emotionalism, etc.). However, in his evaluation of populism in the context of Latin America, Waisbord (2012) has alluded to specific techniques of media control through exercising tighter control of the press through legislation and judicial decision. Wayland’s understanding that populism cannot be reduced solely on what populists say but also on what they do closely aligns with Waisbord’s point. As previously mentioned, Freedom House’s annual reports on press freedom employ the following criteria: laws and regulations that influence media content, political pressures and controls on media content, and economic influences over media content. In the context of Serbia, the question of self-censorship and financial pressures are of central importance, and they are to a great extent connected.

As many Serbian journalists and media experts argue, the most prominent media problems are not in the legislature but in the ways politics interferes with the economy. This is in a twofold way: first, there are too many media channels, dailies, and weeklies to support a relatively small Serbian media market; and two, the journalists’ economic position in society. The journalist’s average monthly salary in the provincial towns is around 300 euros, which is below the national average. The average wages in Belgrade are higher, but they are also behind the average Belgrade salaries (Brajovic, 2019; Bodrozic and Filipovic-Stefanovic, 2019). This dire economic situation also causes an adverse selection of people who work in the media. According to Nino Brajovic (2019), Serbia deals with yet another specific phenomenon. After the collapse of

Milosevic's regime, there was a considerable increase in interest in studying journalism. Fast forward 20 years, all surveys and analyzes show that only 10% of journalism students want to work in journalism. An overwhelming majority of journalism students are more interested in marketing, public relations, entertainment industries, and, more recently, 'job' in politics (all of which pay much more than journalism). In Brajovic's words, "Journalism students of the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade are oriented to do business in political parties, to be political activists, to be political officials, to be political organizers (2019)." Those who stay become easily corrupt and accept to work for all kinds of tabloids whether they agree or not with the editorial policies of those papers. Self-censorship is not only a political issue but an existential one (Vucetic, 2019; Culibrk, 2019).

An additional mechanism of media control in Serbia relates to the lack of a transparent media ownership structure and how the state financially supports media infrastructure (Georgiev, 2019). According to Milan Culbirk (2019), editor-in-chief of NIN, the lack of clarity of who owns what in Serbia allows for many indirect means of economic control of media. For ex., the oldest and most influential political weekly in the country, NIN, is 50% owned by the German company Axel Springer, 50% by the Swiss company Ringier. So, everything is known; everything is transparent. However, thanks to its independent editorial policy, it has absolutely no public financial support. On the contrary, it is, like other independent press, under a complete financial blockade from the state and public companies that are of great importance for creating the gross domestic product in Serbia. The biggest advertisers are still those state-owned or controlled companies - the state lottery, Telekom Srbija, Dunav osiguranje, etc. And they refuse to market themselves in any of the independent dailies or political weekly magazines (Georgijev 2019).

Thus, as Culibrk (2019) maintains, "you have a completely illogical situation, the more transparent media company is, the less it can rely on public funds or advertisement, leading to the situation that the price of one NIN equals the subsidized price of 15 copies of the most popular pro-regime tabloid 'Informer.'" In final analysis, in these subsidy competitions that local media are engaged in, it has become a common practice that after the announcement of the competition, some phantom portals are formed by people who are close to the authorities, and they get the lion's share of that money (Krstic, 2019; Milojevic, 2019). As a rule, the more violation a certain tabloid commits against the journalist's ethical code, the more they can count

on financial support from various public funds at the municipal and regional levels (Skrozza, 2019). Commissions that decide who gets the funds are under the direct political influence of the party in power (at this point, almost all Serbian municipalities are run by the Serbian Progressive Party of Aleksandar Vucic). So, it is not surprising that they distribute money to the media who support the governmental agenda rather than investing in the media infrastructure or production of a higher quality media content.

Overall, through the various indirect economic mechanisms (the lack of advertising in the independent press, artificially keeping the media market saturated with tabloids, and financially not supporting independent media in any way), the government can manipulate the media without directly controlling it (Radojevic, 2019). Hence, the final consequence of a whole range of economic and media policies at the regime's disposal is reducing the role of the media and civil society to an ideological construct that fits a populist us-them logic and through which Vucic's illiberal populist regime successfully legitimizes his position in a Serbian state and society.

Conclusion

Even though Serbia's political system in form is typical of liberal-democracies, the country is better described as a populist-in-style but the clientelist-in-content political regime. The government-controlled media plays an important role in legitimizing this hybrid system that skillfully combines certain democratic norms with illiberal practices. Commercialized TV stations and tabloids, however, should not be perceived as genuinely supportive of the regime. Olja Beckovic (2019), one of the foremost Serbian journalists, expresses optimism despite her negative personal experiences with her TV program being practically banned by the regime for several years. Unlike many journalists and media experts who are afraid of the long-term consequences of the tabloidization of the political culture in Serbia, she believes that an average audience buys tabloids or watch commercialized TV programs for the same reason citizens of other countries do. Not to get informed but entertained. They get their information from other sources, and this is where independent Serbian media plays an important role.

In other words, Serbian citizens are more informed than they are given credit for. If they appear brainwashed in their support for Vucic, this is simply because of the lack of the alternative: the weak opposition. At the same time, one cannot easily dismiss the lack of space for opposition

parties in media discourse” with the consequence of creating a “highly skewed playing field against government opponents that undermines their capacity to mount compelling challenges to incumbents (Vladislavljevic, 2020).” Ultimately, the quality of the Serbian democracy is directly related to the status of the media in Serbia, even though the media cannot resolve political divisions in the country. What it can do, however, and what it does, is to provide a mirror, even though a skewed one, that highlights challenges facing Serbian society.

Works cited:

- Hjarvard, Stig. 2008. “The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change: *Nordicom Review* 29(2): 105-33.
- Kellner, Douglas. 2003. *Media Spectacle*. London: Routledge.
- Manucci, Luca. 2019. “Populism and the Media.” *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Edited by Kaltwasser et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 467-488.
- Mazzoleni, G. and W. Shulz. 1999. “Mediatization of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?” *Political Communication* 16(3):247-261.
- Mazzoleni, Gianpietro. 2008. “Populism and the Media,” in Albertazzi Danielle, and Duncan McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. New York: Palgrave, 49-66.
- Moffitt, Benjamin. 2016. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mudde, Cas, and Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Mudde, Cas. 2004. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 541-563.
- Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mueller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What is Populism?* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ociepka, B. 2005. “Populism as ‘Good Communication with People’. The Polish Case during the Referendum Campaign,” in Ociepka, B. (ed.) *Populism and Media Democracy*. Wroclaw: Wroclaw University Press.
- Pauwels, Teun. 2010. “Explaining the Success of Neo-liberal Populist Parties: The Case of Lijst Dedecker in Belgium.” *Political Studies* 58.5: 1009-1029.
- Russell-Omaljev, Ana. 2016. *Divided We Stand: Discourses on Identity in ‘First’ and ‘Other’ Serbia*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.

- Stromback, Jesper. 2008. "Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of Mediatization of Politics." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(3):228-246.
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2019. *Me, the People*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2014. *Democracy Disfigured*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Vladisavljevic, Nebojsa. 2020. "Media Discourse and the Quality of Democracy in Serbia after Milosevic." *Europe-Asia Studies* 72.1: 8-32.
- Waisbord, Silvio. 2012. "Democracy, Journalism, and Latin American Populism." *Journalism* 14(4): 504-521.
- Weyland, Kurt. 2019. "Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Edited by Kaltwasser et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 48-72.

Websites:

Biro za društvena istraživanja: <http://www.birodi.rs/category/analize/>

Cenzolovka, sajt of slobodi medija u Srbiji: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/pavol-salaj-rbg-srbija-medju-tri-najgore-rangirane-drzave-u-eu-i-na-balkanu-medijske-slobode-i-dalje-u-padu/>

Freedom House: Serbia webpage: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2021>

Reporters without Borders on Serbia: <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

Appendix 1: The List of Interviewees

- Aleksandra Krstic, Media Professor, Faculty of Political Science, Belgrade
- Danica Vucenic, TV journalist, Fonet Agency, internet program, Kvaka 23 (Catch 23)
- Filip Svarm, Editor and political columnist, Vreme (weekly newsmagazine)
- Milan Culibrk, Editor-in-Chief, NIN (weekly newsmagazine)
- Nino Brajovic, Secretary General, Journalists' Association of Serbia
- Olja Beckovic, TV journalist (talk show "Impression of the Week")
- Slobodan Georgijev, BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Belgrade Office)
- Snjezana Milivojevic, Media Professor, Faculty of Political Science, Belgrade
- Tamara Filipovic-Stefanovic, Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia

- Tamara Skrozza, journalist, Vreme (weekly newspaper); Cenzolovka (Freedom of Media website, Foundation Slavko Curuvija, Belgrade)
- Vesna Radojevic, KRIK – Crime and Corruption Reporting Network, Belgrade
- Zeljko Bodrozic, President, Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia