(MIS)USE OF UNNAMED SOURCES IN MEDIA REPORTING ON POLITICAL ACTORS: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE POPULIST CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE[1]

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Abstract

The paper examines populist content in media in a relation to challenges that journalism faces today — decreasing level of professionalism which, among the other issues, led to the absence of a journalistic gatekeeping role. Therefore, the research was focused on common journalistic practice, the treatment of specific type of journalistic sources — unnamed sources, which were established as a journalistic norm that indicates protection of sources in the media freedom context. According to the standards of journalistic practice, unnamed sources are supposed to reveal abuses of power and bad governance. The research shows that journalists from pro-government tabloid media use unnamed sources to promote mainstream populist political discourse and discredit opposition leaders by repeating key points promulgated by the ruling party in its defamation narratives. Instead of being used for revealing corruption or misuse of power, unnamed sources become a tool for labelling and defamation of political opponents and promoting populist governance.

 Key words: *populism, journalism, unnamed sources, media, political communication, Serbia*

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Political context in Serbia was significantly changed in 2012, after more than a decade. Serbian Progressive Party (Serbian: SNS) as a relatively new political actor burst onto the scene. Although SNS was established in 2008, their leadership and most of the members have been present in Serbian political life since the 1990s as members of far-right ultra nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Led by Vojislav Seselj, SRS played an important role in war conflicts in former Yugoslavia. Seselj's closest associate in 1990s was young Aleksandar Vucic, now omnipresent leader of SNS and Serbian President. In 2008, SNS political actors formally changed their political views, but this change was not substantial. It could be described as pragmatic, in order to conquer the political scene, which happened in 2012.

Since then, SNS became the most dominant political force in Serbia, but this process was gradual — from 20.04% of voter's support in 2012 to 60.65% in 2020. When the last Parliamentary elections in 2020, SNS and their political allies became the only people's representatives in the Serbian Parliament.

Successful political communication that SNS conducted from 2012 to 2020, resulted in more than 40% increase in voter's support. It was based populism, "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" (Mudde, 2004: 543). The populist political communication depends on the specific characteristics of and relations between the three main groups of social actors that are involved in the communication process: political actors, media, and citizens (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017). In this case populist politics and media mutually harmonized their logics and pushed SNS populist agenda. As a result, "an integrated process of content production involving both political and media actors" (Manucci, 2017: 557) transformed public opinion and voters' choices.

Media as key social institutions, shape public opinion and control the distribution of information and symbolic resources in society (Zelizer, 2004: 36). Therefore, the domination of populist content in media could be a consequence of a challenge that journalism is facing today — decreasing level of professionalism which, among the other issues, led to the absence of a journalistic gatekeeping role[5]. Consequently, this research was focused on a common journalistic practice, the treatment of specific type of journalistic sources — unnamed sources, which were established as

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[5] "Journalists are bombarded with information from the Internet, newspapers, television and radio news, news magazines, and their sources. Their job of selecting and shaping the small amount of information that becomes news would be impossible without gatekeeping. It is the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news" (Shoemaker, Vos, Reese, 2009:73).
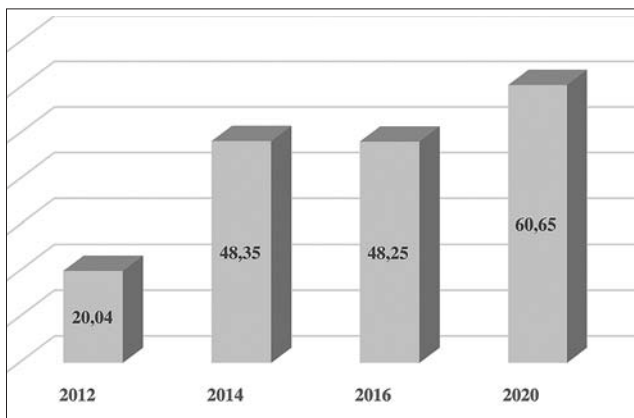
Graph 1 — Serbian Progressive Party results in the Parliamentary elections from 2012 to 2020 in %. Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction of the Enemies of the People".

a journalistic norm that indicates protection of sources in the media freedom context.

Obtaining information from an unnamed source is a common practice in journalism, which presumes use of "sources which are known to the reporter, but confidentially kept from readers" (Carlson, 2011:1). In investigative journalism the use of unnamed sources is allowed, but only in exceptional cases — in situations when it is necessary to obtain information in the public interest which is hard to gain through regular journalistic work. This practice requires trust among three parties — journalists, the source and the audience (see Graph 3). According to Carlson, introducing an unnamed source into a news story implies that the "value gained in making hidden information public outweighs the lack of transparency in withholding the source's identity" (Carlson, 2011:7). The opacity of unnamed sources, as he emphasises, prevents audiences from gaining additional information from which to make judgments about unattributed information".

As our analysis shows, most media, especially tabloids, used unnamed sources in order to provide a cover for populists' delegitimating of the opposition, to stoke "conflict and encourage polarization" as "they also treat their political opponents as 'enemies of the people' and seek to exclude them altogether" (Müller 2016:4). From the public point of view, media did not question the politics of executive power and populist governance, thus did not perform their supposed critical role. Also, they did not control the distribution of information, letting populist communication being distributed without any journalistic intervention, through sources that cannot be verified. By refraining from rational critique, the media discouraged public debate and provided the public communication infrastructure for populists to delegit-

Graph 2 — Triangle of trust. Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction of the Enemies of the People".

imize the opposition. Thus, this analysis of media content aims to examine if political competitors of the populist leader(s) in Serbia were represented as "part of the immoral, corrupt elite (Muller 2016:20), and discredited as a "legitimate opposition" (Muller 2016:20) within narratives that could not be verified.

In the focus of this analysis were texts from online news portals, which were previously published on the front pages of the most relevant[6] daily newspapers with national distribution in Serbia.[7] The research sample was selected from the news portals of the following newspapers: Blic, Kurir, Vecernje novosti, Alo!, Politika, Informer and Danas and covers the period from January 1st, 2019 to June 30th, 2019[8]. The additional criteria for texts selection were: (a) the obligatory presence of at least one of the key political actors at that moment: Dragan Đilas, Vuk Jeremic, Bosko Obradovic, Boris Tadic and Vojislav Seselj, as representatives of the opposition[9], Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic[10] and Prime Minister Ana Brnabic[11], as leading representatives of executive authority; and (b) *the presence of unnamed*

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[6] In terms of circulation and reputation.

[7] Daily issues provide overview in narrower editorial selection related to the relevant content and dailies are key actors in setting public agenda in Serbia.

[8] The misuse of the unnamed sources was considered as indicator of the level of professionalism-commercialization of media. Selected media represent range of dailies from most prominent to most tabloid in Serbia. The focus of the research was on media mechanism and its implications in a relation to populism (communication dimension of populism),

[9] Those actors were selected according to the frequency of their appearance on the front pages of the observed newspapers from 1. 1. 2019 — 30. 6. 2019: Dragan Đilas mentioned in 475 texts, Bosko Obradovic — 331, Vuk Jeremic — 310, Vojislav Seselj 115 and Boris Tadic was noticed in 107 texts — source: *Quarterly Mediameter*, vol. 5, issue 1-2.

[10] Mentioned in 1399 texts.

[11] Mentioned in 330 texts.

sources as one of the sources of information[12] The selected sample was subjected to content analysis in order to enable us "to illuminate patterns in communication content reliably and validly" because "only through the reliable and valid illumination of such patterns" it is possible "to illuminate content causes or predict content effects" (Riffe, Lacy, Ficco, 2005: xiii).

In that sense, the aim of the research was to "illuminate" the journalistic practice of using unnamed sources in cases of reporting on the most prominent political actors. Through this analysis we try to examine whether journalistic work which significantly relies on unnamed sources contributes or prevents the circulation populist narratives on Serbian news platforms.

Research results

The presence of unnamed sources relating to opposition leaders varied in accordance with the level of interest that executive power displays towards each of them and the type of analysed media (tabloid or media with a similar orientation as broadsheets). Information that had been communicated through unnamed sources was concentrated in texts that were constructed around Djilas, Obradovic and Jeremic. The other two opposition leaders, Seselj and Tadic, were significantly less involved in the main narratives, especially those based on unnamed sources. The media used anonymous sources when reporting on Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, but obtained information in that manner significantly less often when texts were related to Prime Minister Ana Brnabic. Graphs 4 and 5 show the distribution of texts in the sample, by political actor and media outlet.

When analysing the structure of the selected texts, it could be observed that there was a significantly different approach towards the treatment of the actors. Negative value context[13] was directed towards Djilas, Obradovic and Jeremic, while the media presented the other two leaders predominantly in a neutral manner. This practice is mostly present in pro-government tabloids, led by news portals Alo.rs, Informer.rs and Kurir.rs, where information which damages the reputation of opposition leaders come from unnamed sources and could not be verified. As could be seen in Graph 5, more than 91% of all texts on Alo.rs news portal containing references to Dragan Djilas were damaging for him. 80% and 75% texts related to Obradovic and Jeremic, respectively, were also negative. The journalistic practice of all three tabloids is very similar (Graph 6 and Graph 7): the leaders that the politicians

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[12] The sample was finally consisted of 252 texts where opposition leaders were detected, and 245 texts where the President and Prime Minister were detected.

[13] Which considers journalistic value judgment towards certain actor — attribution, negative attitude (*ad hominem* or on political activity) or any kind of criticism.
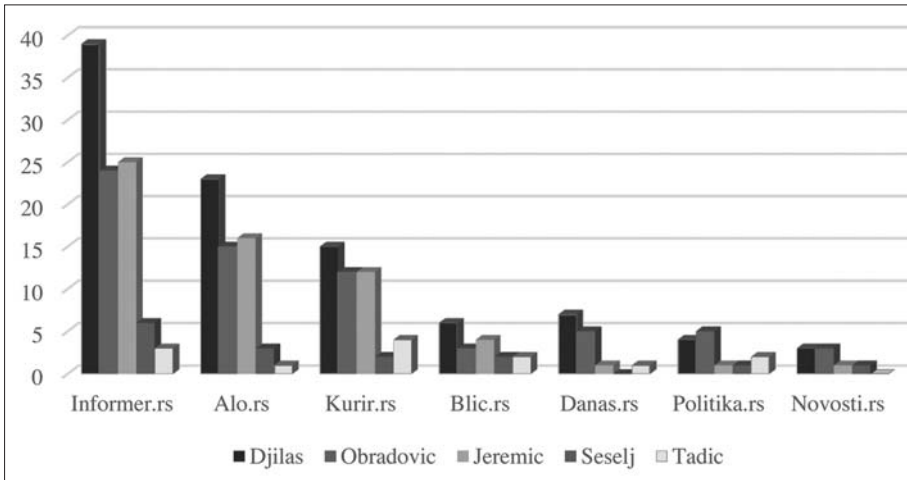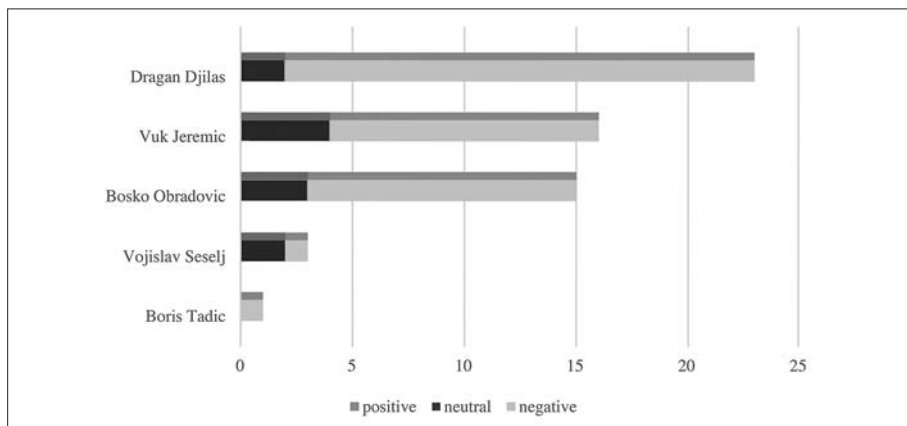
Graph 3 — Distribution of selected texts (relying on at least one unknown source) by the representatives of the opposition and media. Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction of the Enemies of the People".
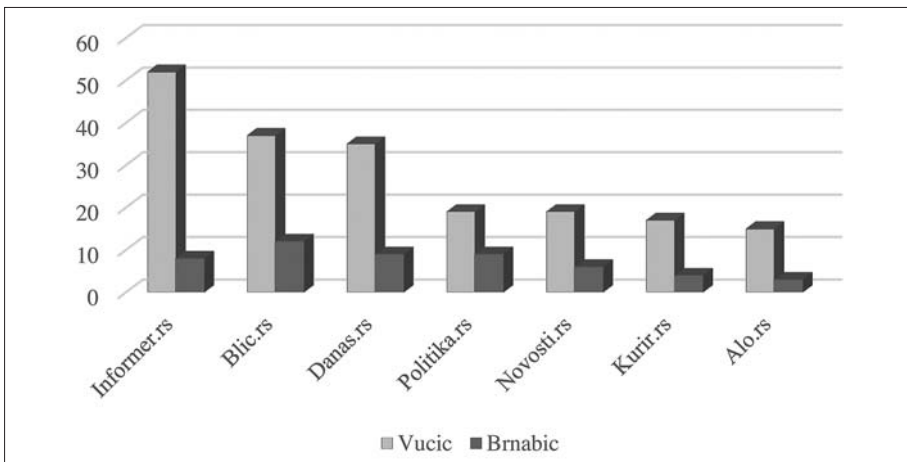
Graph 4 — Distribution of selected texts (relying on at least one unknown source) by the representatives of the executive power and media. Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction of the Enemies of the People".

who control executive power consider to be political competitors are presented in a negative manner, while other opposition politicians are left out the limelight - underrepresented or portrayed neutrally.

The rest of analysed media took a different approach. Blic.rs wrote about all five opposition leaders in 17 texts where unnamed sources were present, but all

Graph 5 — Value context by the representatives of the opposition on Alo.rs.
Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting
on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction
of the Enemies of the People".
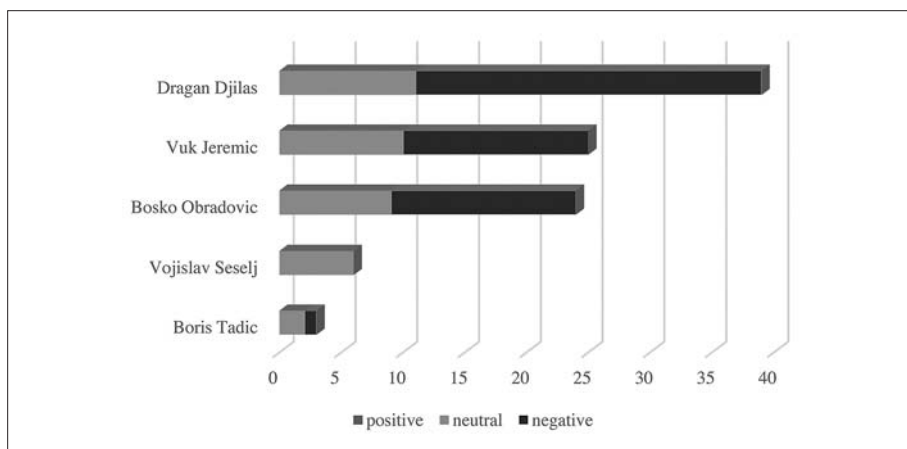
Graph 6 — Value context by the representatives of the opposition and media on Informer.rs.
Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting
on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction
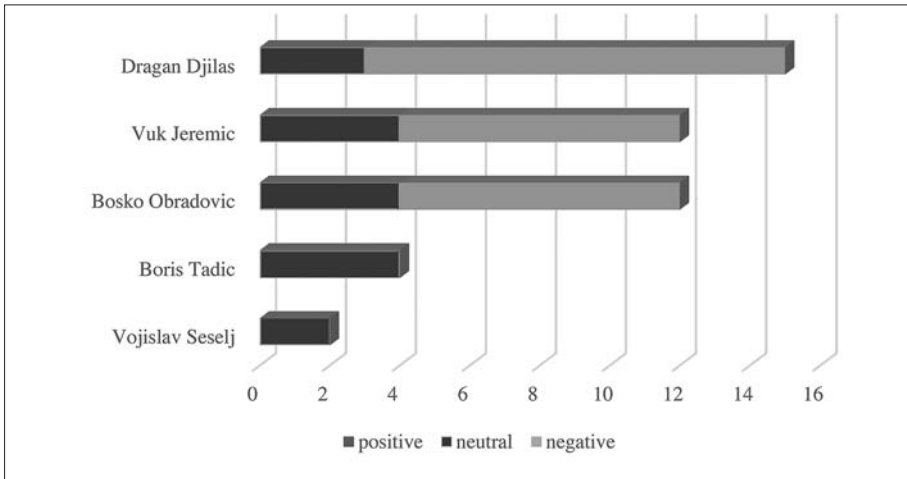of the Enemies of the People".

texts but three were neutral.[14] Danas also used information given by unnamed sources in 17 texts, but all texts were neutral towards the opposition leaders, as well as all 13 texts in Politika and 8 in Vecernje Novosti.

Evaluations of representatives of executive power were predominantly neutral. Aleksandar Vucic was presented in a neutral manner in 97.94% texts from the sam-

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[14] Three units, where Jeremic, Obradovic and Seselj each are mentioned, carried negative value.

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Graph 7 — Value context by the representatives of the opposition on Kurir.rs.
Source: Jarić, Balaban, Bajčeta: "(Mis)Use of Unnamed Sources in Media Reporting on Political Actors: The Role of the Media in the Populist Construction of the Enemies of the People".

ple (190 of 194), and 3 or 1.55% units were positive (two texts in Alo.rs and one in Kurir.rs). The only negative text that contained information from an unnamed source was published in Danas daily and its news portal. This media outlet is critical towards the Government, the Serbian president and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.

All analysed texts contained neutral evaluations of Prime Minister Ana Brnabic.

In order to discredit Djilas and Obradovic the tabloids publish stories based upon information that could not be verified.[15] Also, negative features that populist everywhere attribute to their political opponents were used in reference to each opposition leader. For example, in Informer.rs, Dragan Djilas was depicted as a corrupt former "tycoon" in 23 of the 28 texts based on unnamed sources that were classified as negative towards him, while Vuk Jeremic was labelled as a "thief" in 3 texts in all three tabloids (Informer, Kurir, Alo). Bosko Obradovic was presented as a

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[15] Examples: 1. https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/429148/mora-padne-krv-vuk-bosko-djilas--guraju-srbiju-rat-hoce-svaku-cenu-otmu-vlast suggest that three opposition leaders plan civil war; 2. https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/423247/ekskluzivno-otkrivamo-svi-detalji--tajnog-sastanka-skoplju-kod-zaeva-dogovoren-plan-vucicev-pad "exclusively reveals" that "tycoon Djilas" has agreed with Macedonian president Zoran Zaev to "remove" President Vucic from office and "create chaos" in Serbia; 3. https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/draganova-namera-da-posvada-crkvu-i-drzavnih-vrh-osujecena-ono-sto-je-imao-u-planu-je--krajnje-podlo/228627/vest discovers that "tycoon Djilas" tried to organize "coup" and take control of Serbian Orthodox Church, to prevent Vucic to perform speech on the Church's Assembly.

"fascist" in 7 of 14, the attribute which denotes the most despised collective enemy of "the people". The selection of those negative characteristics is in line with the President's narrative, who repeats them when publicly talking about those three opposition leaders.[16]

According to the standards of journalistic practice, unnamed sources are supposed to reveal abuses of power and bad governance, our research shows that journalists from pro-government tabloid media use them to promote mainstream political discourse and discredit opposition leaders by repeating key points promulgated by the ruling party in its defamation narratives. Information obtained from unknown sources is thus used to protect particular interests of the executive authority, which collides with the public interest. "The danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world — the political actors posing the danger speak the language of democratic values. That the end result is a form of politics that is blatantly antidemocratic should trouble us all — and demonstrate the need for nuanced political judgment to help us determine precisely where democracy ends and populist peril begins" (Mueller, 2016:6).

Those demonizing narratives on corruption, immorality, and elitism — that the opposition leaders are allegedly prone to — delegitimize the political opponents of the ruling elites because "whoever does not support populist parties might not be a proper part of the people—always defined as righteous and morally pure" (Müller 2016:4).

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[16] For example: https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/predsednistvo-sns-jednoglasno-za-izbore--vucic-izbori-ili-u-junu-ili-na-prolece/yeth4kd;

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