THE LANGUAGE OF INSULTS IN THE DISCOURSE OF SERBIAN POLITICAL PARTIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN[a]

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Abstract

Social media has an increasingly important role in the communication of political parties with their supporters and potential voters. However, previous studies argue that communication via social media may often be a tool for preserving and deepening the trends of political polarisation, which occasionally amounts to political sectarianism. This paper deals with the language of insults aimed at political opponents in social media posts on the official *X* and *Instagram* social media profiles of the leading Serbian parties during the 2023 election campaign. The analysis of posts shows that insults are very often used when mentioning political opponents. The focus of insults is most often on discrediting the opponent as a person, on their activities, which are deemed immoral (e.g. lying, stealing), on their lack of qualifications or agency, as well as their lack of patriotism. In the conclusion, the importance of the identified patterns of political communication is discussed in light of the growing polarisation in Serbian society.

Key words: political discourse, social media, Serbia, language of insults, election campaign.

ЈЕЗИК УВРЕДА У ДИСКУРСУ СРПСКИХ ПАРТИЈА НА ДРУШТВЕНИМ МРЕЖАМА ТОКОМ ПРЕДИЗБОРНЕ КАМПАЊЕ

Апстракт

Друштвене мреже имају све важнију улогу у комуникацији политичких партија са присталицама и потенцијалним бирачима. Међутим, раније студије указују на то да комуникација на друштвеним мрежама често представља механизам

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очувања и продубљења трендова политичке поларизације, која повремено достиже размере политичког секташтва. Предмет рада је језик увреда усмерен према политичким противницима у објавама на друштвеним мрежама на званичним профилима на друштвеним мрежама *X* и *Instagram* водећих српских партија током кампање за изборе 2023. године. Анализа објава показује да се увреде веома често користе при помињају политичких противника. У фокусу увреда најчешће се налази личност политичког другог која се дискредитује по разним основама, његове активности које се оцењују као неморалне (нпр. лаже, краде), недостатак компетенција или агенсности, као и одсуство патриотизма. У закључку се разматра значај идентификованих образаца политичке комуникације у светлу растуће поларизације у српском друштву.

Кључне речи: политички дискурс, друштвене мреже, Србија, језик увреда,
                      предизборна кампања.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media have become standard channels for the communication of political actors with their voters and supporters, both during and outside of election campaigns (Kalsnes, 2016). The key feature of the new media, which makes them very suitable for these purposes, is a direct two-way communication which enables the users to interact, create and share content (Kalsnes, 2016; Kruikemeier, 2014). Parties can use the Internet to connect with their voters and mobilise them (Kruikemeier, 2014), as well as to mobilise volunteers and coordinate campaign activities (Spierings & Jacobs, 2018). Social media also offer an opportunity for politicians to profile themselves (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013), to develop personalised communications styles and use the interactive style in addressing their electorate (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Parties' communication via social media may have a persuasive effect when it comes to actual electoral support as well. Kruikemeier's study (2014), which analysed the content of tweets posted by candidates in the national elections in the Netherlands in the 2010 campaign, showed that the use of Twitter to communicate with potential voters and, particularly, the style of communication on this platform, may have a beneficial effect, especially if the candidates use the interactive communication style. This study also indicated that the candidates who more frequently engaged in direct communication and replied to comments, retweeted or used mentions, received more votes as well.

On the basis of the aforementioned previous studies, it may be argued that the specific characteristics of the new media, such as their interactive features and the possibility to make communication more individual, may have positive consequences for the sphere of politics, such as increased political involvement on the part of citizens (Kruikemeier et al., 2013, p. 60). Still, other authors point out that communicating via social media may often serve as a mechanism of deepening and increasing the

trends of political polarisation, which may also reach the proportions of 'political sectarianism' (Finkel et al., 2020). The political opponent may not be perceived and represented as a legitimate competitor, but as a morally corrupt fiend with malevolent intentions (Pavlović, 2022).

Bearing in mind the ever-growing importance of communicating via social networks in the political sphere, this paper focuses on Serbian parties' social media posts during the 2023 election campaign. More specifically, the paper deals with the language of insults levelled at political opponents in social media posts on the official *X* and *Instagram* social media profiles of the leading Serbian parties during this campaign. The aims of the study are to identify and to categorise the insults, with the purpose of elaborating on the possible consequences of using such discourse in political communication.

The Use of Insults in Political Discourse

There are numerous previous studies aimed at analysing the features of discourse in politics, predominantly carried out within the theoretical and methodological framework of critical discourse analysis (e.g. Wodak, 2014) and critical metaphor analysis (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2004; 2005). Previous studies often focused on the conceptual metaphors[1] used in public discourse (e.g. Flusberg, Matlock, & Thibodeau, 2018; Musolff 2006), and framing the discourse in such a way as to communicate the desired message (e.g. Lakoff, 2014). Discourse metaphors are convenient devices for highlighting certain aspects of reality, while hiding some others (Lakoff, & Johnson, 2003 [1980]). They can increase persuasion and, thus, favour certain representations of political events and actions (Charteris-Black, 2004), possibly steering the electorate towards a specific look upon a certain issue. There is a long tradition of studies examining the use and potential effect of conceptual metaphors in the political discourse in Serbia, pertaining to various relevant topics in the specific time periods, for instance, Silaški, Đurović, & Radić-Bojanić, 2009; Đurović, & Silaški 2010; Rasulić, 2020; Vesić Pavlović, 2010. In recent years, the prevalent studies have been those

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[1] In cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor is defined as understanding a more abstract concept via a more concrete one, closer to our everyday experience (Lakoff, & Johnson, 2003 [1980]). For example, various aspects of life are understood through elements of a journey and this can be formulated as the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, which is exemplified in language by various expressions, such as *my career path*, *I went into physics* etc. (Vesić Pavlović, 2018). Metonymy is another conceptual mechanism frequently present in the public discourse. Conceptual metonymy occurs when we use one entity to stand for another (Lakoff, & Johnson, 2003 [1980]). There are various types of idealised cognitive models featuring the groups of different metonymies, such as the Action ICM (e.g. INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION), the Causation ICM (e.g. SOUND CAUSED FOR THE EVENT THAT CAUSED IT), the Containment ICM (e.g. CONTAINER FOR CONTAINED) etc. (Kövecses, & Radden, 1998);

investigating the features of the Serbian public discourse related to the topical issue of the Covid-19 pandemic. They focused on the general features of the discourse of pandemics in Serbia (e.g. Slijepčević Bjelivuk, 2021; Nikolić, & Slijepčević Bjelivuk, 2022), as well as on the prominent metaphors for structuring the Covid-19 disease and their impact on the shaping of the opinions on the new disease (Silaški, & Đurović, 2022a; Silaški, & Đurović, 2022b; Silaški, 2023).

The use of insults in political discourse has been analysed as well, albeit to a lesser extent. The pertinent literature states that political opponents can be discredited in political debates by different communicative acts, such as criticism, accusation and insult (Poggi & D'Errico, 2022, p. 163); insults are mentioned as an action of aggressive communication (*ibid.*). Politicians usually tend to project a positive image of themselves, and, at the same time, endeavour to prevent people from being persuaded by their opponents (D'Errico, Poggi, & Corrierio, 2014). Therefore, they may use different strategies, including insults, to discredit their opponents and spoil their image (D'Errico et al., 2014).

An insult may be defined as "a whole communicative act produced by a sender with the deliberate intent of offending a target entity T (a person, a group, even an object)" (Poggi et al., 2022, p. 167). Offending is usually performed by an attribution of a very negative property to the target, which implies that the target/opponent is placed in a degrading category, with the purpose of spoiling their image and also targeting their self-image (*ibid.*). The most common form of insults are verbal direct insults, which take the form of an informative sentence (e.g. "You are an X"), where 'X' may be either an adjective or a noun that express some negative property or belonging to a negative category (Poggi et al., 2022, p. 172).

Discrediting moves in political discourse may involve negating the aspect of benevolence of a political opponent, who is described as immoral, dishonest or cheating (D'Errico et al., 2014, p. 106), or may refer to the opponent's competence, whereby s/he is described as inadequate – either ignorant or stupid (D'Errico et al., 2014, p. 107). Insult may serve as an efficient weapon for political discredit (Poggi et al., 2022), specifically in social media. When an opponent is discredited and insulted through social media posts, this can contribute towards an increase in hate speech, primarily "in terms of dehumanisation of a political opponent" (D'Errico et al., 2014, p. 114). The prevalent use of violent rhetoric in political discourse may have direct consequences. For example, an experimental study by Kalmoe (2014) showed that the use of mild violent metaphors increased support for political violence among aggressive citizens, especially young adults, and concluded that violent rhetoric may encourage violent attitudes, leading to the situations in which "many citizens seem comfortable wishing physical harm on political opponents" (Kalmoe, 2014, p. 557).

Political discourse also frequently abounds with the negative evaluations of political adversaries that are expressed through the opposition of US and THEM (Van Dijk, 1997). Typically, the terms 'us' and 'our actions' are framed in positive terms, and 'them' and 'their actions' (referring to political opponents, competitors, even enemies) in negative terms (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 28). When it comes to the Serbian political discourse in particular, it can be argued that the opposition of WE:THEY has grown into the opposition WE:OTHER, which has the aim of emphasising the negative evaluation of the other that is bad as opposed to us, who are noble and honest (Slijepčević, 2012, p. 194).

The most relevant recent study dealing with the communication of Serbian political parties via social media focused on the social media posts of two leading Serbian parties, the Serbian Progressive Party and the Party of Freedom and Justice, in a nine-month period during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pavlović, 2022). This study showed that the political opponent, or 'other,' was mentioned in the posts relatively often; in the majority of cases, when it was mentioned, it was solely in a negative context. Most posts mentioning the political 'other' also contained moralising evaluations, which described the political opponent as morally corrupt, with malicious intentions, a flawed character, someone who violated moral norms by lying, stealing, or buying votes, as well as someone who wished to get rich at the expense of people and to destabilise the country in various ways (Pavlović, 2022, pp. 156–157). Since previous studies indicate that insults may and do figure as a means of discrediting political opponents, in our current research, we aim at addressing the use of insults in a specific type of communication of political parties – their social media posts during an election campaign in Serbia.

METHODS

The material for the current study comprised the posts of Serbian ruling and opposition parties on the social media platforms *X* (formerly known as *Twitter*) and *Instagram*, in the period of the election campaign for the parliamentary elections held on the 17th of December, 2023. The posts were collected in the period between the 1st of November, 2023, when the Serbian president called for an election, and the 14th of December, 2023, which marked the beginning of the electoral silence.

We analysed the posts from the official accounts of the following parties[2], two ruling and four opposition parties in total, two from each end of the left-right political spectrum: *Srpska napredna stranka* (SNS; Serbian

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[2] The accounts on *X*: @sns_srbija, @socijalisti, @slobodaipravda, @demokrate, @SPDveri, @StrankaNarodna; the accounts on *Instagram*: @sns_srbija, @socijalisti, @slobodapravda, @demokrate, @SPDveri, @narodnastranka;

Progressive Party), *Socijalistička partija Srbije* (SPS; Serbian Socialist Party), *Stranka slobode i pravde* (SSP; Party of Freedom and Justice), *Demokratska stranka* (DS; Democratic Party), *Srpski pokret Dveri* (Serbian Movement Dveri) and *Narodna stranka* (NS; National Party). We chose only the official party accounts, not the accounts of individual politicians, on purpose, since we aimed at capturing the general pattern of communication of the party as an entity, rather than that of its individual officials. Further, we examined all the posts, tweets and retweets, but not the comments left on any posts. Having read all the posts in the aforementioned period, only the posts which explicitly mentioned the political opponents, be it parties or politicians, in a negative/insulting context were taken into account and analysed in the paper.

The number of *Instagram* posts collected in this way was 103 (totalling 24,595 words), and the number of tweets collected from the *X* platform amounted to 171 (totalling 2,357 words). There is a discrepancy in the number of words between the posts collected from *Instagram* and *X*, but it was to be expected, since the style of communication on *X* is different; the posts on *X* are much more succinct and the text content is limited in the number of characters. Still, taken altogether, the collected posts posed abundant and fruitful material for our analysis.

All the parties, except SPS, published election-related content on *X* during the observed period of the election campaign. The number of posts was by far the biggest in the SNS party accounts, and the lowest for DS. The case is similar with the *Instagram* platform; all the parties, including SPS, had election-related posts, but none of the SPS posts mentioned the opponents nor contained insults, which implies that the SPS *Instagram* and *X* posts did not form part of the material for the analysis.

When the material was compiled, we performed a qualitative analysis by identifying the insults aimed at political opponents and then grouping them into several categories, bearing in mind the common theme, i.e. the cause of discrediting the opponent, based on previous studies which offered an outline of the possible ways of discrediting political opponents (e.g. Poggi et al., 2022). Thus, the main criterion for grouping and presenting the insults was the negative aspect of the political other they profiled. The results of our analysis are shown in the Results section of the paper.

RESULTS

A qualitative analysis of the collected *X* and *Instagram* posts containing insults has revealed that there are several categories into which such insults may be grouped. In the following text, we will define the essence of each of these groups formed by the criterion of which aspect of

the political other they focus on and illustrate them by the collected posts[3], paying special attention to the cases in which the insults are semantically realised through conceptual metaphors and metonymies.

We start by discussing the recorded verbal insults aimed at the personality of the political opponent (ex. 1–10, all collected from the account @sns_srbija). In the governing parties' tweets, opposition politicians are frequently targeted personally, through direct insults. They are generally described as scum, misers, sick minds, scavengers (in Serbian: *bezumni ološ*, *bednici*, *bolesni umovi*, *lešinari*, ex. 1–4). One prominent opposition politician is often labelled in these tweets as a court-certified liar (ex. 6, 7), someone who had to repeat grades in school (*čuveni ponavljač*, ex. 6), or someone who tries to steal for his own gain (*secikesa*, ex. 7, *muljator i sitni politički pilićar*, ex. 5). Other opposition politicians are labelled as those who hate the Serbian people and want to destroy them (*uništitelj i mrzitelj srpskog naroda*, ex. 8), cowards (ex. 9) or failed students and alcoholics (*propali i polupani student […] olešen od alkohola*, ex. 10).

1) <u>Bezumni ološ</u> napada decu predsednika V. (X, @sns_srbija, 9/11/2023) [Mindless scum is attacking the children of President V.]
2) <u>Bednici</u> iz opozicije vode najprljaviju i najgoru kampanju (X, @sns_srbija, 8/11/2023) [Misers from the opposition are running the dirtiest and the worst campaign]
3) <u>Bolesni umovi</u> iz opozicije izmišljaju priče o porodici predsednika (X, @sns_srbija, 8/11/2023) [Sick minds from the opposition fabricate stories about the President's family]
4) <u>Lešinari</u> iz opozicije su pokazali svoje pravo lice (X, @sns_srbija, 8/11/2023) [Scavengers from the opposition have shown their true colours]
5) A. je <u>muljator</u> i <u>sitni politički pilićar</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 14/11/2023) [A. is a swindler and a petty political hustler]
6) A. je <u>sudski overeni lažov</u> i <u>čuveni ponavljač</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 10/11/2023) [A. is a court-certified liar and a notorious grade repeater]
7) A. je <u>secikesa</u> i <u>sudski overena lažovčina</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 5/11/2023) [A. is a cutpurse and a court-certified liar]
8) Z. je <u>uništitelj</u> i <u>mrzitelj srpskog naroda</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 12/11/2023) [Z. is a destroyer and hater of the Serbian people]
9) <u>Francuz</u> M. je <u>kukavica</u> i <u>lažni patriota</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 7/11/2023) [The Frenchman M. is a coward and a false patriot]
10) Otišao <u>propali i polupani student</u>, u 43. godini, i prvi na Đ. listi, R. L., u Kruševac, da poziva narod na „ustajanje", dok on uglavnom leži, <u>olešen od alkohola</u>. (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 6/12/2023) [A failed and

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[3] Each given example in Serbian is accompanied by an English translation. The names of the politicians in the posts are represented by their initials instead of full names.

plastered student, at the age of 43, and the first in Đ's list, R. L., went to Kruševac to incite the people to "rise", while he mostly keeps to his bed, hammered from alcohol.]

A specific type of personal insults includes those in which political opponents are described via metaphors (and, in one case, metonymy) as animals that have negative qualities; labelling them as these animals invokes very negative associations (POLITICAL OPPONENT IS AN ANIMAL; ex. 11–13, from @sns_srbija). For instance, a prominent opposition politician is called a rat, which is a filthy animal that spreads infectious diseases (ex. 11). Opposition members in general are referred to as hyenas, vicious animals that feed on carrions (ex. 12). The onomatopoeic nickname *kokoda* for one of the female opposition leaders, M. T., labels her as being a chicken, because in Serbian "*kokoda*" is a sound that chicken make (THE SOUND FOR THE ANIMAL THAT CAUSED IT metonymy). This implies constant, but meaningless talking and transfers the image of worthless ideas presented by this politician, portraying her as brainless chatterbox (ex. 13).

11) Verovatno je u pitanju neki hologram ili je ponovo dokazao da je najobičniji <u>kanalizacijski pacov</u> koji laže narod i slatkorečivo ga vara. (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [It is probably a hologram or he has proven again that he is just a common sewer rat who lies to the people and sweet talks in order to swindle them.]

12) U istoriju beščašća ući će jeziva zloupotreba ove strašne tragedije koja je pogodila srpsku državu, a koju su <u>opozicione hijene</u> poput Z. P., D. Đ. i M. B. pokušale da iskoriste kako bi na ulicama izazvali haos i putem nasilja uz svesrdnu podršku stranog faktora, bez političke volje naroda preuzeli vlast. (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [The horrible abuse of this terrible tragedy that struck the Serbian state, and which opposition hyenas like Z. P., D. Đ. and M. B. tried to use in order to cause chaos on the streets and, with the wholehearted support of a foreign factor, without the political will of the people, to violently take over power.]

13) Sudski overeni lažov M. A. još jednom se dokazao gazda Đ. da je prevazišao njegovu miljenicu <u>M. Kokoda</u> u laganju. (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 10/12/2023) [A court-certified liar M. A. once again proved to his boss Đ. that he surpassed his favourite M. Kokoda in lying.]

The following set of examples illustrates the insults aimed at the morality of political opponents (ex. 14–21 collected from the account @sns_srbija; ex. 22 from @slobodaipravda). Abundant examples contain clear references to the opponents' immorality, reflected in the fact that they essentially never tell the truth and instead engage in fabricating all sorts of lies when communicating with the electorate (*masno lažu*, ex. 19; *plitko i providno lažu*, ex. 20; *sve što kaže, slaže*, ex. 18). From the point of view of the governing party, SNS, all about the opposition campaign boils down

to lies and false promises (ex. 17). Opposition politicians are labelled as masters of lies (ex. 14), or fraudsters (ex. 15), who offer the citizens of Serbia absolutely nothing (ex. 21). On the other hand, judging by their tweets, the opposition also perceives the governing parties as morally corrupt, i.e. as those that deceive citizens and offer them mere lies (*Sva politika A. V. staje u dve reči: OBMANA GRAĐANA*; ex. 22).

14) D. Đ. pokazao da je <u>gospodar laži</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 11/12/2023) [D. Đ. has shown that he is a master of lies]
15) A. je jedan od <u>najvećih prevaranata</u> na političkoj sceni (X, @sns_srbija, 5/12/2023) [A. is one of the biggest fraudsters on the political scene]
16) Demontaža Đ. <u>laži</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 6/12/2023) [Dismantling Đ's lies]
17) U Đ. kampanji sve se svodi na <u>laž i prazna obećanja</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 27/11/2023) [In Đ's campaign everything boils down to lies and empty promises]
18) Đ. <u>sve što kaže, slaže</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 13/12/2023) [Everything that Đ. says, he lies]
19) V. O. masno <u>lagao</u> o svojoj biografiji (X, @sns_srbija, 28/11/2023) [V. O. lied through his teeth about his biography]
20) D. Đ. plitko i providno <u>laže</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 28/11/2023) [D. Đ. lies poorly and blatantly]
21) V. O. građanima <u>pokušava da ponudi jedno veliko ništa</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 11/12/2023) [V. O. is trying to offer to citizens one big nothing]
22) Sva politika A. V. staje u dve reči: <u>OBMANA GRAĐANA</u>. Nebitno da li je tema Kosovo, ekonomija, obrazovanje, zdravstvo... Uvek isto. <u>Laž pokrivena medijima</u>. (X, @slobodaipravda, 6/12/2023) [The entire politics of A. V. can be summed up in two words: DECEPTION OF CITIZENS. It doesn't matter if the topic is Kosovo, the economy, education, healthcare... It's always the same. A lie covered by the media.]

Another aspect of immorality often ascribed to political opponents in the posts during the election campaign is that of being thieves, i.e. those stealing from the people of Serbia (ex. 23–33 from @sns_srbija; ex. 34, 35 from the accounts @SPDveri, @demokrate). In this respect, one of the opposition leaders is derogatorily referred to as the tycoon, and the opposition as a whole as a gang of tycoons and thieves (*tajkunsko-lopovska ekipa*, ex. 25; *tajkunska opozicija*, ex. 26). The posts of the governing parties frequently accuse the opposition parties/leaders of stealing in a variety of ways and with only one aim – to devastate the state budget (*ponovo bi Đ. da opustoši gradsku kasu*, ex. 27; *Đ. čerupao našu državu*, ex. 28) and even being proud of that (*ponosan što je građane pljačkao*, ex. 24). Hence, they suggest to the voters not to vote for the opposition because their votes are, metonymically, votes for the opposition leaders who will steal and put the money into their pockets (*svaki glas za Đ. je glas za njegov džep*, ex. 29).

Further, political opponents are immoral since they are venal, i.e. can be bought easily (ex. 31–33; e.g. *R. R. za malo para 'peva' sve što mu se naredi*).

In this group, we also notice the examples of insults being realised through conceptual metaphors and metonymies. The metonymy CON-TAINER FOR CONTENT is present in ex. 26 and 27, where the political opponent is depicted as wishing to lay their hands on the 'cash register,' which represents the money in the state budget. Further, ex. 27 features the NAT-URAL DISASTER METAPHOR, which conceptualises the act of stealing from the state budget as natural devastation (the verb *opustošiti*). In ex. 28, the state budget is conceptualised as a chicken that can be plucked (the verb *čerupati*), which testifies to the presence of THE STATE IS AN ANIMAL metaphor.

23) Dok je Srbija propadala bivši lopovski režim pljačkao (X, @sns_srbija, 11/12/2023) [While Serbia was deteriorating, the former thieving regime was looting]

24) Tajkun Đ. stalno poručuje da je ponosan što je građane pljačkao (X, @sns_srbija, 8/11/2023) [The tycoon Đ. constantly states that he is proud of having robbed the citizens]

25) Tajkunsko-lopovska ekipa želi da se dočepa kase (X, @sns_srbija, 17/11/2023) [The gang of tycoons and thieves wants to get their hands on the cash register]

26) Đ. tajkunska opozicija samo želi da pelješi državnu kasu (X, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [Đ's tycoon opposition only wants to steal from the state treasury]

27) Ponovo bi Đ. da opustoši gradsku kasu (X, @sns_srbija, 6/11/2023) [Đ. would like to devastate the city budget once again]

28) Đ. čerupao našu državu i danas bi opet (X, @sns_srbija, 4/12/2023) [Đ. plucked our state and he would do it again today]

29) Svaki glas za Đ. je glas za njegov džep (X, @sns_srbija, 8/11/2023) [Every vote for Đ. is a vote for his pocket]

30) Zamišlja M. Francuz kako će da deli narodne pare sa Đ. (X, @sns_srbija, 11/12/2023) [M. Frenchman fantasises how he will split the money of the people with Đ.]

31) B. O. bio i ostao službenik tajkuna (X, @sns_srbija, 16/11/2023) [B. O. used to be and remains an employee of the tycoon]

32) J. veran isključivo žutoj tajkunskoj eliti (X, @sns_srbija, 9/11/2023) [J. is loyal exclusively to the yellow tycoon elite]

33) Lažni ekolog R. R. za malo para „peva" sve što mu se naredi (X, @sns_srbija, 9/11/2023) [A fake environmentalist R.R. will "sing" everything he is ordered to for a little money]

The opposition parties also label their opponents as immoral, for instance, by describing them as corrupt, thus subtly implying that they obtain money in an illegal way (ex. 34) or (via the metonymy CONTAINER

FOR CONTENT) claiming that the President of the Republic stole from his citizens, for instance, those who are retired (ex. 35).

34) V.-B. nedemokratski i <u>korumpirani vladajući režim</u> mora da ode na izborima 17. decembra. (X, @SPDveri, 14/11/2023) [The undemocratic and corrupt ruling regime of V.-B. must be defeated in the elections on December 17.]

35) Iako je obećavao da neće smanjivati penzije, <u>V. je odmah, pošto se dokopao vlasti, penzionerima oteo novčanike</u> i onda im iz tog novčanika udeljivao milostinju, naročito pred izbore. (X, @demokrate, 23/11/2023) [Although he promised not to reduce pensions, immediately, after gaining power, V. robbed pensioners of their wallets and then gave them charity from that wallet, especially before the elections.]

Another group of insults is aimed at discrediting the opponent by ascribing them a lack of competence. Examples (36–38) for this kind of insults come from the account of SNS (@sns_srbija): one of the opposition leaders is described as a *fake general* (ex. 36); furthermore, the opposition leaders have no programme (ex. 37); they failed grades at school and cannot put two and two together (ex. 38). In the opposition's posts, the ruling party is also labelled as incompetent (*nestručna […] naprednjačka vlast*, ex. 39; @SPDveri); its incompetence, for instance, is evident in the fact that the ruling party has devastated Serbian villages (ex. 40, @SPDveri).

36) <u>Lažni general</u> P. je veliki ljubitelj svega što je hrvatsko (X, @sns_srbija, 22/11/2023) [The fake general P. is a big fan of everything that is Croatian]

37) V. O. <u>nema nikakav program</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 17/11/2023) [V. O. does not have any programme]

38) Tako računa <u>padavičar</u> i <u>avgustovac</u>: ne može i <u>ne ume da sabere dva i dva</u>, ali ipak želi da ostavi dobar utisak, doduše, potpuno bezuspešno! (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 22/11/2023) [That is how a grade repeater who had to resit his exams in August calculates: he can't put two and two together, but he still wants to make a good impression, albeit completely unsuccessfully!]

39) Naš cilj je smena vlasti SNS-a na svim nivoima: od republičkog preko pokrajinskog do lokalnog, a posebno u Beogradu gde se <u>bahata, nestručna i korumpirana naprednjačka vlast</u> ogadila Beograđanima!!! (X, @SPDveri, 12/12/2023) [Our goal is to depose the SNS government at all levels: from the republican over provincial to local, and especially in Belgrade, where the citizens of Belgrade are disgusted by the reckless, incompetent and corrupt progressive government!!!]

40) <u>Ova vlast je uništila srpsko selo</u>! ... Pod vlašću SNS-a idemo ka deponiji Evropske unije!!! (X, @SPDveri, 22/11/2023) [This government has destroyed the Serbian village! ... Under the rule of SNS, we are heading towards the European Union landfill!!!]

Further, discrediting political opponents in the posts is also based on previously shown incompetence, confirmed by the bad decisions and disastrous consequences of the former politics. Both the ruling party and the opposition label each other as renowned for the destruction of the Serbian state and its citizens (ex. 41–44, @sns_srbija; ex. 45, 46 @StrankaNarodna, @slobodaipravda).

41) Đ. građani Beograda <u>pamte isključivo po lošem</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 7/12/2023) [The citizens of Belgrade remember Đ. only for the bad]

42) Za građane Šapca <u>Z. je ružna prošlost</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 1/12/2023) [For the citizens of Šabac, Z. is the ugly past]

43) P. i Đ. su <u>jedino poznati po uništavanju vojske i države</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 10/12/2023) [P. and Đ. are renowned only for destroying the army and the state]

44) Bivša vlast <u>katastrofalno upravljala državom</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 30/11/2023) [The former regime ruled the country disastrously]

45) Omogućite vašoj političkoj opciji da na izborima na istorijsko đubrište oteramo <u>vlast koja je državu dovela do potpune propasti.</u> (X, @StrankaNarodna, 7/11/2023) [Allow your political option in the elections to throw the government that brought the country to complete ruin to the ash heap of history.]

46) I. D. je <u>saučesnik u svim zločinima koje je ova vlast načinila nad Srbijom i njenim građanima prethodnih 11 godina.</u> (X, @slobodaipravda, 5/12/2023) [I.D. is complicit in all the crimes committed by this government against Serbia and its citizens in previous 11 years.]

Another identified category of insults may be illustrated by examples in which opponents are discredited based on the argument that their sanity is questionable. The opposition leaders are thus portrayed as imagining things, speaking a lot of nonsense and having phantom lodgers in their heads (ex. 47–50, collected from @sns_srbija). In the opposition' posts, it can be noticed that they think that the ruling party also suffers from a total absence of reason (ex. 51 from @SPDveri).

47) T. misli da ljudi veruju <u>u njene besmislice</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 19/12/2023) [T. thinks that people believe her nonsense]

48) A da joj Š. i Đ. budu što zadovoljniji, <u>začinila je svoj bućkuriš gluposti sa bezbroj lupetanja</u>, samo njoj svojstvenih. (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [And, in order to make Š. and Đ. as satisfied as possible, she spiced up her jumble of nonsense with immense rambling, peculiar only to her.]

49) <u>Fantomski stanari nalaze se u glavi Z. L.</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 10/12/2023) [Phantom lodgers live in the head of Z. L.]

50) Treba razumeti Ć. što <u>veruje u bajke</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 8/11/2023) [We should understand Ć. for believing in fairy tales]

51) Događanja od juče iz Bavaništa pored Pančeva pokazala su kako sunovrat ekonomske politike sada već bivše Vlade Srbije na čelu sa Srpskom naprednom strankom, tako i potpuno <u>rasulo i odsustvo razuma u redovima SNS.</u> (X, @SPDveri, 14/12/2023) [Yesterday's events in Bavanište near Pančevo showed both the collapse of the economic policy of the now former Government of Serbia led by the Serbian Progressive Party, as well as the complete disintegration and absence of reason in the ranks of SNS.]

In the analysed posts, political opponents are also discredited on the grounds of their inability to think and act on their own (ex. 52–63), mostly in the posts of the ruling party @sns_srbija. This group of insults implies the existence of one master mind who orchestrates the actions of all other opposition members and politicians by ordering them what to do. There is one main boss of all the opposition politicians (*gazda*, ex. 52) and the others are his employees (*uposlenici*, ex. 53), pawns (*pioni*, ex. 54), servants (*posluga*, ex. 55), or his extended arms (*produžene ruke Đ.*, ex. 56). Especially derogatory is describing one of the opposition candidates as a cheap piece of cloth used for mopping up dirty water in the kitchen and easily disposed of (*O. je Đ. truleks krpa*, ex. 57), or as a worthless rag (*Đ. najobičnija dronja*, ex. 58). It is also implied that the mentioned opposition politicians would do anything if ordered so by this master mind (e.g. do his bidding, obey blindly, play the way he fiddles, ex. 59–61), and are able to communicate only the things he puts in their mouth (ex. 61–63).

52) V. O. zanima samo interes njegovog <u>gazde</u> Đ. (X, @sns_srbija, 30/11/2023) [V. O. is only interested in the interest of his boss Đ.]
53) T. i ostali <u>uposlenici</u> Đ. su politički lešinari (X, @sns_srbija, 6/12/2023) [T. and other Đ's employees are political vultures]
54) Đ. i njegovi <u>pioni</u> su jedino stručni u pljačkanju i razaranju države (X, @sns_srbija, 9/11/2023) [Đ. and his pawns are experts only in looting and devastating the country]
55) Đ. <u>posluga</u> ne može prevariti ljude u Nišu (X, @sns_srbija, 17/11/2023) [Đ's servants cannot deceive the people in Niš]
56) J. i M. su <u>produžene ruke</u> Đ. (X, @sns_srbija, 28/11/2023) [J. and M. are extended hands of Đ.]
57) O. je Đ. <u>truleks krpa</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 4/12/2023) [O. is Đ's dish rag]
58) I priznao je to, M. Francuz – nema nikakav problem da bude <u>Đ. najobičnija dronja</u>! (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 11/12/2023) [He admitted it, M. Frenchman – he has no problem being Đ's worthless rag!]
59) <u>Slepo slušaju svaku direktivu D. Đ.</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 15/11/2023) [They blindly obey every directive of D. Đ.]
60) J. <u>igra onako kako Đ. svira</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 13/11/2023) [J. plays the way Đ. fiddles]
61) <u>Ć. naučio samo ono što mu Đ. izdiktira</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 16/11/2023) [Ć. has learned only what Đ. has dictated to him]

62) <u>Klepeće L. sve ono što mu je gazda Đ. dao u zadatak</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 6/12/2023) [L. rambles all the things his boss Đ. assigned to him]
63) <u>Dežurni megafon D. Đ.</u>, koji se odaziva na ime M. T., misli da će ljudi poverovati u njene besmislice (...). (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 19/11/2023) [The on-call megaphone of D. Đ., who responds to the name of M. T., thinks that people will believe her nonsense (…).]

A specifically prominent linguistic realisation of insults within this group is the frequent use of THE PUPPET THEATRE METAPHOR in the tweets of the governing party, SNS (ex. 64–68). This metaphor implies that there is a puppeteer, i.e. a politician who governs all the other opposition politicians, who are thus puppets, i.e. have no mind of their own and perform exclusively those moves imposed by the puppeteer. Thus, the opposition is described as a puppet theatre (*lutkarsko pozorište*, ex. 64), and the opposition politicians are described as marionettes (ex. 65–67), who will perform their last puppet show since they are going to lose in the election (*poslednja predstava Đ. marionete*, ex. 68).

64) Kampanja <u>Đ. lutkarskog pozorišta</u> biće najdestruktivnija do sada (X, @sns_srbija, 16/11/2023) [The campaign of Đ's puppet theatre will be the most destructive so far]
65) V. i D. su <u>marionete D. Đ.</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 12/11/2023) [V. and D. are puppets of D. Đ.]
66) <u>Đ. dubl marioneta</u> širi nove izmišljotine (X, @sns_srbija, 6/12/2023) [Đ's two puppets spread new lies]
67) <u>J. je marioneta kojom upravljaju Đ. i Š.</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 1/12/2023) [J. is a puppet controlled by Đ. and Š.]
68) <u>Poslednja predstava Đ. marionete O.</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [The last performance of Đ's puppet]

Political opponents are also portrayed as very hostile and hateful. For instance, the ruling party's posts depict the opposition parties' campaign as containing only hate, which is then channelled into violence (ex. 69–75, @sns_srbija); the opposition behaves like savages (*divljačko ponašanje opozicije*, ex. 71) or common offenders (*svi [su] obični nasilnici*, ex. 72; *sve nasilnik do nasilnika*, ex. 73), who incite people to violence (ex. 74, 75). The opposition labels the ruling party as thugs (ex. 76) and their politics as full of insults, hate and violence (*povratka radikalskoj politici uvreda, mržnje, nasilja i izolacije*, ex. 77).

69) <u>Opozicija se preporučuje biračima samo mržnjom</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 13/11/2023) [The opposition recommend themselves to voters only through hatred]
70) <u>Bolesna mržnja</u> i prljava kampanja opozicije prema predsedniku (X, @sns_srbija, 8/12/2023) [Sick hatred and dirty campaign of the opposition towards the President]

71) <u>Divljačko ponašanje opozicije</u> ne prestaje (X, @sns_srbija, 9/11/2023)
[Savage behaviour of the opposition has no end]

72) Opozicija svakodnevno pokazuje da su <u>svi obični nasilnici</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 7/11/2023) [Every day, the opposition demonstrates that they are all ordinary thugs]

73) <u>Na Đ. listama sve nasilnik do nasilnika</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [Nothing but bullies on Đ's lists]

74) J. V. <u>poziva na nasilje i isto sprovodi</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 13/12/2023) [J. V. incites violence and then implements it]

75) S. M. <u>bi opet da ruši Srbiju</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 12/12/2023) [S. M. would like to destroy Serbia again]

76) Pančevo danas, to je kad se zbog <u>SNS batinaša</u> iseliš jer ti 17 puta izbuše gume, a policija kaže da ne može da te zaštiti. (Instagram, @slobodaipravda, 21/11/2023) [Pančevo today, it's when you have to move out because of SNS thugs who have punctured your tires 17 times, and the police say they can't protect you.]

77) Zajednički izlazak na izbore naprednjaka i radikala, najavljen na skupu u Hrtkovcima, dokaz je konačnog <u>V. povratka radikalskoj politici uvreda, mržnje, nasilja</u> i izolacije koju je pokušao da sakrije u proteklih 10 godina. (X, @slobodaipravda, 1/11/2023) [The joint participation of progressives and radicals, announced at the meeting in Hrtkovci, is evidence of V.'s final return to the radical policy of insults, hatred, violence and isolation that he was trying to hide in the past 10 years.]

The final group of insults aim at discrediting the opponents on the basis of their lack of patriotism: the opposition leaders, in their activities against Serbia, laugh in the face of their own people since they are fake patriots (ex. 78–81, from @sns_srbija); similarly, in the eyes of the opposition (ex. 82, 83 from @SPDveri), the state and the Government do not work in the best interest of Serbian citizens.

78) Tajkun Đ. i M. Francuz <u>otvoreno rade protiv Srbije</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 6/11/2023) [The tycoon Đ. and M. Frenchman openly plot against Serbia]

79) J. nije strano da se <u>smeje u lice svom narodu</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 12/11/2023) [J. is no stranger to smiling in the face of his people]

80) M. J. <u>ima zadatak da glumi patriotu</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 10/11/2023) [M. J. has the task of playing a patriot]

81) Francuz M. je potvrdio da je <u>Đ. vlasnik lažnih rodoljuba</u> (X, @sns_srbija, 10/12/2023) [The Frenchman M. confirmed that Đ. is the owner of false patriots]

82) Naša Vlada nažalost nije naša, već <u>Vlada koja radi za strane interese</u>! (X, @SPDveri, 21/11/2023) [Unfortunately, our government is not ours, but a government that works for foreign interests!]

83) Naše pare odlaze stranim firmama, <u>država radi samo za strane banke i kompanije.</u> (X, @SPDveri, 9/11/2023) [Our money goes to foreign companies, the state only works for foreign banks and companies.]

In the end, we provide one example from *Instagram* (@sns_srbija) where it can be seen how insults from all the above-identified categories can be used in one post to create a very persuasive and striking picture of discredit of the political opponent on multiple accounts (ex. 84). This post contains personal insults (e.g. *Đ. potrčko P. G.*, *A. J. Ć. zvani Vinjak*, *S. M. Primerak*), coupled with immorality (lying: *međusobno [se] takmiče u tome – ko će više i odvratnije slagati*; stealing: *tajkunsko-lopovska ekipa*), lack of patriotism (*u svakom trenutku spremni da pljunu i udare po srpskom narodu*), previous incompetence (*ojadili sve čega su se dohvatili dok su vedrili i oblačili Srbijom*) and aggression (*osvedočene siledžije i nasilnici*).

84) <u>Tajkunsko-lopovska ekipa</u> u sastavu: <u>najmlađi Đ. potrčko P. G., A. J. Ć. zvani Vinjak, S. M. Primerak, secikesa iz Trstenika M. A.</u> i <u>R. L. koji je tu samo nekim nesrećnim slučajem zalutao</u> pokušali su da se večeras međusobno takmiče u tome – <u>ko će više i odvratnije slagati!</u> To su oni za koje su Srbi genocidan narod, <u>oni koji su u svakom trenutku spremni da pljunu i udare po srpskom narodu</u>, <u>oni koji su pozivali na ubistvo A. V. i članova njegove porodice</u>, <u>oni koji su ojadili sve čega su se dohvatili dok su vedrili i oblačili Srbijom</u>, oni koji su <u>sinonim za pljačkanje i otimanje od usta naših građana</u>, <u>oni koji su osvedočene siledžije i nasilnici</u> – svi do jednog, bez izuzetka, a sve sa <u>tajkunom</u> na čelu kolone! (Instagram, @sns_srbija, 17/11/2023) [The gang of tycoons and thieves consisting of: the youngest Đ's errand boy P. G., A. J. Ć. aka Brandy, S. M. the Specimen, the cutpurse from Trstenik M. A. and R. L., who simply ended there by some unfortunate accident, had a competition this evening – who will tell a more disgusting lie! These are the people for whom the Serbs are a genocidal nation, those who are ready to spit at and attack the Serbian people at any moment, those who called for the murder of A.V. and his family members, those who destroyed everything they could get their hands on while they were pulling all the strings in Serbia, those who are synonyms for looting and stealing from the mouths of our citizens, those who are proven thugs and abusers – all of them, without exception, and with a tycoon at the helm!]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was aimed at identifying and categorising insults found in posts on the official social media profiles (*X* and *Instagram*) of Serbian political parties during the campaign for the 2023 election. The findings indicate that negative qualifications of political opponents in the form of insults are frequent, which especially holds true for the posts of the ruling SNS party. The posts of the opposition parties in the observed period contain negative evaluations of the opponents rather than insults, and, if they

are present, insults are mostly indirect, such as pointing out the bad actions of their opponents and labelling them with negative adjectives.

Discrediting of the political opponents in the analysed posts is performed by qualifying the opponent as being immoral (it is someone who lies, cheats, steals), incompetent (based on the past and present activities), corruptible (someone who works for other people's interests), non-agentive (someone who blindly obeys orders and does what somebody else tells them to do) and as being a non-patriot (someone who does not love their country, but supports the interest of other countries instead). The insults that ascribe negative features to the political opponent's personality add to this (e.g. being described as scum, an alcoholic or brainless chatterbox). This corroborates the findings of previous research regarding the increased presence of negative qualifications in the communication about political opponents in the Serbian parties' social media discourse (Pavlović, 2022), and provides further insights into the nature of the negative qualifications and the systemic nature of relying on a certain kind of insults in the official party posts on social media.

Bearing in mind the study results, we may argue about the significance of the identified patterns of political communication in light of the growing polarisation in Serbian society. First of all, the offensive styles in communicating about the opponents during the election campaign may be a strategy of dehumanisation of the political opponent, who is portrayed as someone morally corrupt and with extremely malicious intentions (D'Errico et al., 2014; Finkel et al., 2020). This has become a frequent strategy in party discourse, where it is completely normal and standard to level all kinds of insults at the opponents since the ultimate aim is to debase them and depict them as totally unfit to rule the country. The public is thus swamped by scenarios in which someone as malevolent and rotten to the core as that can seize power, which would be considered a disaster for the citizens of Serbia. Consequently, this type of portrayal of political opponents serves to legitimise the actions against them that deviate from democratic norms, because someone who is described in such a negative way does not deserve any democracy, tolerance or respect at all – quite the opposite. Thus, the abundant use of insults levelled at opponents in the direct communication of political parties has practical implications for the strategies of dealing with such political opponents. We could imagine a different kind of communication during the election campaign in which the focus would not be on insulting the political opponent, but on parties' achievements and their programme for the country in the forthcoming period. Although such posts have been found on party accounts during the election period, more so on the accounts of the opposition parties, they seem to be overshadowed by the negative qualifications of the opponent and insults.

Still, we cannot debate on the prevalence of positive and negative posts, as this study was not quantitative in nature. This is one of its basic

limitations, since the insight into the number of posts during the campaign which did and did not mention political opponents, as well as those which mentioned the political opponent positively and negatively, could shed more light on the emerging new patterns of communication of the Serbian parties on social media. Future research could also focus on the social media posts of a larger number of parties and a bigger time span to confirm the findings of the current study, and possibly expand on the research of insults in political discourse in Serbia.

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ЈЕЗИК УВРЕДА У ДИСКУРСУ СРПСКИХ ПАРТИЈА НА ДРУШТВЕНИМ МРЕЖАМА ТОКОМ ПРЕДИЗБОРНЕ КАМПАЊЕ

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Резиме

Коришћење интернета и друштвених мрежа за комуникацију политичких актера са бирачима и присталицама постало је већ уобичајено, а нарочито је изражено током изборних кампања. Главна предност нових медија, која их чини посебно погодним за ове сврхе, јесте могућност директне двосмерне комуникације, која корисницима омогућава интерактивност у комуникацији и стварање, дељење и коментарисање различитих политичких садржаја путем друштвених мрежа. Имајући у виду све важнију улогу комуникације политичких партија путем друштвених мрежа са потенцијалним бирачима, у овом раду анализирамо објаве на званичним профилима на мрежама Икс и Инстаграм водећих српских странака током кампање за изборе 2023. године са циљем да идентификујемо и класификујемо увреде усмерене према политичким противницима у овој изборној кампањи. Анализиране су објаве следећих партија: Српска напредна странка, Социјалистичка партија Србије, Странка слободе и правде, Демократска странка, Српски покрет Двери и Народна странка. Налази студије указују на то да се увреде веома често користе при помињању политичких противника. Издвајају се увреде усмерене на личност политичког противника, оне којима се активности противника оцењују као неморалне, увреде у којима се противник оцењује као некомпетентан, у којима се доводи у питање разум противника, оне у којима се тврди да противник не може да дела самостално, да шири мржњу и насиље, као и да није патриота и да ради у интересу других земаља. Издваја се и више појмовних метафора које се користе за вређање противника, као што су ПОЛИТИЧКИ ПРОТИВНИК ЈЕ ЖИВОТИЊА (нпр. пацов) и МЕТАФОРА ЛУТКАРСКОГ ПОЗОРИШТА (политичке групације описују се као луткарско позориште, а политичари као нечије марионете). Закључује се да крајњи циљ оваквих увреда јесте унижавање политичких противника и указивање на то да су потпуно неспособни и морално неподобни да преузму власт над земљом. Такође, уочени обрасци комуникације српских партија путем друштвених мрежа могу довести до тога да овакав вид опхођења у политичкој сфери постане уобичајен, што може продубити већ присутну поларизацију на српској политичкој сцени.