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Analysis of fascism as a signifier in online editions of daily newspapers *Danas* and *Informer*

The socio-political context in Serbia is oversaturated with ideologically charged resources utilised in the construction of populist identities, such as the semiotic network around the concept of 'fascism'. The practices of signifying a 'fascist' threat have become more complex with the surge of multimodal digital platforms. The media combine various expressive repertoires in materialising the multiplicity of meaning. Thus, social semiotics serve as a fitting theoretical starting point. One of the objectives of the research is to identify the plurality of discourses floating around the constructed 'fascist' constellation. In this research, content published on the websites of Serbian daily newspapers *Danas* and *Informer* is examined. The label 'fascist' functions as an exclusionary strategy in both instances; however, there are differences in portraying 'fascist' actors and institutional responses to its destructive potential. Moreover, respective styles and presentations of information, such as tabloidisation, are used to further legitimise the reality of the 'fascist' threat.

Keywords: fascism, social semiotics, semiotic resource, *Danas*, *Informer*

Introduction

There has been a hyperinflation of 'fascists' in the contemporary global and national political arenas

(Paxton 1998). According to Roger Griffin (2022), fascism has become a lingering threat haunting the whole of the liberal world, fearful of the political actors thought of as anti-democratic and disruptive. The alarm bells, especially in the West, went off during the past decade when prominent authoritarian and far-right figures came to power in the United States and some European Union countries. Grounded or not, transhistorical lines were drawn, comparing the rule and policies of the, among others, former presidents Donald Trump (Plasencia 2020) and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro (Webber 2020) to the fascist regimes of the interwar period. The designations go both ways, with these characterisations being exchanged between political opponents or used to target marginalised nationalist groups, as in the case of South Africa (Hyslop et al. 2022).

The recent 'fascist' resurgence did not evade Serbia, an ex-Yugoslav country where existing political divides have an impact on the polarisation in the media and civil society sector (Spasojevic 2019: 136). In 2020, a year marked with the Covid-19 pandemic, parliamentary elections, violent protests and neighbouring quarrels, these signifying exchanges circulated intensively between the ruling, authoritarian structures and the political opposition, both accusing each other of indulging in fascism.

However, scholars can rarely come to a universal agreement on what present political materialisations deserve the 'fascist' designation, with the rare exceptions of Greece's Golden Dawn and the Hungarian party Jobbik (Traverso 2016). Due to its widespread attribution to label political figures and movements, fascism has, both in the media and the academia, become a "banal term", more often referring to behaviour and attitudes one considers unacceptable and questionable rather than to past or present terror, or totalitarian regimes (Chow 1995: 23). The ease with which fascism is thrown around enables it "to be used as a floating signifier, whose function is essentially that of denunciation" (Foucault 1980: 139 as cited in Chow 1995: 23). As such, its use is appropriated for strategic and pragmatic reasons to support different, opposing political projects and is subjected to the "perpetual process of redefinitions and instrumentalisation vis-à-vis the purposeful usages" (Fatmanur 2021: 221).

Despite it becoming a commonplace in the contemporary political realm, fascism has seldom been subjected to analysis as a floating signifier. Nonetheless, this approach has been utilised in examining other concepts which underwent significant political abstraction and relativisation, such as Islam (Meret & Beyer Gregersen 2019), migrants (Fatmanur 2021) and populism (Hatakka & Herkman 2022). This article adopts similar analytical logic, founded on Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, and conceptualises fascism as a political signifier, not as political ontology. The discursive struggle is analysed

in terms of the reporting of the two politically opposed Serbian national dailies *Informer* and *Danas*, and their signification of 'fascism' and 'fascist' actors. Thus, the paper is not concerned with the truthfulness of the content, but with the drawing of the boundaries between in-group and out-group within newspapers' respective political and ideological backgrounds. In doing so, it contributes to analysing the hegemonic meaning of the concept and understanding the political consequences of its omnipresence in the public sphere.

Polarisation and crisis-driven fascism

Fascism as a distinct historical polity, generally understood in the context of two far-right political systems and their totalitarian leaders – Italy's Benito Mussolini and Germany's Adolph Hitler – cannot be replicated. Nevertheless, the idea of a fascist threat has endured the collapse of the materialised regimes. Even before far-right extremist groups and ideologies came to prominence, the aftermath of the World War I left the traditional systems wide open to fringe, marginalised actors who fought for their place under the spotlight. In that post-war atmosphere, historian Aristotle Kallis (2003: 220) traces initial instances of 'fascist' labels, as communists did not hesitate to draw parallels between the opposing, counterrevolutionary tendencies and fascism.

Even fitting fascist movements or regimes into its Weberian ideal type can be a troubling exercise. Neither the Nazis in Germany nor fascists in Italy came to power by revolutionary means – Adolph Hitler won the elections, Benito Mussolini coalesced with the Italian conservative aristocracy and the Catholic Church (Kallis 2003: 228). For that reason, Kallis (2003: 238) claims that one should discuss the degree of fascistisation of a regime, as none of them reached or acted in their pure form, but rather in symbiosis with the capitalist elite who, in these movements, recognised allies in their fight against communists.

The most notable fascistisation, to use Kallis's (2003) expression, in Serbia, a country in South-eastern Europe and a former member state of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, occurred during the years of the Nazi occupation. A puppet regime was installed, with general Milan Nedic at the helm of the government, which shared the ideological core with the domestic fascist movement Zbor. Its leader, Dimitrije Ljotic, exerted significant influence on the decisions of the collaborationist apparatus and propagated a religious, orthodox version of nationalism and anti-modernism, along with an emphasis on value-oriented education and homogenisation of society (Tosic-Malesevic 2017).

In the contemporary context of Serbian politics, the ruling centre-right Serbian Progressive Party and pro-government media, as well as left-wing actors, use

pejoratively the term “ljoticevac” to label and denounce Bosko Obradovic, the leader of the far-right party Dveri (‘Doors’ in English), for his alleged sympathies for the figurehead of Zbor and his ideology. Paradoxically, authors Zoran Stojiljkovic and Dusan Spasojevic (2018) argue that it was precisely the Serbian Progressive Party, in power since 2012, which paved the way for the far-right Dveri and the emergence of other populist groups, such as the anti-globalist movement Dosta je bilo (‘It’s enough’ in English). Depending on the context and the political needs, the international community, neighbouring countries, the previous Democrat government, the independent media and the civil society sector all the Serbian Progressive Party and, thus, against the well-being and interests of the Serbian people. This polarisation is also reflected in the reporting of the media. On the one hand, the pro-regime media represent the opposing political actors as ‘tycoons’, ‘thieves’ and ‘fascists’ (Valic Nedeljkovic & Janjatovic Jovanovic 2020); on the other hand, the independent outlets paint a picture of a corrupt, repressive and totalitarian state personified in the character of the president Aleksandar Vucic.

In such a tense atmosphere, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic could have never been solely a health issue – every social sphere was politicised. Parliamentary elections were also scheduled for the first half of 2020, further widening the polarisation gap. Such tectonic events can leave crevices in the current hegemonic configurations, providing opposing or fringe figures with the opportunity to counter established order, values and narratives. French philosopher Etienne Balibar (2004: 17) utilises the expression ‘ambivalence of circumstances’ in describing the unpredictable character and the potential of crisis-driven events in causing upheaval. The sudden levelling of the playing field is both a blessing and a curse – it can create conditions for efficient reproduction of dominant structures and beliefs, but also lead to their abrupt downfall.

Signs, signifiers and hegemony

The (re)production of “discursive societal practices are inseparable to the domain of power and dominion of privileged forms of knowledge” (Ristic & Marinkovic 2013: 20). Therefore, the question is not whether ideology or any other form of knowledge can lay claim to truth(fulness), but to what extent are they convenient in explaining the social reality. If one is not able to discern the truth, in a positivist sense, the emphasis then moves to the “meaningfulness, interpretation and narration” (Ristic & Marinkovic 2013: 55).

Anchoring this insight in Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, it can be claimed that “social reality is the product of continuous hegemonic struggles rather than innate essences or immanent laws” (Farkas & Schou 2018: 301). Discourse can be understood as a systematised totality made

of series of articulated moments, where the articulation process itself has an impact on the meaning of each element (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In order for the idea or a political project to become hegemonic, it needs to link heterogeneous identities and nodal points, establishing the basis for a social order (Carpentier 2021). Consequently, this leads to the “forgetting of its constructed nature and in its articulation as natural and objective” (Carpentier 2021: 68).

Following Laclau’s line of thinking, meaning “depends upon the creation of limits and the drawing of boundaries between insiders and outsiders” (Farkas & Schou 2018: 301). As Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1995: 7) notes, it is through the lens of the enemies that the identity of a community is established. In a power struggle, antagonist actors attempt to present their beliefs, attitudes and worldviews as popular, shared by the majority, thus legitimising and justifying the superiority of their claim over other contenders. What is considered in a certain period, group or culture as credible evidence of true knowledge may not be deemed as such in another (Van Dijck 1998).

Due to the unpredictable and unstable character of discourses, there is always an opportunity for disruption and conflict which challenges the hegemonic order. This is where the concept of the floating signifier enters the picture, displacing stable frontiers and the content embedded within them. Ernesto Laclau (2005: 132) posits that they primarily emerge in periods of organic crises, rattling the fundamental symbolic systems. The floating signifier is positioned between competing hegemonic projects, simultaneously articulated within opposing discourses (Farkas & Schou 2018). Its meaning is not “crystalised, but is subject to a constant process of discursive struggle” (Hatakka & Herkman 2022: 1524). As such, it is located at a particular historical conjuncture, where it is “used as part of a battle to impose the ‘right’ viewpoint on to the world” (Farkas & Schou 2018: 302).

Meaning through the media is communicated in a multimodal environment in which signs, i.e. words, images, shapes and colours, stand in relation to one another, each contributing to the totality and wholeness of the reproduced fragment of social reality. This complexity, on the other hand, makes it more ambiguous and open to various, conflicting interpretations. However, Van Leeuwen (2004: 5) warns that this does not indicate that the symbolic arena is equally accessible to all interested parties. For example, the study conducted by Catherine Happer and Greg Philo (2013) outlined the tendency of the media to replicate and reflect hegemonic positions, especially when discussing large-scale issues, such as climate change or economic crises.

Signs function as intermediaries between the universal, abstract ideas and their particular, palpable materialisations. However, following the constructionist line

of thinking, there are no predetermined, fixed meanings. Societal configurations are in a constant symbolic struggle of imposing the preferred interpretations and uses. Each act of reproduction simultaneously draws from previous uses of a particular sign, but it is also a creative venture in having the capacity to insert new and different perceptions and knowledge. Thus, a single discursive process either maintains the existing structures or disrupts the established links (Lemke 2005).

For that reason, the socio-semiotic perspective to meaning-making, discursive practices was adopted in this research. In the realm of social semiotics, signs become semiotic resources with meaning potential (Van Leeuwen 2004). The multiplicity of possibilities, both in form and meaning, are realised in use situated within a particular cultural context. For example, the colours pink and blue are gender-neutral – it is only through the continuous discursive practices and patterns of associating them with boys or girls that they gain the status of colours reserved for either/or. Similarly, ‘fascism’ arises out of the multiplicity of particular, objectivised conditions and networks – from uniformed aesthetics, as in the case of the Italian ‘Blackshirts’, to supremacist hierarchies, reflected in anti-Semitic retributions in Nazi Germany.

Data and method

Most of the newspapers in Serbia are explicitly for or against the ruling structure, personified in the president Aleksandar Vucic and the Serbian Progressive Party. In everyday jargon, there are two camps – ‘pro-regime’ and ‘independent’ media. The most representative of the whole, located at the opposing ends of the ideological spectrum, are the tabloid *Informer* (‘Informant’ in English) and quality paper *Danas* (‘Today’ in English). Their online editions were used to collect the analysed material.

Cheap and popular, the pro-government tabloid *Informer* is among the most widely read newspapers (Media Ownership Monitor 2018). It reports in favour of president Aleksandar Vucic and propels the party’s interests into the national mainstream. The tabloid is characterised by the “unrestrained use of hate speech, obscene vocabulary, misogyny, nationalism and persecution of political opponents and dissidents” (Janjic & Sovanec 2018: 53). Its politicised and sensationalist approach to journalism makes it a media outlet with one of the highest outputs of manipulative content and disinformation in the past years (Zlatni Pinokio za „Alo“... 2021). However, *Informer* does not always align with the party’s, in principle, pro-European position. It holds the European Union, NATO and the West in contempt, while nurturing strong pro-Russian sentiment.

On the other hand, the daily newspaper *Danas* is considered quality press (Todorovic 2006: 22, as cited in Trajkovic 2020: 95). It is an independent outlet founded at the end of the 20th century, during the repressive and authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. For its critical reporting, it was one of only three media banned from publishing in 1998 by Milosevic's government for "spreading fear and defeatism" when the prospect of NATO's intervention in the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia had become a palpable threat (Media Ownership Monitor 2018). Today, *Danas* has been under growing political and economic pressure since the Serbian Progressive Party and, more notably, Aleksandar Vucic came to power. In 2021, it was bought by a transnational media company United Media, owner of a regional television network N1, also recognised for unfavourable reporting on the Serbian Progressive Party and the president Vucic. For that, it is often under scrutiny and discredited, linked like other independent media with "opposition leaders or targeted as a threat to Serbia" (Jarakovic 2020: 14).

The time frame for the data collection of texts on the media's respective online platforms was set to cover the entirety of 2020, a year oversaturated with crucial political events and processes which were underlined by the Covid-19 pandemic. The search was conducted using the following key words - fascism, fascist, fascists, fascistic and other linguistic variations of the word in the Serbian language. In total, a database of 96 texts from *Danas* and 83 texts from *Informer* was assembled.

The entire body of news material was then canvassed to remove redundant content. This proved to be quite beneficial because important patterns were detected in relation to the presence of the word 'fascism'. Namely, three major narrative blocks were distinguished, and each of them had a commendable number of texts revolving around it containing the label 'fascist'. These clusters are as follows -Victory Day on May 9, the parliamentary elections in Serbia and subsequent violent demonstrations in July, and the election campaign in Montenegro. which peaked in August.

For the purposes of this study, the focus was on the visual superstructure of the news, primarily on its two subordinate modalities - written language and images. These cultural technologies and intermediaries are the dominant carriers of meaning in online news media. Each article was viewed as a distinct communicative act involving the sender - journalist, and the recipient - anonymous reader. In the operationalisation of this 'textual event', the three-layered model of theoretician Norman Fairclough (1989; 1992; 2004) was implemented. Therefore, a single news piece represents a particular, materialised communicative act; on another, broader level, the specific act is the result of discursive, media practices aimed at, finally, reproducing social reality, its superstructures and systems.

The interpretation of the images was approached by adopting and adapting the five dimensions that Ivan Tomanic Trivundza (2015) utilised in his analysis of visual frameworks in news. What is important here is, not only the relevance of the content in representing 'fascism', but how formal qualities of photographs, their style and situatedness within the journalistic whole, play into their assumed property of truthfulness. A popular belief is that words are easy to manipulate and have the ability to disguise the essence, while images unveil the reality beyond the façade, putting under the spotlight events and actions trying to be hidden from public view. Thus, special attention is paid to this quality of theirs, particularly as one of the analysed newspapers is a tabloid, rich with so-called 'paparazzo' photographs, intruding on the privacy of individuals and revealing the unpleasant side to its voyeuristic readership.

For the purposes of the present analysis, findings in regards to Victory Day on May 9, an occasion when the international community celebrates its triumph in World War II, are articulated and laid out. In itself, this event has a high signifying potential, as it draws and weaves narratives around the historical reservoir, especially tense due to the rivalry between the far-right nationalists and communists. Also, it was uniquely commemorated in Serbia, marked by hunger strikes and opposition protests at the parliamentary stairs. With the intention of providing clear and concise findings, this analysis is limited to the tabloid *Informer*, while briefly addressing the paper *Danas* for the sake of comparison.

Victory in Europe Day: fascism at the doorstep

On 9 May 2020, delegations from the Serbian Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces laid wreaths of flowers to commemorate the soldiers who fell during World War II fighting against the fascist regimes. Once part of socialist Yugoslavia, this Western Balkan country, similarly to several countries from the former Soviet bloc, celebrates 9 May as the Victory in Europe Day, even though the Nazi capitulation was signed in Berlin late in the evening the day before. Nonetheless, this is an occasion for contemplation, a mirror which reflects how far the society has progressed since the horrors and dreads caused by the extremist, totalitarian regimes of the mid-20th century.

However, only a day before this national holiday, Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic, the Minister of Defence and the recognised figures of the Serbian Progressive Party, would all make the memories of the looming fascist ghost appear as palpable and present as ever, kicking and knocking in front of the parliamentary building.

Circumstances leading up to and surrounding the celebration of the Victory in Europe Day in 2020 were unlike any other in recent history. In mid-March, the Serbian government imposed a plethora of restrictive measures, including a nearly two month-long lockdown, to mitigate the spread of the unprecedented Covid-19 global pandemic. The state of emergency was declared, businesses were shut; at one point, the government attempted to control the flow of information – that decision was short-lived.

This was also an election year, with the voting for the members of the Parliament scheduled for April. In the midst of the campaign trail, and with the unpopular set of imposed Covid-19 restrictions, the tensions were high. What is more, a significant number of opposition parties and politicians, who formed a unique ideological block Alliance for Serbia, campaigned for a boycott, urging the citizens to abstain from participating in what they deemed were unfair and fraudulent elections.

On 6 May, the same day the state of emergency was revoked, Bosko Obradovic, president of the far-right party Dveri, and, at the time, a sitting member of Parliament, stormed out of one of the sessions, rudely addressing the representatives of the ruling coalition, knocking down a Serbian flag and resisting the building security people in the process. He was also one of the most recognised actors of the aforementioned loose, but all-encompassing Alliance for Serbia that called for the boycott of the elections. His outburst was the initial spark for the events which would unravel the following days, around which the ruling structures and the Serbian Progressive Party, with the pro-government tabloids as their platform, would mould the face of the fascist threat.

Two days later, the “fascist phalanx” (Informer 1) rallied in front of Parliament and attacked the members of the ruling coalition, tearing their suits and knocking them down with the intent to wreak havoc, destabilise Serbia and violently take control of the government. At their helm were Bosko Obradovic and Dragan Djilas, the leaders of the Alliance for Serbia, whose aggressive protest was only a prelude to “civil war” (Informer 2), while the brutality they showcased is comparable only to terror regimes of the “Nazi Germany and the Croatian Ustasha” (Informer 1).

This is a paraphrased and summarised collage discursively constructed by the news material published by the tabloid *Informer* reporting on the protest. The last quote, as reported by *Informer*, was uttered by the president Aleksandar Vucic in his reaction to the disruptive event. Here, he activates a more localised node in the historical network of fascist manifestations, much more relevant to the Serbian population than, for example, Franco’s regime in Spain or Salazar’s in Portugal – the Croatian Ustashe.

They were an interwar fascist political movement led by Ante Pavelic, a Croat nationalist, which fought for the creation of an independent Croatian state based on the principle of ethnic self-determination (Miljan 2016). The Ustashe argued for a unique Croatian identity, different from that of the Serbs and the South Slavic people which made up the ethnic fabric of the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Ante Pavelic ruled over a puppet regime during the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, which enjoyed the support of the fascists in Italy, alongside the Catholic Church (Amim 2014). They conducted ethnic cleansing against Serbs, Jews and the Roma population (Kralj 2019). Their short-lived terror regime was brought to an end by the collapse of the Axis war effort, as well as the successful advance of the ever-expanding partisan movement in Yugoslavia.

What is also notable in *Informer's* signification exercise is that most of their coverage of the protest stems from the reaction of the ruling structures and the Serbian Progressive Party. Besides Vucic, prime minister Ana Brnabic (Informer 3), the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Informer 4), the Minister of Defence (Informer 5), the deputy mayor of Belgrade (Informer 6), the mayor of Novi Sad (Informer 7), even the editor-in-chief of *Informer* (Informer 8) contributed to designating the fascist threat. All, except for the comment from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, were published on the same day, 8 May.

The chain of description utilised by the tabloid matches some of the ideal characteristics common for the fascist fabric. This includes the control of the capital embodied in Dragan Djilas as the “thief” and “tycoon” (Informer 8), Bosko Obradovic as the charismatic leader who mobilises irrational mobs, as the protestors were labelled “his fascists” (Informer 9), as well as the use of violence and the revolutionary character of their supposed attempt to seize power in Serbia.

The political display was covered in fascist colours on a cultural and historical level, alongside the ideational. Namely, both the Minister of Defence and the mayor of Novi Sad labelled Bosko Obradovic “Ijoticevac”, referring to his alleged sympathies for the World War II-era fascist figure Dimitrije Ljotic. The transhistorical comparison does not cease there in the case of the Minister of Defence, as he alludes to a horrific event in the city of Kragujevac where the Nazis executed more than 2000 people, including pupils:

Either law will rule Serbia or Ijoticevci will beat antifascists, and then execute children. There is no room for fascists among free people. (Informer 5)

In this populist manoeuvre, the Minister of Defence explicitly sets himself and the government in a chain of equivalence with the law, freedom, and, most notably, the anti-fascist legacy. Thus, he claims the “mantle of a history that is deep, and

that attaches to the epic of the worldwide fights against Mussolini, Hitler and Franco” (Hyslop et al. 2022: 2).

Manichaeian evil implies the existence of the Manichaeian good that is able to cope with the impending threat. The faces of this superior rational order can be many, but their ultimate goal is the same – to bring chaotic forces under control. The pattern is as follows – after the threat is recognised in its destabilising potential, the strength of the institutional response is legitimised and validated in relation to the severity of consequences the opposing forces might bestow upon the established system. In other words, the dangers of ‘fascism’ are to be taken more seriously than if the marginalised actors are presented as simply ‘political opponents’. Thus, the engagement of the media, the security services and the legal apparatus are all justified in the efforts of the hegemonic position to neutralise the antagonistic formation. The final phase of the hegemonic response is to morally elevate its position. As Traverso (2016) prudently notes, fascism has nowadays been transformed from a cognitive to a moral category. The intent is twofold – it distinguishes itself from impure and undesirable, and showcases its power in properly and skilfully dealing with it. One of the most frequent patterns in painting this picture is to emphasise how the opposition figures are revolting in self-interest, selfishly pursuing their individual, rather than collective goals. Therefore, the ‘threat’ does not only indicate a change, but it entails an undesirable change, one that is detrimental to the democratic and civilised society.

This second act in the discursive thread, the minimisation of the ‘fascist’ threat, the idealisation of the current hegemonic order and the showcase of its (moral) power, is conveniently portrayed in a comment made by the deputy mayor of Belgrade. In a peculiar switch, the protest of the opposition, or *coup d’état*, is but a result of their frustration:

In days when the world is celebrating 75 years since the victory over fascism, domestic fascist Bosko Obradovic is very nervous. I can to a degree understand that it must be difficult for him because 75 years ago the Third Reich disappeared, a country he dreams of, but that does not give him the right to attack members of parliament and ministers, wreak havoc and take down the constitutional order. (Informer 6)

Contested fascist signification in relation to the protests appeared only twice in the daily *Danas*, one more picturesque than the other (Danas 1; Danas 2). Predrag Koraksic Corax, their regular cartoonist, drew the president Aleksandar Vucic and his close partners from the ruling party, carrying a sign saying “Down with the fascism” and wearing rather recognisable moustaches (Danas 3). In explaining the intent behind the drawing, he said it “represents a paradox in which fascists

accuse others of being fascists”, while later in the same text he asked rhetorically about the differences between fascism and the current regime (Danas 2).



Image no. 1: "Corax za 11. maj 2020".

Source: Corax/Danas (Danas 3)

Staying true to their designation as quality press, *Danas* published responses to the caricature from the ruling politicians in the same piece. In the context of the analysis, most notable is the comment made by the Minister of Defence, as it showcases how political polarisation can spill over to the media landscape. In this instance, he condemns the comparison, saying it insults the victims of Hitler's regime, and that *Danas* should feel ashamed for doing that. He remarks that the paper must take pleasure when hurting Vucic, and concludes that, unfortunately, the hate which drives their editorial policy and reporting is much stronger than shame (Danas 2).

Translated into a photograph, the symbolic illustration of the dramatised clash on May 8 is perfectly captured in the image showing the leader of the Dveri confronting Zlatibor Loncar, the Minister of Health and a member of the Serbian Progressive Party in front of Parliament (see Image no. 2). The institutional background adds to the mythologisation of the antagonistic relation established

through their direct gaze. However, the political and ideological orientation of the media outlet is implied in the manner in which the actors 'appear' on the stage. Opposition figure Bosko Obradovic comes from the outside of the frame, he does not belong to the visual environment, but rather intrudes. He aggressively enters from above, an exaggerated personification of evil. In addition, he is also situated in the shadowy part of the photograph.



Image no. 2: Photograph accompanying the article 'BOŠKOVA BANDA, PO NAREDBI ĐILASA, ŽELI DA IZAZOVE GRADANSKI RAT! Milenko Jovanov: Ne biraju sredstva da dođu na vlast!'; Source: Tanjug/Marija Petrovic (*Informer* 10)

On the other hand, the Minister of Health, as the representative of the system and the 'people', stands almost at the centre, illuminated by the sunbeam, which symbolically hints that he is legitimately chosen by the ones surrounding them. He stands straight, bravely awaiting the attack, almost like he knows that the aura of righteousness will provide him with the necessary defence. In the manner of a true populist figure, he is presented as an 'ordinary citizen' faced against the corrupt elite.

The style of photographs, and the subsequent claim to the truth, present an interesting insight into the workings of media practices weaving the 'fascist' thread. Particularly in the case of the tabloid *Informer*, it is peculiar how the 'paparazzo' technique is utilised to reaffirm the painting of the opposition, and their behaviour, as 'fascist'. The dramatisation is, on the one hand, emphasised through the dynamism of the characters onscreen, where the reality is not

interrupted by the camera, but is unfolding oblivious to its presence. Furthermore, most of the photographs in the tabloid *Informer* are poor quality, in low resolution. Paradoxically, it is these properties that actually add to their validity. If 'fascist' figures try to hide the evil within them, conducting themselves as to manipulate the others in believing they act for the public good, then the voyeuristic nature of the 'paparazzo' pierces through that bubble, unveiling the corruptive elements that were meant to be hidden. Poor quality indicates the authenticity of the content; such depictions are not perceived as furnished, staged and embellished, but on the contrary – their raw features act as means of legitimisation.

Conclusion

The French theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1996: 21) was shrewd in arguing that there is "nothing more difficult than presenting reality in all its ordinariness". The struggle for a place within the oversaturated media landscape comes at a cost of constantly justifying the perceived importance of discussed issues. As a result, journalists are in constant search of events, phenomena and perspectives that disturb the monotony and pierce through the routine, which is why Bourdieu (1996: 7) calls them 'the laborers of the everyday'. In reproducing reality, media professionals make decisions not only on what they report, but also how the topic is interpreted for the general audience, what meaning-making schemes were made salient, and what elements were marginalised.

The outcome and impact of their choices are particularly sensitive in authoritarian regimes and crisis environments, as the gap between the ruling structures and the 'people' is much deeper. This was the reason why this research focused on Serbia, a highly polarised society in the midst of a political and health crisis. Such potentially destabilising events and processes can cause distress to the established institutional and hegemonic order, opening up crevices which allow entrance to the subordinate actors and alternative narratives. The media technologies are at the forefront of contemporary power struggles and they function as platforms for symbolic, political friction within the global and local communities and nation-states.

The focus of this analysis was on two national Serbian dailies who nurture differing professional traditions – the tabloid *Informer* and the quality paper *Danas*. What is more, they are also situated on the opposing ends of the political spectrum, using conflicting ideological matrixes to interpret ongoing events and phenomena.

Fascism pervaded the political discourse in the media sphere, acting as Laclau's (2005) 'floating signifier', an ambiguous and fluid resource appropriated

to suit the hegemonic project of conflicting parties and entities. Thus, the aim of this study was to identify the plurality of meaning-making practices behind the construction of the 'fascist' threat in the online editions of selected media outlets. Furthermore, situated in the multimodal landscape of the webpage, digital and cultural affordances are rich, dense expressive tools in weaving and creating a nuanced semiotic constellation around the social knowledge of 'fascism'. Therefore, the secondary goal of the research was to understand how diverse semiotic modalities, namely, written language and images, and their potentials were utilised to compliment the meaning-making venture. Finally, these discursive practices were interpreted within the broader, socio-political context.

When it comes to the tabloid *Informer*, 'fascism' is personified in one of the leading opposition figures Bosko Obradovic, at the helm of the far-right party Dveri. His political convictions and acts, such as aggressive behaviour inside and outside the Parliament, were often put under the label of the extreme ideology. On the other hand, the paper *Danas* tended to ascribe the 'fascist' character to the ruling elite and the dominant value system. This was not only reflected and materialised in the language used, although it was the dominant modality; photographs, particularly their formal properties, such as resolution and dynamism, were utilised to add to the claims and their truthfulness.

Discursively, the 'fascist' threat operated as a delegitimising weapon, in both ways. As a pro-regime tabloid, *Informer* directed its pejorative charge towards the opposition figures. It unfolded gradually; firstly, by recognising the significance of the potential disruption, the hegemonic structure justified the strong application of diverse response mechanisms in order to neutralise it. Secondly, it served as a populist demarcation line, distinguishing the morally pure and righteous power structure, materialised in the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, and the corrupt, egocentric and malicious 'Other', reflected in the opposition block. Similarly, but in a different direction, the semiotic network of 'fascism' was appropriated in *Danas*, applied in regards to the parliamentary majority, the regime and the loose, fringe extremist elements on the periphery.

The analysis implies the potential of ambiguous 'floating signifiers' in constructing populist, antagonistic identities. Depending on the context, the severity of a looming crisis and the relevance of the socio-historical conditions, 'fascism' is likely to continue its metamorphosis, the intake and outtake of the symbolic elements necessary for the success of the hegemonic project. The process of identity-building is further fragmented in the contemporary, digitised and mediatised society, which can only make it more of an imperative for future scholarly research, questioning the hegemonic possibilities, alternative responses and the community's resilience.

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Appendix

Analysed texts: *Informer*

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Analysed texts: *Danas*

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