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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Manufacturing Dissent: Tabloid Vitriol and Informer's Delegitimization of Student Protest in Contemporary Serbia

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Abstract

This study examines the systematic campaign of delegitimization conducted by the Serbian tabloid Informer against student protesters following the November 2024 Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse. Through content analysis of 28 articles published between March and July 2025, this research reveals how tabloid journalism serves as an instrument of political control in illiberal democratic contexts. Applying Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model alongside contemporary frameworks for analyzing media framing of political protests, the study demonstrates how Informer employs escalating rhetoric, dehumanizing language, foreign conspiracy narratives, and false patriotic framing to marginalize dissent. The analysis reveals a temporal escalation from characterizing protesters as "colored revolution" agents to accusing them of terrorism and planning bloodshed. These findings contribute to understanding how tabloid sensationalism intersects with authoritarian media tactics to undermine democratic discourse and civic engagement.

Keywords: tabloid journalism, political protests, media framing, propaganda, Serbia, authoritarianism, student movements

Muhalefet Üretimi: Magazin Gazetelerinin Nefret Dolu Yazıları ve Muhabirlerin Çağdaş Sırbistan'da Öğrenci Protestolarını Gayrimeşru Hale Getirmesi

Öz

Bu çalışma, Kasım 2024'teki Novi Sad tren istasyonu çatı çökmesinin ardından Sırp tabloid gazetesi Informer'ın öğrenci protestocularına karşı yürüttüğü sistematik meşruiyetsizleştirme kampanyasını inceliyor. Mart ve Temmuz 2025 tarihleri arasında yayınlanan 28 makalenin içerik analizi yoluyla, bu araştırma, tabloid gazeteciliğin illiberal demokratik bağlamlarda siyasi kontrol aracı olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü ortaya koyuyor. Herman ve Chomsky'nin propaganda modelini, siyasi protestoların medya tarafından nasıl çerçevelendiğini analiz etmek için kullanılan çağdaş çerçevelerle birlikte uygulayan çalışma, Informer'ın muhalefeti marjinalleştirmek için nasıl artan söylem, insanlık dışı dil, yabancı komplo anlatıları ve sahte vatanseverlik çerçevesi kullandığını gösteriyor. Analiz, protestocuları "renkli devrim" ajanları olarak nitelendirmekten terörizmle ve kan dökme planlamakla suçlamaya kadar zamansal bir tırmanışı ortaya koyuyor. Bu bulgular, tabloid sansasyonculuğunun otoriter medya taktikleriyle nasıl kesişerek demokratik söylemi ve sivil katılımı baltaladığını anlamaya katkıda bulunuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: magazin gazeteciliği, siyasi protestolar, medya kurgusu, propaganda, Sırbistan, otoriterlik, öğrenci hareketleri

Introduction

The collapse of a concrete canopy at Novi Sad railway station on November 1, 2024, killing 16 people, triggered the largest student-led protest movement in Serbia's recent history. What began as demands for accountability regarding the infrastructure disaster evolved into a broader anti-corruption movement challenging the government of President Aleksandar Vučić (Leofreddi 2025). The response from pro-government media, particularly the tabloid *Informer*, provides a compelling case study of how contemporary authoritarian regimes employ media manipulation to delegitimize dissent while maintaining the facade of press freedom.

Informer, Serbia's most widely circulated tabloid, launched a systematic campaign against the protesters that escalated from political criticism to accusations of terrorism and foreign conspiracy. This campaign exemplifies what Susánszky, Kopper, and Zsigó (2022) identify as media populism in illiberal regimes, where pro-government outlets use derogatory language and delegitimizing frames to discredit political activism. The tabloid's coverage demonstrates how sensationalist journalism can serve as an instrument of political control, transforming legitimate civic protest into a perceived threat to national security.

The significance of this case extends beyond Serbia's borders. As democratic institutions face pressure worldwide, understanding how media manipulation operates in hybrid regimes becomes crucial for recognizing similar patterns elsewhere. The Serbian case offers insights into the mechanisms through which tabloid journalism contributes to what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2002) term "competitive authoritarianism," where democratic forms persist but are systematically undermined.

This study analyzes 28 articles published by *Informer* between March and July 2025, examining how the tabloid employed escalating rhetoric to transform public perception of student protesters from legitimate civic actors to existential threats. The analysis reveals four primary rhetorical strategies: dehumanizing language that strips protesters of their student identity, violence escalation rhetoric that portrays peaceful demonstrations as terrorist activities, foreign conspiracy narratives that frame domestic dissent as

foreign manipulation, and false patriotic framing that positions government opposition as anti-national sentiment.

Going through all the articles (selected by a search term containing "blokaderi", "blokada", "blokada" within the site:informer.rs Google search query) quickly revealed a highly iterative pattern, where most articles spoke the same in a "rinse and repeat" approach, so we concentrated on those who were judged to be the best representative of the vitriol. This follows the methodological concept by Zillman and Brosius (2012), who expound how carefully selected examples can effectively represent broader trends in media reporting; Instead of analyzing every piece of redundant content, selecting "exemplars" helps highlight patterns without analytical overload. Smyrnaioi et al. (2010) further justify this by noting that digital news ecosystems are often dominated by "redundant sources" and repetitive content. They advocate for focusing on content diversity rather than volume when designing analytical samples (Smyrnaioi et al 2010). Additionally, Hendrickx et al. (2022) propose a framework that accounts for homogenization in media content. They argue for analyzing how content variety (or its absence) manifests across a smaller, representative sample rather than through exhaustive inclusion of nearly identical articles (Hendrickx et al 2022).

The theoretical framework combines Herman and Chomsky's (2021) propaganda model with contemporary research on media framing of political protests, particularly the work of Harlow and Brown (2023) on the "protest paradigm." This approach illuminates how tabloid journalism's sensationalist tendencies align with authoritarian media strategies to create what Bajomi-Lázár (2013) describes as a "media capture" scenario, where ostensibly independent outlets serve regime interests.

The temporal dimension of *Informer's* campaign reveals a calculated escalation strategy. Initial coverage in March 2025 employed "colored revolution" discourse, drawing on post-Soviet authoritarian rhetoric to suggest foreign manipulation. By April, the tabloid introduced terrorism accusations, claiming protesters planned to seize air traffic control facilities. June coverage predicted "bloodshed" during the religious holiday of Vidovdan, exploiting national and religious symbolism. Finally, July

articles reported alleged “lynching” incidents, portraying protesters as violent mobs threatening ordinary citizens.

This escalation pattern reflects what Polyák (2019) identifies as the systematic transformation of media landscapes in illiberal democracies. Rather than direct censorship, governments employ economic pressure, regulatory capture, and propaganda campaigns to shape public discourse. Informer’s coverage demonstrates how tabloid sensationalism becomes weaponized in this context, using emotional manipulation and simplified narratives to advance political objectives. S As Guriev and Treisman (2019) observe, the boundary between low-quality democracy and informational autocracy remains fuzzy. Informer’s campaign against student protesters illustrates how this boundary is crossed through systematic media manipulation that maintains formal press freedom while undermining democratic discourse.

1. Social and Political Context

The Novi Sad Railway Station Disaster

The events that triggered Serbia’s largest student protest movement in decades began with a catastrophic infrastructure failure that exposed deeper issues of corruption and accountability in Serbian governance. On November 1, 2024, at 11:52 CET, the 48-meter concrete canopy of Novi Sad’s main railway station collapsed onto the busy pavement below, instantly killing 14 people and severely injuring three others. Two additional victims would later die from their injuries, bringing the final death toll to 16 people, ranging in age from 2 to 77 years old (Bzganović 2024). The tragedy was particularly shocking because the station had recently undergone extensive renovation as part of the Belgrade-Budapest railway project, a flagship infrastructure initiative funded through China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The renovation, completed in mid-2024 at a cost of millions of euros, was repeatedly highlighted by government officials as evidence of Serbia’s modernization and international partnerships. The collapse of a newly renovated structure thus represented a symbolic collapse of government competence and credibility.

The technical circumstances of the collapse revealed systemic problems in Serbia’s infrastructure

management. The canopy, originally constructed in 1964, had been renovated between 2021 and 2024. Despite the recent renovation, investigations revealed that the front-entrance canopy had not been reconstructed during the renovation process, with officials claiming it was merely given “conservation treatment” consistent with heritage preservation guidelines (Korman 2024). This explanation satisfied few observers, particularly given that multiple engineering experts had previously suggested the structure required replacement rather than conservation. The disaster’s political implications were immediately apparent. The railway project had been a centerpiece of President Aleksandar Vučić’s infrastructure agenda and its alleged pursuit of economic development through major construction projects and “lucrative infrastructure projects of political significance for the government” (Ivković 2024). The collapse thus struck at the heart of the government’s legitimacy narrative, which emphasized competent management and successful international cooperation. Moreover, the timing was particularly damaging, occurring just as the government faced criticism over other infrastructure projects and corruption allegations.

The Emergence of Student-Led Protests

The immediate aftermath of the collapse saw spontaneous gatherings of citizens laying flowers at the site and demanding accountability. However, these initial expressions of grief and anger quickly evolved into organized protest movements led primarily by university students. The student leadership was significant for several reasons. First, students possessed the organizational capacity and time flexibility necessary for sustained protest activities. Second, their status as future professionals gave them particular credibility in demanding accountability for infrastructure failures that threatened public safety. Third, their relative independence from economic pressures made them less vulnerable to government retaliation than other potential protest leaders.

The protests began in Novi Sad but rapidly spread to Belgrade and other Serbian cities. By March 25, 2025, the movement had organized what observers described

as the largest protest in modern Serbian history, with over 325,000 participants gathering in Belgrade (De Launey 2025). The scale and persistence of these demonstrations represented an unprecedented challenge to Vučić's government, which had previously managed to contain or co-opt opposition movements. The protesters' demands evolved from specific accountability for the Novi Sad disaster to broader calls for systemic change. Initial demands focused on the resignation of officials responsible for the railway project and transparent investigation of the collapse. However, as the movement gained momentum, protesters expanded their agenda to include demands for media freedom, judicial independence, and early parliamentary elections. This evolution reflected growing public frustration with what protesters characterized as systemic corruption and authoritarian governance.

The student leadership employed sophisticated organizational strategies that distinguished this movement from previous opposition efforts. Rather than relying on traditional political parties, students created autonomous organizational structures that emphasized horizontal decision-making and plenary consensus-building (Nova.rs 2024). They also demonstrated tactical innovation, employing blockades of university buildings and public spaces to maintain pressure while avoiding direct confrontation with security forces. This approach proved effective in sustaining the movement over several months while maintaining public sympathy.

Serbia's Media Landscape and Informer's Position

Understanding Informer's campaign against the protesters requires situating the tabloid within Serbia's broader media landscape, which has undergone systematic transformation since Vučić's rise to power. Scholars have documented how the Serbian government has employed multiple strategies to control media discourse without resorting to direct censorship, all in direct support of President Vučić (Jovanović 2018a). These strategies include economic pressure through state advertising allocation, regulatory capture through media ownership concentration, and the creation of a pro-government media ecosystem that marginalizes critical voices (Dragojlov 2025, Milojević 2021).

Informer occupies a unique position within this ecosystem as Serbia's most widely circulated tabloid newspaper. Founded in 2012, the publication quickly established itself as a fierce defender of government policies and a harsh critic of opposition figures (Jovanović 2018b). The tabloid's approach combines sensationalist journalism with explicit political advocacy, using emotional appeals and simplified narratives to advance pro-government messaging. This combination has proven highly effective in reaching audiences who might not engage with traditional political discourse.

The tabloid's influence extends beyond its circulation figures through its role in setting media agendas and providing talking points for other pro-government outlets. Informer's stories frequently become topics of discussion on television programs and social media, amplifying their reach and impact. The publication also serves as a testing ground for government messaging strategies, allowing officials to gauge public reaction to particular narratives before adopting them in official communications. Informer's editorial approach reflects what Bajomi-Lázár (2013) describes as "media capture," where ostensibly independent outlets serve regime interests through economic dependence and ideological alignment. The tabloid's business model relies heavily on state advertising and government-friendly private advertisers, creating strong incentives for editorial compliance with government preferences. This economic relationship enables the government to influence coverage without direct editorial intervention, maintaining the appearance of press freedom while ensuring favorable treatment.

The tabloid's coverage of political events consistently demonstrates partisan bias in favor of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Vučić personally (Jovanović 2018a, b). Opposition figures are routinely subjected to personal attacks, conspiracy theories, and character assassination. Conversely, government officials are portrayed as competent leaders defending Serbia against foreign manipulation and domestic extremism. This pattern reflects what Herman and Chomsky (2021) identify as systematic bias in favor of elite interests, achieved through structural rather than conspiratorial mechanisms.

The Government's Response Strategy

The government's response to the student protests revealed a sophisticated strategy combining legal, political, and media components. Rather than relying solely on police repression, officials employed what Varol terms "stealth authoritarianism," using legal harassment, media manipulation, and economic pressure to undermine the movement while maintaining democratic appearances (Varol 2014). This approach reflects broader trends in contemporary authoritarianism, where regimes seek to neutralize opposition through institutional capture rather than overt repression. The legal component involved selective prosecution of protest leaders and participants, often on charges related to blocking public spaces or disturbing public order. While these prosecutions were presented as routine law enforcement, their selective application and timing suggested political motivation. The government also employed administrative harassment, such as tax audits of organizations supporting the protests and regulatory investigations of venues hosting protest events.

The political component involved attempts to divide the opposition by offering limited concessions while refusing substantive reforms. Government officials repeatedly claimed willingness to investigate the Novi Sad collapse while simultaneously characterizing protesters as extremists and foreign agents. This strategy aimed to satisfy moderate public opinion while delegitimizing more radical demands for systemic change.

The media component, exemplified by Informer's coverage, proved perhaps most significant in shaping public perception of the protests. Rather than simply ignoring the demonstrations, pro-government media launched a systematic campaign to reframe them as threats to public order and national security. This campaign employed sophisticated propaganda techniques, including the use of loaded language, selective reporting, and conspiracy theories to transform legitimate civic protest into perceived extremism. The effectiveness of this versatile strategy became apparent as public support for the protests gradually declined over the months following the initial

demonstrations. While the student movement maintained its organizational capacity and commitment, broader public enthusiasm waned as government messaging took effect. This outcome demonstrates the power of sustained media manipulation to shape political discourse even in the face of legitimate grievances and organized opposition.

The Serbian case thus provides insights into how contemporary authoritarian regimes manage dissent in democratic contexts. Rather than relying on crude repression, these regimes employ sophisticated strategies that combine legal, political, and media tools to neutralize opposition while maintaining democratic legitimacy. Informer's campaign against the student protesters represents a crucial component of this strategy, demonstrating how tabloid journalism can serve authoritarian objectives through sensationalist manipulation of public opinion.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

The Propaganda Model and Media Bias

This study's theoretical foundation rests primarily on Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's (2021) propaganda model, which provides a framework for understanding how media systems serve elite interests through structural rather than conspiratorial mechanisms. The model identifies five "filters" through which news content passes, systematically excluding information that challenges dominant power structures while amplifying messages that support them. These filters operate through the size and ownership concentration of media firms, advertising as the primary revenue source, reliance on official sources, "flak" as a disciplining mechanism, and ideological frameworks that define acceptable discourse. The propaganda model's relevance to the Serbian context becomes apparent when examining Informer's structural position within the country's media ecosystem. As Herman and Chomsky observe, "the raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place" (Herman & Chomsky, 2021, 2). Informer's coverage of student protests demonstrates this filtering process in action,

systematically excluding protesters' perspectives while amplifying government narratives.

The first filter, concerning media ownership and profit orientation, operates clearly in *Informer's* case through its dependence on government-friendly advertising and its alignment with ruling party interests. The tabloid's business model creates structural incentives for pro-government coverage, as critical reporting could jeopardize essential revenue streams. This economic relationship enables what Herman and Chomsky describe as "elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents" without requiring direct editorial intervention.

The second filter, advertising dependence, shapes content by privileging messages that appeal to advertisers and their target demographics. In Serbia's polarized political environment, this creates pressure for sensationalist coverage that generates readership while avoiding criticism of major advertisers, many of whom maintain close relationships with the government. *Informer's* tabloid format maximizes this dynamic by prioritizing emotional engagement over factual accuracy.

The third filter, reliance on official sources, appears prominently in *Informer's* protest coverage, which consistently privileges government and police perspectives while marginalizing protesters' voices. This pattern reflects what Herman and Chomsky identify as media dependence on "information provided by government, business, and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power." The result is coverage that appears balanced while systematically favoring official narratives.

The fourth filter, "flak" as a disciplining mechanism, operates through the government's capacity to generate negative responses to unfavorable coverage. In the Serbian context, this includes economic pressure, regulatory harassment, and coordinated attacks by pro-government media outlets. *Informer* both benefits from this system by avoiding such pressure and contributes to it by generating flak against critical media outlets.

The fifth filter, ideological frameworks, has evolved since Herman and Chomsky's original formulation but remains relevant in adapted form. While the original model focused on anticommunism, contemporary applications identify nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and conspiracy theories as comparable ideological filters. *Informer's* coverage demonstrates all these elements, framing student protests as foreign-manipulated threats to Serbian sovereignty and traditional values.

The Protest Paradigm and Media Framing

The study also draws on research examining how media coverage systematically marginalizes political protests through what McLeod and Hertog (1999) term the "protest paradigm." This framework identifies consistent patterns in mainstream media coverage that delegitimize protest movements by emphasizing disruption over grievances, relying on official sources, and framing protesters as deviant or extremist. The paradigm operates through selection bias (underreporting protests), description bias (focusing on spectacle rather than substance), and contextual bias (isolating protests from broader social issues). Susánszky, Kopper, and Zsigó have extended this framework to analyze media coverage in illiberal democratic contexts, identifying four levels of analysis: selection bias, framing bias, degrading tone, and iconic frames. Their research on Hungarian media's coverage of political protests provides a particularly relevant comparative framework for understanding *Informer's* strategies. As they observe, "pro-governmental media pushes the protest paradigm to the extreme: it turns it into a decisive instrument of populist politics and the de-democratization process where democratic institutions still exist but are hollowed out and function only as a façade of democracy" (Susánszky et al 2022, 313).

The concept of framing bias proves especially relevant for analyzing *Informer's* coverage. Framing involves "selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993, 52). *Informer's* coverage consistently frames student protests through lenses of violence, foreign manipulation, and extremism, while excluding frames that might legitimize protesters' grievances or methods. The degrading tone identified by Susánszky and colleagues appears prominently in *Informer's* coverage through the use of derogatory language, ridicule, and condescension. This tone serves to criticize protesters as well as to establish the superiority of government supporters and the inferiority of opposition voices. The effect is to create what the authors describe as "the general degrading tone that the pro-government media outlets employ, which conveys the superiority of the 'speaker' and anyone who identifies with him/her and by extension with the government" (Susánszky et al 2022, 313).

Iconic frames represent the most sophisticated element of this analytical framework, involving "inter-textual references" that work through "dog-whistling" to convey meanings that may not be explicitly stated. *Informer's* use of terms like "colored revolution" and

references to foreign manipulation exemplify this technique, invoking broader narratives about Western interference in post-socialist countries without requiring detailed explanation.

Tabloidization and Political Discourse

The study also engages with scholarship on tabloidization, the process by which tabloid journalism's characteristics spread throughout the media landscape and influence political discourse more broadly. Johansson defines tabloidization as involving a "shift in media priorities," (Johansson 2007, 31) characterized by sensationalism, personalization, and the blurring of entertainment and news. This process has particular significance in political contexts, where tabloid techniques can be employed to simplify complex issues and manipulate public opinion. The relationship between tabloidization and political discourse has been examined extensively in European contexts, where scholars have identified how tabloid journalism contributes to political polarization and democratic degradation. Conboy (2006) argues that tabloid journalism's emphasis on emotional engagement over rational deliberation undermines the quality of democratic discourse by privileging spectacle over substance. This dynamic becomes particularly problematic when tabloid techniques are employed in service of political objectives rather than commercial ones.

Informer's coverage of student protests exemplifies what might be termed "weaponized of the media," where sensationalist techniques are deliberately employed to advance political objectives (Iazzolino & Stremlau 2017, 4). The tabloid's use of emotional language, simplified narratives, and conspiracy theories serves to shape political perceptions in ways that benefit the government. This represents a qualitative shift from commercial tabloidization to political tabloidization, where sensationalism becomes an instrument of power rather than profit.

Methodological Approach

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine 28 articles published by Informer between March and July 2025, focusing on coverage of student protests following the Novi Sad railway station collapse. This approach ensures comprehensive coverage of the tabloid's campaign while maintaining analytical focus. The analytical framework combines elements from the propaganda model, protest paradigm research, and tabloidization studies to examine four primary dimensions of Informer's coverage: language and framing strategies, source selection and bias, temporal patterns and escalation, and ideological frameworks and

narratives. Each article was coded for these dimensions, with particular attention to direct quotations that illustrate the tabloid's rhetorical strategies. The study employs both Serbian-language quotations and English translations to ensure accessibility while maintaining analytical precision. All translations are provided by the author, with attention to preserving the emotional and ideological content of the original language. This approach is essential given that much of Informer's rhetorical power derives from its use of colloquial Serbian expressions and cultural references that may not translate directly.

The study's limitations include its focus on a single media outlet and a specific time period, which may limit generalizability to other contexts or time frames. However, Informer's position as Serbia's most widely circulated tabloid and its central role in pro-government media campaigns make it a particularly significant case study. The findings thus provide insights into broader patterns of media manipulation in illiberal democratic contexts while acknowledging the specificity of the Serbian case.

3. Analysis

Dehumanizing Language and Identity Erasure

Informer's most fundamental rhetorical strategy involves the systematic erasure of protesters' identity as students and citizens, replacing these legitimate social roles with dehumanizing labels that facilitate their marginalization. This process operates through what van Dijk (1998) identifies as "ideological square" construction, where in-group members are portrayed positively while out-group members are characterized negatively. The tabloid's language choices reveal a calculated effort to strip protesters of social legitimacy by denying their authentic identity claims.

The primary mechanism for this identity erasure involves the consistent use of the term "blokaderi" (blockers) rather than "studenti" (students) or "demonstranti" (demonstrators). This linguistic choice is significant because it defines protesters solely through their disruptive actions rather than their social identity or political motivations. As one representative article states: "Blokaderi i njihovi simpatizeri kažu da sinoć na ekstremističkom protestu u Beogradu, nije bilo nikakvih ubačenih elemenata" (Blockers and their sympathizers say that last night at the extremist protest in Belgrade,

there were no infiltrated elements, Informer 2025a). The term “blockers” reduces complex political actors to simple obstructionists, eliminating any suggestion of legitimate grievances or democratic participation.

This dehumanizing language escalates through the use of qualifying terms that further delegitimize protesters’ identity claims. The phrase “takozvan studenti” (so-called students) appears repeatedly throughout Informer’s coverage, explicitly questioning whether protesters deserve recognition as authentic students. One article exemplifies this strategy: “Takozvan studenti u blokadi na Medicinskom fakultetu oglasili su se nakon što smo raskrinkali njihov opasan teroristički plan” (So-called students in blockade at the Medical Faculty spoke out after we exposed their dangerous terrorist plan, Informer 2025b). The qualifier “so-called” suggests that protesters’ student identity is fraudulent, implying they are imposters masquerading as legitimate university members.

The tabloid extends this delegitimization strategy by creating false dichotomies between “real” and “fake” students. Articles frequently reference “studenti koji hoće da uče” (students who want to study) as victims of “blokaderi” (blockers), constructing a narrative where authentic students are oppressed by extremist imposters. This framing serves multiple functions: it divides the student population, suggests that protesters are not genuine students, and positions the government as defender of legitimate educational interests.

The dehumanizing language reaches its extreme through the use of terms typically associated with criminals or terrorists. Protesters are labeled “ekstremisti” (extremists), “nasilnici” (violent ones), and “teroristi” (terrorists), language that places them outside the bounds of legitimate political discourse. One particularly inflammatory article declares: “Odmah nakon što smo raskrinkali ovaj podli, teroristički plan, oglasili su se takozvani studenti blokaderi” (Immediately after we exposed this vile, terrorist plan, the so-called student blockers spoke out). The combination of “vile,” “terrorist,” and “so-called” creates a linguistic framework that completely delegitimizes protesters as political actors.

This dehumanizing language serves what Wodak (2015) identifies as a crucial function in authoritarian

discourse: it makes violence against targeted groups psychologically acceptable by portraying them as threats rather than fellow citizens. By consistently characterizing protesters as extremists, terrorists, and imposters, Informer creates conditions where harsh government responses appear justified and necessary. The tabloid’s language thus functions as what Butler (2016) terms “grievable life” construction, determining which lives matter and which can be sacrificed for political objectives.

Violence Escalation and Threat Construction

Informer’s coverage demonstrates a systematic escalation of violence rhetoric that transforms peaceful student protests into existential threats requiring emergency response. This escalation follows a clear temporal pattern, beginning with political accusations and progressing through security concerns to predictions of bloodshed and reports of actual violence. The progression reveals strategic planning rather than spontaneous reaction, suggesting coordinated efforts to justify increasingly harsh government responses.

The initial phase of this escalation, evident in March 2025 coverage, employed “colored revolution” discourse to frame protests as foreign-manipulated political threats. One representative article states: “Za pokušaje obojene revolucije u Srbiji i izazivanje krvavog građanskog rata potrošeni su milioni evra” (Millions of euros have been spent on attempts at colored revolution in Serbia and provoking bloody civil war, Informer 2025c). This framing draws on post-Soviet authoritarian discourse that portrays domestic opposition as foreign manipulation, a narrative that has proven effective in delegitimizing protest movements across Eastern Europe.

The colored revolution framework serves multiple rhetorical functions. First, it suggests that protests lack authentic domestic support, implying that Serbian citizens would not naturally oppose their government. Second, it invokes fears of foreign interference that resonate with nationalist sentiment and historical experiences of external manipulation. Third, it provides justification for security responses by framing protests as threats to national sovereignty rather than expressions of democratic dissent.

The second phase, beginning in April 2025, introduced explicit terrorism accusations that dramatically escalated the perceived threat level. Informer claimed to have “exposed” a terrorist plot involving airport seizure: “raskrinkali njihov opasan teroristički plan da zauzmu Kontrolu leta i Aerodrom ‘Nikola Tesla’” (exposed their dangerous terrorist plan to seize Air Traffic Control and ‘Nikola Tesla’ Airport, Informer 2025b). The article elaborated: “Ovu opasnu operaciju nazvali su ‘Mejdej’, odnosno ‘Pomoć’, a ideja je da upadnu u Kontrolu leta i naprave opšti haos koji bi mogao da dovede čak i do rušenja aviona” (They called this dangerous operation ‘Mayday’, meaning ‘Help’, and the idea is to break into Air Traffic Control and create general chaos that could even lead to plane crashes).

These terrorism accusations represent a qualitative escalation from political to security framing, transforming student protesters into threats to public safety and national security. The specificity of the accusations (naming particular facilities and describing operational details) creates an appearance of credibility while the sensationalist language maximizes emotional impact (see: Tasić 2024). The reference to potential plane crashes exploits public fears of mass casualty events, making the alleged threat appear both imminent and catastrophic.

The final phase, evident in July 2025 coverage, reported alleged violence as accomplished fact rather than future threat. One article claimed: “Horor u Zemunu: Blokaderi linčovali vozača i razlupali mu auto” (Horror in Zemun: Blockers lynched a driver and smashed his car, Informer 2025d). The article described: “Okupljeni blokaderi su zatim pojurili za njima i razlupali im vozilo, a momku koji je bio van kola – razbili glavu” (The gathered blockers then chased after them and smashed their vehicle, and broke the head of the guy who was outside the car). The use of “lynching” language represents the ultimate escalation of violence rhetoric, invoking historical associations with mob violence and extrajudicial killing. This language choice is particularly significant because lynching carries connotations of racial and political violence that extend far beyond simple assault (Ore 2019, Martkovitz 2004). By characterizing protesters as lynch mobs, Informer positions them as threats to civilized society itself,

justifying any government response as defense of law and order.

Foreign Conspiracy Narratives and National Security Framing

Informer’s coverage systematically employs conspiracy theories about foreign manipulation to delegitimize domestic protest movements, drawing on established patterns of authoritarian discourse that explain opposition through external rather than internal factors. These narratives serve dual functions: they deny the legitimacy of domestic grievances while positioning the government as defender of national sovereignty against foreign threats. The sophistication of these conspiracy theories reflects their strategic importance in maintaining regime legitimacy; Giry and Gürpınar (2020) explain that conspiracy theories function as tools of political communication in authoritarian contexts, offering simple explanations for complex socio-political events while reinforcing the perception of a threatened nation. They help regimes reframe internal opposition as externally manipulated threats.

The foundation of Informer’s conspiracy narrative rests on the “colored revolution” framework, which portrays student protests as part of a broader pattern of Western-sponsored regime change operations. One article explicitly states: “Za pokušaje obojene revolucije u Srbiji i izazivanje krvavog građanskog rata potrošeni su milioni evra” (Millions of euros have been spent on attempts at colored revolution in Serbia and provoking bloody civil war, Informer 2025c). This framing draws on real historical examples of Western involvement in post-Soviet political transitions while applying the template inappropriately to domestic Serbian protests.

The colored revolution narrative proves particularly effective because it contains elements of truth that make the broader conspiracy theory more credible. Western governments and NGOs have indeed supported civil society organizations and democratic movements in post-socialist countries, providing factual foundation for more elaborate conspiracy theories. Informer exploits this historical reality to suggest that any domestic opposition must be foreign-manipulated, eliminating the possibility of authentic domestic dissent.

The tabloid extends its conspiracy narrative by identifying specific foreign actors allegedly involved in manipulating Serbian protests. One article claims: “u neke od akcija studenata blokadera uključena i zloglasna američka firma ‘Blek rok’, za koju se priča da je produžena ruka američke tajne službe CIA” (the notorious American company ‘Black Rock’ is involved in some of the student blockers’ actions, which is said to be an extension of the American secret service CIA, Informer 2025b). This accusation demonstrates how conspiracy theories operate by connecting unrelated entities through vague associations and unsubstantiated claims. The BlackRock reference proves particularly revealing because it combines legitimate concerns about global financial power with unfounded conspiracy theories about protest manipulation. BlackRock is indeed a powerful investment firm with significant global influence, making it a plausible target for conspiracy theories. However, Informer provides no evidence connecting the firm to Serbian protests, relying instead on vague suggestions and reader assumptions to create the impression of foreign manipulation.

Informer supports its conspiracy theories by presenting ordinary protest logistics as evidence of foreign funding and coordination. One article describes: “za blokadere je obezbeđena hrana i piće, paketi vode, gajbe voća, hrana upakovana kao iz restorana, dušeci, posteljina, jastuci u celofanu potpuno novi, kutije higijenske opreme” (food and drink were provided for the blockers, water packages, crates of fruit, food packed like from restaurants, mattresses, bedding, pillows in cellophane completely new, boxes of hygiene equipment, Informer 2025c). The article concludes: “A sve to košta!” (And all that costs money!).

This “evidence” demonstrates how conspiracy theories transform mundane activities into suspicious behavior through selective interpretation and loaded language (Danesi 2023, Klein 2023). Every protest movement requires basic supplies for participants, and the provision of food, water, and shelter represents standard organizational practice rather than evidence of foreign manipulation. However, Informer’s presentation makes these ordinary supplies appear sinister by emphasizing their cost and suggesting they exceed what domestic supporters could provide.

The tabloid’s conspiracy narrative culminates in explicit accusations of foreign intelligence involvement designed to overthrow the Serbian government. Articles repeatedly reference CIA manipulation and Western intelligence operations, creating an atmosphere of international intrigue and national emergency. One article asks rhetorically: “Zapitajte se, kome je u interesu da upumpava ogromne količine novca kako bi se srušila legitimno izabrana vlast u Srbiji” (Ask yourself, who is interested in pumping huge amounts of money to overthrow the legitimately elected government in Serbia, 2025c). This rhetorical question exemplifies how conspiracy theories operate by encouraging readers to draw their own conclusions while providing strong suggestions about the “correct” answer. The phrase “legitimely elected government” reinforces the narrative that opposition to the government equals opposition to democracy itself, while the reference to “huge amounts of money” suggests resources beyond domestic capacity. The overall effect is to position any criticism of the government as foreign-sponsored subversion.

False Patriotic Framing and National Identity Manipulation

Informer’s coverage employs sophisticated manipulation of Serbian national and religious symbolism to position government support as patriotic duty while characterizing opposition as betrayal of national identity. This strategy proves particularly effective because it exploits genuine cultural attachments and historical memories to advance political objectives, making criticism of the government appear equivalent to criticism of Serbia itself.

The most prominent example of this manipulation involves Informer’s exploitation of Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day), the most important date in Serbian national and religious calendar. The tabloid’s prediction of violence on this sacred holiday represents calculated exploitation of cultural symbolism for political purposes. The headline “SPREMAJU KRVOPROLIĆE! Blokaderi na Vidovdan ‘oslobađaju Ćacilend’” (THEY ARE PREPARING BLOODSHED! Blockers on Vidovdan ‘liberate Ćacilend’, Informer 2025g) deliberately associates student

protests with desecration of Serbia's most sacred cultural symbol.

Vidovdan commemorates the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, where Serbian forces led by Prince Lazar fought against the Ottoman Empire in a battle that has become central to Serbian national mythology (Bakić-Hayden 2006, Lugar 2005). In Serbian national memory, the date is often associated with sacrifice, martyrdom, and resistance to foreign rule, themes that Informer mobilizes for contemporary political purposes. By suggesting that protesters plan violence on Vidovdan, Informer positions them as enemies of Serbian identity itself, exploiting religious and national sentiment for political advantage. The tabloid extends this patriotic manipulation by consistently characterizing the government as "legitimno izabrana vlast u Srbiji" (legitimately elected government in Serbia), language that equates government support with democratic legitimacy and national loyalty. This framing suggests that opposition to specific policies or officials constitutes opposition to Serbian democracy and sovereignty, eliminating space for legitimate political criticism.

Similarly, Informer extends its delegitimizing discourse to highly sensitive issues such as Kosovo and Srebrenica, accusing the opposition of portraying Serbia as a "genocidal state" and using genocide-denying nationalist rhetoric to discredit both opposition actors and student protesters. (Informer 2025e, 2025f): "Pavle Grbović, predsednik minornog Pokreta slobodnih građana Srbije, nada se da će blokaderi srušiti legalnu i legitimnu vlast u Srbiji, kako bi neka buduća kvislinška vlada priznala lažnu državu Kosovo i nepostojeći genocid u Srebrenici" ("Pavle Grbović, president of the minor Movement of Free Citizens of Serbia, hopes that the blockaders will overthrow the legal and legitimate government in Serbia, so that some future quisling government will recognize the fake state of Kosovo and the non-existent genocide in Srebrenica", Informer 2025f), indicating a serious "lack of patriotism" within the opposition that supports the students in blockade. Through this wording, Informer presents support for the student blockades, recognition of Kosovo, and acknowledgement of the Srebrenica genocide as signs of national betrayal rather than as matters of political debate or historical accountability. The phrase "non-existent genocide in Srebrenica" is cited here not as the

author's position, but as an example of Informer's genocide-denying nationalist discourse.

Informer also employs patriotic framing through its characterization of protesters as threats to Serbian citizens and institutions. Articles consistently portray protesters as attacking ordinary Serbians rather than criticizing government policies, creating narratives where government supporters appear as victims of extremist violence. One article describes: "blokaderi ne dozvoljavaju organima reda da odvedu privedene" (blockers do not allow law enforcement to take away the detained, Informer 2025d), suggesting that protesters obstruct legitimate state authority. This victimization narrative proves particularly effective because it reverses the actual power dynamics between government and protesters. Rather than acknowledging that protesters challenge powerful institutions, Informer presents the government and its supporters as victims of extremist aggression. This reversal allows the tabloid to justify harsh government responses as defensive measures rather than authoritarian repression.

The tabloid's patriotic manipulation reaches its extreme through suggestions that protesters threaten Serbian sovereignty and independence. References to foreign manipulation and colored revolution discourse position domestic opposition as foreign invasion, making government support appear equivalent to national defense. This framing exploits historical memories of foreign occupation and manipulation to generate support for authoritarian measures presented as patriotic necessity.

Informer reinforces its patriotic framing through consistent use of nationalist language and symbolism that associates government support with Serbian identity. Articles frequently reference Serbian history, culture, and values in ways that suggest protesters reject these fundamental aspects of national identity. The overall effect is to create what Anderson (1983) terms an "imagined community" where "true" Serbs support the government while opponents are characterized as foreign agents or domestic traitors.

Temporal Escalation and Strategic Coordination

The temporal dimension of Informer's campaign reveals strategic coordination rather than spontaneous reaction, with escalating rhetoric timed to coincide with key political events and protest activities. This pattern suggests systematic planning designed to shape public opinion through graduated intensification of inflammatory messaging, demonstrating how media manipulation can be employed as a political weapon.

The campaign's initial phase, beginning in March 2025, established foundational narratives about foreign manipulation and colored revolution that would be developed throughout subsequent months. Early articles focused on questioning protest legitimacy through funding accusations and foreign influence claims, creating a baseline of suspicion that could be intensified as needed. This approach reflects what Lakoff (2004) identifies as "framing" strategy, where initial conceptual frameworks shape subsequent interpretation of events. The escalation to terrorism accusations in April 2025 coincided with increased protest activity and government pressure for resolution of the crisis. The timing suggests strategic calculation designed to justify harsh government responses by portraying protesters as security threats rather than political opponents. The specificity of terrorism accusations (including detailed descriptions of alleged plots) created an appearance of credibility while maximizing emotional impact.

The intensification of violence rhetoric in June 2025, particularly around Vidovdan, demonstrates how Informer coordinates its messaging with cultural and political calendars to maximize impact. The exploitation of Serbia's most important religious holiday reveals sophisticated understanding of cultural psychology and strategic timing designed to generate maximum emotional response. This coordination suggests professional media management rather than spontaneous editorial decisions.

The final phase, reporting alleged violence in July 2025, represents the culmination of the escalation strategy by presenting predicted threats as accomplished facts. The "lynching" reports provide apparent vindication of earlier warnings while justifying continued harsh treatment of protesters. This progression from prediction to "confirmation"

demonstrates how media campaigns can create self-fulfilling prophecies that validate their own narratives. The overall temporal pattern reveals what might be termed "manufactured escalation," where media coverage systematically intensifies inflammatory rhetoric to create the appearance of growing threats requiring increasingly harsh responses. This strategy proves particularly effective because it exploits natural human tendencies to perceive patterns and escalating dangers, making coordinated media manipulation appear as objective reporting of deteriorating conditions. In scholarship, Cristina Ilie (2024) provides a discourse-analytic approach showing how crisis rhetoric is shaped by media to construct escalating perceptions of danger. This strategic framing primes audiences for repressive or exceptional measures, under the guise of necessity. Similarly, Maor (2020) identifies specific patterns of policy overreaction that follow media-driven escalations, where political actors exploit perceived threats to justify overreach.

4. Discussion

Tabloid Journalism as Political Weapon

The weaponization of journalism operates through the systematic application of sensationalist techniques to political ends, transforming commercial tabloid practices into instruments of political control. The Serbian case demonstrates that the threat to democratic discourse comes from the sophisticated manipulation of media formats and audience psychology.

Informer's success in delegitimizing student protesters illustrates what might be termed "tabloid authoritarianism," where sensationalist media techniques are employed to undermine democratic opposition while preserving formal press freedom. This approach proves particularly effective because it exploits tabloid journalism's existing credibility with mass audiences while avoiding the international criticism that direct media censorship would generate. The result is a form of soft authoritarianism that achieves political objectives through manipulation rather than repression.

The tabloid's rhetorical strategies demonstrate sophisticated understanding of audience psychology and political communication. The escalating violence rhetoric, foreign conspiracy narratives, and patriotic manipulation all reflect professional media management

designed to maximize political impact. This level of coordination suggests that Informer's campaign represents strategic political communication disguised as news reporting.

The effectiveness of these strategies raises important questions about media literacy and democratic resilience in contemporary societies. Informer's ability to transform peaceful student protesters into perceived terrorists and foreign agents demonstrates the vulnerability of public opinion to systematic manipulation, particularly when such manipulation exploits existing cultural anxieties and political divisions. The Serbian case thus provides insights into how democratic societies might better defend against media manipulation while preserving press freedom.

The Propaganda Model in Illiberal Democratic Contexts

The five filters identified by Herman and Chomsky (ownership concentration, advertising dependence, official source reliance, flak mechanisms, and ideological frameworks) all operate clearly in the Serbian case, but with adaptations that reflect contemporary political and technological conditions.

The ownership filter operates through economic dependence rather than direct government control, creating structural incentives for pro-government coverage without requiring explicit editorial intervention (see: Szeidl & Szucs 2021, Gehlback & Sonin 2014). This arrangement allows the government to maintain plausible deniability regarding media manipulation while ensuring favorable treatment through market mechanisms. The Serbian case thus demonstrates how the propaganda model's insights remain relevant even in contexts where governments avoid direct media ownership. The advertising filter proves particularly significant in the Serbian context, where state advertising allocation serves as a powerful tool for media control. Informer's dependence on government-friendly advertisers creates strong incentives for editorial compliance while maintaining the appearance of commercial independence. This mechanism demonstrates how economic pressure can achieve political objectives without formal censorship, making media manipulation more difficult to identify and resist.

The official source filter operates through Informer's systematic privileging of government and police

perspectives while marginalizing protesters' voices. This pattern reflects what Herman and Chomsky identify as media dependence on "primary sources and agents of power," but with the added dimension of active hostility toward alternative sources. The Serbian case thus reveals how the propaganda model's insights apply even when media outlets actively seek to discredit rather than simply ignore oppositional voices.

The flak filter operates through the government's capacity to generate negative responses to critical coverage, including economic pressure, regulatory harassment, and coordinated attacks by pro-government media. Informer both benefits from this system by avoiding such pressure and contributes to it by generating flak against critical outlets. This dual role demonstrates how pro-government media can serve as both beneficiaries and instruments of the flak mechanism.

The ideological filter has evolved since Herman and Chomsky's original formulation but remains highly relevant in adapted form. While the original model focused on anticommunism, the Serbian case demonstrates how nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and conspiracy theories serve comparable functions in contemporary contexts. Informer's use of colored revolution discourse and foreign manipulation narratives illustrates how ideological filters adapt to changing political circumstances while maintaining their essential function of limiting acceptable discourse.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's focus on a single media outlet and specific time period limits its generalizability, though Informer's central role in Serbian pro-government media makes it a particularly significant case study. Future research might examine how similar strategies operate across different media outlets and longer time periods to provide more comprehensive understanding of media manipulation in illiberal democratic contexts.

The study's emphasis on textual analysis could be complemented by audience research examining how Informer's messaging affects public opinion and political behavior. Such research would provide insights into the effectiveness of tabloid manipulation strategies and the factors that make audiences more or less susceptible to propaganda techniques. Comparative research examining similar media campaigns in other countries experiencing democratic backsliding could illuminate

whether the patterns identified in the Serbian case reflect universal authoritarian strategies or context-specific adaptations. Such research would contribute to broader understanding of how media manipulation operates across different political and cultural contexts.

Longitudinal research tracking the evolution of media manipulation strategies over time could provide insights into how authoritarian movements adapt their communication approaches in response to changing political circumstances and technological developments (Kalathil 2020). The Serbian case provides a baseline for such analysis, but longer-term observation would be necessary to understand how these strategies evolve..

5. Conclusion

This study's analysis of Informer's campaign against Serbian student protesters reveals how tabloid journalism can be systematically weaponized to serve authoritarian objectives while maintaining the appearance of independent media. The Serbian tabloid's coverage demonstrates sophisticated understanding of propaganda techniques, audience psychology, and political communication that transforms commercial sensationalism into an instrument of political control. The findings have significant implications for understanding contemporary threats to democratic discourse and the evolving nature of authoritarianism in the twenty-first century.

The research confirms the continued relevance of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model while revealing how it operates in illiberal democratic contexts where formal press freedom coexists with systematic media manipulation. Informer's coverage exemplifies all five filters identified by the propaganda model but with adaptations that reflect contemporary political and technological conditions. The Serbian case thus demonstrates how the propaganda model's insights remain applicable even in contexts where governments avoid direct media ownership or censorship.

The rhetorical strategies work synergistically to transform legitimate political protest into perceived extremism, demonstrating how media campaigns can systematically alter public perception through coordinated messaging. The temporal escalation revealed in Informer's coverage suggests strategic planning rather than spontaneous reaction, indicating professional media management designed to achieve specific political objectives.

The analysis reveals how tabloid journalism's inherent characteristics (sensationalism, emotional manipulation, simplified narratives) make it particularly suitable for authoritarian manipulation (Örnebring & Jönsson 2004, Popović & Popović 2014) Informer's success in delegitimizing student protesters illustrates what might be termed "tabloid authoritarianism," where sensationalist techniques are employed to undermine democratic opposition while preserving formal press freedom. This approach proves particularly effective because it exploits tabloid journalism's existing credibility with mass audiences while avoiding the international criticism that direct censorship would generate.

The Serbian case in particular further demonstrates how media manipulation can exploit cultural and religious symbolism to advance political objectives, revealing the vulnerability of democratic societies to appeals that transcend rational political discourse. Informer's exploitation of Vidovdan symbolism and patriotic sentiment illustrates how authoritarian movements can capture democratic legitimacy by positioning themselves as defenders of national identity against foreign threats. This dynamic suggests that contemporary threats to democracy may be more subtle but no less dangerous than traditional forms of authoritarianism.

The study's findings have important implications for media literacy and democratic education. Informer's ability to transform peaceful student protesters into perceived terrorists and foreign agents demonstrates the vulnerability of public opinion to systematic manipulation, particularly when such manipulation exploits existing cultural anxieties and political divisions. The Serbian case thus highlights the need for more sophisticated approaches to media literacy that help citizens recognize and resist propaganda techniques while preserving their capacity for critical political engagement. This dynamic undermines the informed citizenship that democratic theory assumes while maintaining the appearance of robust public debate. The Serbian case thus suggests that contemporary threats to democracy may operate through information pollution rather than information restriction, making them more difficult to identify and resist. The Serbian student protests that prompted Informer's campaign represent a significant challenge to authoritarian governance, demonstrating the continued potential for democratic resistance even in contexts of

systematic media manipulation. The protesters' ability to maintain organizational coherence and public support despite sustained media attacks illustrates the resilience of democratic values and the possibility of effective resistance to authoritarian manipulation. However, the ultimate outcome of this struggle remains uncertain, highlighting the ongoing nature of the contest between democratic and authoritarian forces in contemporary Serbia.

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