

# “You’re Simply the Best”: Communicating Power and Victimhood in Support of President Aleksandar Vučić in the Serbian Dailies *Alo!* and *Informer*

**Srdan Mladenov JOVANOVIĆ**

Polish Institute of Advanced Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences,  
Długa 26, Warsaw, Poland  
E-mail: srdjan.jovanovic@piast.pan.pl

**Abstract.** *Since the recent slew of anti-democratic developments on a world-wide scale, from the onset of the xenophobic crisis in Europe to the election of president Donald Trump, scholarly interest in the Western Balkans has waned significantly. Yet new developments have unraveled in Serbia since 2012 and the coming into power of the 1990s warmonger, Aleksandar Vučić. During his now six year reign, the country has fallen into disarray, with the stifling of the freedom of the press, increased poverty, an intense brain drain, and a number of bizarre affairs in which Aleksandar Vučić’s collaborators are often involved. His method of governance has shown to be intrinsically linked to the media, especially dailies that have been, for years, framing him as both being a type of Übermensch, extremely competent, strong and efficient, while at the same time developing a victimhood narrative, via which he is painted as under constant attack, as well as a victim of numerous attempts on his life. From a methodological standpoint of media content analysis, through the theoretical lenses of discursive deception theory (and other relevant media-related theoretical standpoints), this article analyzes the discourses of the Alo! and the Informer, the two most prominent dailies that support Serbia’s ruler, Aleksandar Vučić, looking into how they communicate power to their readership.*

**Keywords:** *Media content analysis; Serbia; Aleksandar Vučić; Informer; Alo!; Power.*

## Introduction

During the wars of the Yugoslav secession, the current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić (nowadays the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party, SPP), was known both locally and internationally as the man who proclaimed that a hundred Muslims should be killed for every Serb (RTS, 1995). Serbia was in the spotlight at that time, not only in scholarly circles, but in international media as well. Yet times seem to have changed, as from a warmonger/hatemonger from the nineties, Vučić has succeeded in attaining almost absolute power in Serbia, and is currently serving as its president, a fact nowadays ignored not only by the worldwide media, political players in Europe and the USA, but by scholars as well.

To an uninformed observer, the figure of Aleksandar Vučić, when seen through the lens of the local media, would look like an *Übermensch*, fighting for his people, yet receiving constant threats for his noble effort. According to *Alo!*, Vučić “conquered” the Croatian president (Alo!, 2018b), he is “always with Serbs when they are having a hard time” (Marković, 2018), he “sends powerful messages to Serbs” (Informer, 2018a), he is “convincingly the strongest” (Informer, 2018b), and the “first in everything” (Informer, 2017g). At the same time, he is seemingly constantly under attack, as *Alo!* reported that Croatian Ustašas were preparing an assassination attempt on him (Alo!, 2018a); an alleged assassination attempt happened in 2017 as well (Alo!, 2017), including yet another one (Đondović, 2017a), while in 2016, *Alo!* conveyed that there were preparations for an assassination during the election night (Alo!, 2016b). The *Informer*, similarly, tried to convince its readership that there was “an assassination attempt on Vučić by use of bazookas” (Informer, 2016e), commandeered by “eight killers waiting for Vučić” (Informer, 2016d), as well as that there was a “coup d’état in its final stages” for the “toppling of Vučić” (Informer, 2015b). These are, however, but a few examples of the numerous depictions of alleged assassination and coup attempts on President Vučić within the popular Serbian dailies, *Alo!* and *Informer*, as their discursive production consistently aims at presenting president Vučić as under attack. From a factual perspective, none of the abovementioned presentations turned out to be true.

Scholars have already conducted research on how the media that support their governments and political leaders convey discourses of power in order to strengthen the political party or leader (Gainous, Wagner, & Ziegler, 2018; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017; Markotich, 1994; Paletz, Reichert, & McIntyre, 1971). In other words, the media can *communicate power* in order to present the strongman figure as *powerful*. This is the case with the two most prominent government-supporting dailies in Serbia, the *Alo!* and the *Informer*. As we shall show within the analytical section of this article, the president is continuously and perpetually framed as a martyr, a victim of known and unknown forces, battling them and winning.

Within such framing, he is presented within *Alo!* and *Informer* as a strong leader, a competent politician, who battles insurmountable odds in the fight for his nation.

### 1. Societal and political context

Serbia – including the majority of the countries that were created after the breakup of Yugoslavia – has during the nineties, and for a certain time afterwards, figured often as a topic for social science research (Bieber, 2003; Blagojević, 2016; Bracewell, 2000; Damjanović, Novaković, & Obradović, 2003; Djokic, 2009; Gagnon, 1994; Gordy, 1999; Gow, 1994; Greenberg, 2004; Hudson, 2003; Kisić, 2015). Recently, however, it has been cast out of the spotlight, as the xenophobic crisis in Europe gained momentum (Čulík, 2015; D’Ancona, 2016; Jovanović, 2015; Kaati, Shrestha, Cohen, & Lindquist, 2016; Khalili, 2016; Kluknavská, 2014), coupled with the rise of the Right Wing in Europe (Melzer & Serafin, 2013; Müller, Hedström, Wennberg, & Valdez, 2014; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupkiolis, & Siomos, 2017; Wodak, 2015), and the election of Donald Trump as the president of the USA (Ahmadian, Azarshahi, & Paulhus, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kazin, 2016); these issues gained more and more focus within social research, pushing aside a plethora of other relevant issues. This is somewhat understandable, as both Europe and the USA started facing new problems and issues that need to be solved. Nevertheless, ignoring Eastern Europe (with the exception of the Russia/Ukraine conflict) in social scientific research cannot and should be seen as a positive development within the social sciences and humanities. When it comes to Serbia and its recent history, new developments have occurred, the political system has changed via the blocking and ignoring of institutions and an increase of accumulated extra-institutional power of Aleksandar Vučić, who came into power in 2012 (and took the mantle of the first vice-president of the Parliament; a position that does not exist in Serbia’s political system), became the Prime Minister afterwards, after which, in a Putinesque maneuver,<sup>1</sup> became its president.

The social, economic, political and media situation in Serbia has, during his reign, become barely tolerable, as the country has seen an upsurge in nepotism and corruption (Lončar, 2017; Pjesivac, 2017), an increasing brain drain to the West (Rakocevic, Benkovic, & Milosevic, 2016; Vasiljević-Blagojević, Marinković, Perčić, & Lučić, 2016), breaking of institutional regulations and lessening of the rule of law (Mendelski, 2015), a rise in hunger and poverty (Beta, 2017), and a row of bizarre affairs in which Vučić and his clique are regularly a part of. According to the *Black Book of the SPP Rule from 2013-2018*, among the most relevant of said affairs

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1 We are referring to Vladimir Putin’s shifts from President to Prime Minister and *vice versa*, wherein he keeps the same amount of social and political power, regardless of the position he occupies.

was the failed Belgrade Waterfront project, where one person died, including numerous instances of breaking the Constitution and numerous laws; poor rescue response during the floods of 2014; revoking of state aid for the poorest; a row of affairs with the Mayor of Belgrade, Siniša Mali, including his plagiarized doctorate; the buying of an 83,000 euro Christmas tree in Belgrade via which the money was laundered; four million euros spent on New Year decorations in 2017/18, selling tickets for a metro that does not exist (FoNet, 2018), and many more.<sup>2</sup> Stunningly, the rule of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party has seen minimal to nonexistent interest in contemporary scholarship, with but a few exceptions that border on simple mentions in a broader context (Pavlović, 2016).

The very SPP came into existence as an offshoot of the Serbian Radical Party (SRP), a notorious nationalist, warmongering party that was particularly active during the wars of the nineties, and still figures as a part of the country's political scene, in its Far Right part of the political spectrum (Bustikova, 2017). Designated as "ultranationalists" (Darmanović, 2017) and "far nationalists" (Wilson, 2017), the Radicals have figured as a hub of nationalism, patriarchy and an ethnocentric, populist worldview ever since the party's inception. The president's Progressive Party was initially entirely comprised of members of the Radical Party, which is why the democratic opposition dubs them often "neoradicals". As Aleksandar Vučić used to be the Minister of Information in the government of Slobodan Milošević (as well as a close friend and long-time collaborator of the Radicals' leader, the former Hague inductee, Vojislav Šešelj, who can be said to have functioned as his mentor for decades), it is of small wonder that Freedom House reported negatively, at great length, about the diminishing media freedoms in Serbia during his six year reign, year after year (FreedomHouse, 2016).

The media have arguably seen the most of the impact of the diminishing freedoms in Serbia during the last six years. Being under the increasing control of the government, most traditional media (and a slew of internet outlets) have succumbed to the pressure exerted by the government into producing propaganda. The state television (RTS, *Radio Televizija Srbije*) and the Belgrade-based Studio B and TV Pink channels would stand among the most prominent when it comes to televised state propaganda, while dailys such as the *Informer* and *Alo!* serve as marketing outlets for the government in print form. The RTS' Channel 1, together with TV Pink, are the most watched channels in Serbia, while the *Informer* boasts as having one of the highest circulations among the printed media (D.B., 2016). Severe pressure on the media has been documented, including an increase in tabloidization and auto-censorship (Lončar, 2017), as well as an "avalanche of kitsch and pornography within reality shows" (Radojković, 2016).

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2 A thorough presentation is found at: <https://crnaknjigasns.wordpress.com/>

## 2. Theory on power and deception

In media theory, “an increasing number of instances when media content is distorted by the government” (Qian & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2017) is fairly well-studied and known, as the media have the tendency to *discipline* their audience, communicating governmental power (Tang & Tang, 2016), which “relates to issues of legitimacy and recognition that are reflected in the wider field of power and perpetuated within journalism practice and scholarship” (Hess & Waller, 2016). In other words, *power is perpetuated, performed and promoted by the media* – the three Ps of governmental power play within the media. The governmental impact on the media is old as the media themselves, as “the British government, eager to maintain control of its imperial periphery, was a prodigious user of electric media and at first resisted the democratization of the phone on the grounds that it ought to be their reserved domain; opening it up would compromise the quality of the official government service” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 32), as but one striking example from the past. Another relevant theoretical perspective used is Galasinski’s *discursive deception* (Galasinski, 2000), wherein falsehoods and so-called “half truths” are analyzed from a discourse analytical perspective. Deception is thus defined as “a means of constructing and maintaining a preferable version of reality” (Galasinski, 2000), whereas half-truths are thus defined as ‘a mix of truthful and dishonest information yet do not offer any explanation of what that may mean’ (Burgoon, Buller, Guerrero, Afifi, & Feldman, 1996). Deception is seen as part of everyday life, though reported in increasing amounts within the media that seek to drive a particular type of discourse, especially if said discourse is intended to communicate power of a political strongman. We shall thus engage in the analysis through the prism of power that is promoted via the media, concentrating on deceptive instances in which the president is presented as a victim and a savior.

## 3. Methodology

Due to the reasons described above, we shall tackle the discursive production within the *Informer* and *Alo!* via media content analysis, “a specialized sub-set of content analysis, a well-established research methodology” (Macnamara, 2005), having in mind that we are essentially tackling media propaganda. Conveniently enough, media content analysis was initially founded by Harold Lasswell in 1927 precisely for the purpose of studying propaganda (Lasswell, 1927), which is broadly defined as a means of swaying and influencing public opinion (Ellul, 1966). We shall thus define content analysis as a “research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text” (Stone, Dunphy, & Smith, 1966), a “technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text. The ‘content’ refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated” (Neuman, 2002). A

cornerstone issue within media content analysis that we shall tackle is the concept of the frame, that is, of *framing*. A frame is a “central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), as well as the “the way context alters the meaning of information” (Simon & Jerit, 2007). By analyzing the ways in which the texts are framed within the content analysis, we shall come to a broader conclusion of how the figure of the strongman president is packaged for the audience, and by use of abovementioned established theoretical perspectives on power and deception, we can dissect the discourses that promote the President’s power with more precision.

#### 4. Case studies

We shall now take a closer look into the discursive production of *Informer* and *Alo!*, concentrating on the two common tropes that figure as the main interest of the research given in the paper’s title: the victimhood narrative on one side, coupled with the *Urbemensch* narrative on the other. We have further divided the analysis into two parts, namely, the analysis of headlines, and the analysis of the article texts:

- Headline analysis
  - Victimhood discourse
  - *Urbemensch* discourse
- Article text analysis
  - Victimhood discourse
  - *Urbemensch* discourse

The headlines/articles were selected by simple searching for queries relating to any type of victimhood rhetoric, or any text that presents Aleksandar Vučić as strong, competent and brave, within the websites *alo.rs* and *informer.rs*. Around thirty articles have been chosen for their deceptive rhetoric, falsehoods, and general “fake news” atmosphere they purvey to their audiences. 28 article headlines have been selected inductively, taken from the 2015-2017 period, where these two dailies have been most prolific in promoting a pro-Vučić agenda. All of the articles are standardized news-type articles (e.g. no editorials or similar have been chosen). The *Informer* is possibly among the dailies with the largest daily circulation in Serbia, as the Society of Journalists of Serbia reported *Informer* to have a daily circulation of over 100,000 copies; *Alo!* was reported to be around 50,000 (D.B., 2016), the former being among the largest ones. Due to the corruptive nature of Serbian reporting, however, this is impossible to verify with absolute certainty, as some sources claim that the circulation numbers have been false since the new government, such as the Independent Society of Journalists of Serbia (E.I., 2012).

## 4.1 *Headline analysis*

Much of the semantic foci in the presentation of the Prime Minister-cum-President within *Informer* and *Alo!* is contained within the headlines, to which we need to pay special attention. Scholars have long concluded that there is a general human tendency to rely on heuristic information (Graber, 2001), especially when it comes to information revolving around politics, received by the media. Headlines, due to their short form, necessarily convey heuristic information, the effectiveness of which has been debated in scholarship (Johnston, 1996; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000). Due to their heuristic nature, Andrew has called headlines the “most ubiquitous media-generated shortcut of all” (Andrew, 2007). They represent what Popkin called “low-information rationality” (Popkin, 1994), and have been shown to have a significant impact on their audience’s attitudes (Allport & Lepkin, 1943; Smith & Fowler Jr, 1982). What is more, the impact is so profound that “reader perception of the news account depended on the headline” (Pfau, 1995). For the abovementioned reasons, the analysis of headlines is seen as holding high relevance within media content analysis.

### 4.1.1. *Victimhood discourse*

The first framing issue we are interested is the frame in which Aleksandar Vučić is presented as a perpetual victim, under attack from forces without and within. We can broadly categorize the victimhood headlines in a) those in which Vučić is presented as a victim of an alleged assassination or coup, and b) general victimhood headlines, where he figures as a victim of attacks from forces within and without the country.

TODAY IN THE INFORMER: A COUP! The toppling of Vučić, the final stage! (Informer, 2015b)

EIGHT KILLERS WERE WAITING FOR VUČIĆ: The people for which it is suspected that they took part in the murder of Sale the Mute were in Jajinci until the discovery of the bazookas! (Informer, 2016d)

THEY WANTED TO BLOW UP VUČIĆ WITH A BAZOOKA IN A NARROW STREET: This is what we know about the planned attack on the Prime Minister of Serbia! (Informer, 2016b)

VULIN CLAIMS The preparation of the assassination of Vučić started in the election night (Alo!, 2016b)

THEY WERE PREPARING AN ASSASSINATION They wanted to kill Vučić with a bazooka?! (D.Z. & V.P., 2016)

SHOCKING! A bullet for Vučić was prepared in the sniper’s barrel! (Informer, 2015c)

AFTER THE QUESTIONING Attackers of Vučić arrested, then set free! (Alo.rs, 2015)

Alleged assassination attempts have seen their day in scholarship (Powell & Thyne, 2011), and it is safe to say that, as a discursive figure, they are used to present the alleged victim as suffering for their constant battle for the good of the country and people. Several alleged assassination attempts were put forth within the media, even though there was not a single instance in which an assassination was even close to being planned or actually having happened. The *hyperbole* is probably the most common instance that figures in such headlines, such in the instance where *Alo!* and *Informer* in actual fact claimed that alleged assassins were planning on murdering Vučić with a *bazooka*. The exaggeration serves to emphasize and strengthen the victimhood discourse and instill fear among the readership; it is seen almost regularly, from the abovementioned bazookas, via the alleged “eight murderers” who were waiting for Vučić, to the lexical choices such as “blowing up” the President. The hyperbole is defined as “extreme exaggeration by describing something (an ‘ontological referent’) as larger than it really is” (Burgers, Konijn, & Steen, 2016); it is additionally pragmatic for the discourse creators, as “exaggerations can help to put a topic on the public agenda, thereby arousing interest in the topic”. However, most importantly, ‘using hyperbole to exaggerate the threat (i.e., “threat exaggeration”) can be a powerful rhetorical tool in persuading the public of the existence, importance and imminence of a certain threat’ (Burgers *et al.*, 2016). For the reasons named above, the hyperbole is within the discursive production of the *Informer’s* and *Alo!’s* headlines used profusely.

As the assassination attempts never happened, presenting them as real is achieved by trying to fabricate more detail, such as the idea that an assassination was planned way in advance, or that there was a “bullet prepared in the sniper barrel”. Since the alleged attackers had nothing to do with a non-existing assassination attempt, they were, as the *Informer* reported, “set free”; this serves to strengthen the fabricated power of Vučić’s enemies, who are able to evade legal processing. Yet assassinations were not the only ways in which Vučić is targeted:

THE EUROPEAN UNION IS TOPPLING VUČIĆ: Brussels is bothered by the Prime Minister and chosen president of Serbia, HE IS TOO MUCH OF A SERB AND TOO MUCH HIMSELF! (*Informer*, 2017c)

MI6 AGENT ORGANIZED UNRESTS IN POTOČARI This Englishman is behind the assassination of Vučić! (*Alo!*, 2015)

VULIN: The toppling of Vučić is in progress! Some great powers are not satisfied with a stable Serbia! (*Informer*, 2015e)

DOCUMENTS REVEAL: America sends money to topple Vučić! (*Sputnik/Alo!*, 2017)

RUSSIA TURNS ON A RED ALERT IN BELGRADE The West prepared millions to topple Vučić! (Đondović, 2017c)



JANKOVIĆ CALLS FOR UNREST Vučić can only be toppled by use of force! (Đondović, 2017b)

THE KILLING OF VUČIĆ BEGINS! Informer has evidence, the EU and the USA are organizing extremists to create CHAOS IN SERBIA! (Informer, 2016c)

THE MAFIA STRIKES ON THE VUČIĆ FAMILY: We unveil the blackmail plan to create chaos in Serbia! (Informer, 2016a)

THE CIA STRIKES VUČIĆ! American spies launch a media attack against the Government of Serbia (Informer, 2015a)

When Vučić is not the victim of numerous alleged assassinations attempts, he is framed as the victim of assorted attacks from within and without the country. Some of the headlines are rather revealing, such as the one in which it is claimed that “the CIA will strike Vučić”, with the additional information that the case is actually against the government of the country, thus connotatively equating Aleksandar Vučić with Serbia’s government. “Brussels” (the European Union), the USA, the UK, and the undefined “West” are all accused of trying to topple the President. Drawing upon societal and political context, the “West” is often seen as the Enemy in populist and nationalist discourses in Serbia, whilst Russia is seen as an ally and a helping hand. However, the “West” is not the only attacker on Serbia’s President Vučić. Internal forces are framed as posing a threat to the President regularly, mainly by presenting the political opposition as criminals.

#### 4.1.2 *Übermensch rhetoric*

Not only is the strongman Vučić under constant alleged attack, but immensely competent, strong and successful as well, as seen in the following selection of headlines from *Alo!* and *Informer*:

VUČIĆ SPEAKS TO THE DOS: I am not afraid of you, I WILL NOT LET YOU DESTROY SERBIA! (Informer, 2017f)

VUČIĆ SPEAKS TO THE DUCK-PEOPLE: Gentlemen, 4.5 million euros is not enough to bring me down! (Informer, 2016g)

ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ, OPENLY: I fight for a sovereign Serbia, no matter the price! (Informer, 2017b)

WHAT A POWERFUL MESSAGE TO SERBS! Vučić brings HIS SON DANILO to Kosovo! (Informer, 2018a)

VUČIĆ THE FIRST IN EVERYTHING! Install the AV application on your mobile phone! (Informer, 2017g)

VUČIĆ HELPS A FAINTED YOUNG MAN: Look how the Prime Minister reacted WHEN EVERYBODY ELSE STOOD PETRIFIED! (Informer, 2017d)

SERBIA IN THE VISION OF ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ: We will be a country where people compete and triumph over everybody! (Informer, 2016f)

ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ ON RTS2: I submitted my candidacy for the presidency because I realized that some want to return Serbia into the PAST! (Informer, 2017a)  
VUČIĆ ON TV PINK: I am not afraid of neither Đilas nor Šapić, but of whether we will finish what we started! (Informer, 2017e)  
SERBIA'S TYCOONS IN AN INCREDIBLE PANIC! Vučić will arrest the mafia at New Year's Eve! (Informer, 2015d)  
The man that I admire: Aleksandar Vučić! (Đukić, 2013)  
HIT A new ode to Vučić (VIDEO) (Alo!, 2016a)

The headlines above present a clear picture: Aleksandar Vučić is fearless and competent *even though* he is under constant attack. Such a way of framing presents him as even more powerful than he is. He is reported as “admired”, and some have sung odes to him. Oftentimes, connotative play is not even required, as he is simply, directly presented as “the first in everything”. In order to show his benevolence, he is reported to have helped a man who allegedly fainted. He is furthermore “not afraid” of the opposition, demonstrating courage. Criminals are “in panic” once he is active, and he speaks “to Serbs” in a “powerful” fashion, indicating that he is, in fact, powerful. From the perspective of rhetoric, we see clear encomiastic discourse, praise both direct (“first in everything”, “the man I admire”) and indirect (speaking “openly”, sending “powerful messages”). The message to the audience is thus clear: Vučić is powerful.

## 4.2 Article analysis

More detail is revealed once the articles' texts are unpacked. Whilst headlines serve to offer bombastic, sensationalist falsehoods, the texts themselves offer an insight into how the President is framed in detail. Like in the paragraphs above, we have divided the textual analysis into rhetoric of victimhood and the Ubermensch discourse.

### 4.2.1 Victimhood rhetoric

The 2017 article entitled “RUSSIA TURNS ON A RED ALERT IN BELGRADE The West prepared millions to topple Vučić!” gives more detail within its textual body. At this point, we are allowed to see what exactly was meant by the “West toppling Vučić”, as it is elaborated that USAID was supposed to give two million dollars as charity for the development of the civil sector in Serbia; in other words, nothing to do with a potential “toppling” of Vučić. An explanation is given in a declarative, assertive manner, claiming that this is a “typical cover for the lobbying in USA's gain in Belgrade and the toppling of president Vučić”, as “it is not a secret that many circles in the world do not want a strong president in Serbia, one that enjoys a huge support from the citizens of Serbia”. Furthermore, “Vučić is

being toppled since he came into power, and as the time goes by, more effort and money are being invested into toppling him" (Đondović, 2017c). In other words, investing into the civil sector is being framed as a secret plot to take down Vučić himself, by declaration and fiat. Additionally, enemies are discursively positioned as constantly trying to attack him, via declarations that they have "always" done so; Vučić is furthermore depicted as having immense support among the citizenry, in order to strengthen his position rhetorically. Another relevant issue is the positioning of Russia as "warning Belgrade", as Russia in Serbia (primarily in Right Wing circles) is seen as a sort of a Mother Goose country, as there is a "distinctly pro-Putin and anti-Western orientation of almost all leading print media in Serbia" (Bešlin, 2016).

This method of positioning a bombastic, sensationalist title, in which there is either an imminent "attack" on Vučić, or an attack that has allegedly happened, only to be "explained" within the body of the article as an entirely different instance that needed additional framing in order for the securitization discourse to occur, is ubiquitous within the *Informer* and *Alo!*. Alleged enemies are discursively positioned as working within and without the country; by framing Aleksandar Vučić as fighting alleged enemies on all fronts, yet still succeeding (as he was never toppled), such rhetoric paints him in a highly positive light. The enemies within are seen in this representative article, with the title "JANKOVIĆ CALLS FOR UNREST Vučić can only be toppled by use of force!" (Đondović, 2017b). Saša Janković – one of the opposition leaders – is within the text, nevertheless, revealed not to call upon the use of force at all. Instead, he is being quoted as having said the complete opposite: "I believe that without the use of the freedom of assembly, which is a basic human right, Aleksandar Vučić cannot be beaten... we have to be ready to beat Aleksandar Vučić at the elections". This did not bother the author, Jelena Đondović, to frame this within the text as saying that "the collocutors of *Alo* are in agreement that Janković wants to take over power violently". The vice-president of the SPP, one Milenko Jovanov (one of the collocutors), is further within the text quoted as having said that Janković "gets excited with the mentions of unrest, death threats and the like". What is seen in the quotes above has within scholarly research figured either as *discursive deception* (Galasinski, 2000), or simply *lies* promulgated by the media (Bell, 1998; Whitty & Carville, 2008). Deception, according to Galasinski, operates "in the area of the truth and falsity of propositions" (Galasinski, 2000), within the media nowadays commonly dubbed *fake news*. This deceptive discourse, in the case of the *Informer* and *Alo* is achieved by complete and total misrepresentation, false information, discursive assertiveness, and the separation of the direct lie in the headline from the body of the text.

#### 4.2.2 *Übermensch* discourse

A year after he came into power, the encomiastic article about Aleksandar Vučić, “The man whom I admire” was published by the *Alo!* tabloid. In it, a self-described “sexy political activist”, with a full-frontal nudity picture within the article, named Nada Đukić Blondi, offers her own vision of Aleksandar Vučić:

*“I want to be fighting for an advanced and more beautiful Serbia with all my being, my heart, and my naked breasts. An advanced and more beautiful Serbia with our Aleksandar. I am thrilled with the ideas of the vice-Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić his charisma, intelligence and readiness to lead Serbia towards a better life and a better system of values. Urged by my friend, Dejan Nestorović, a long-time member of Vučić’s Party, progressive activism and the desire for something more serious in me were awakened. I believe that as a political activist, I would be able to achieve just anything, like many of my colleagues, for example, in Italy. Why I choose the Serbian Progressive Party and Progressive Serbia? Because I am sick of the ‘filthy morality of politics’, I am sick of those who have imposed the glow of the television on us, and brought hunger to the people ... I want to stand side by side with real men who will bring prosperity to Serbia and Belgrade. I choose Serbia, and I choose the real man, Aleksandar Vučić” (Đukić, 2013).*

Numerous issues arise from the paragraph above. Vučić is, in a patriarchal *Weltanschauung*, described as a “real man”, while those who stand against him are dubbed “bisexuals”. This connects to the still present patriarchal mores within the Serbian societies, that tend to see excessive masculinity as positive, and anything other than heterosexuality as negative (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017; Halpern, Kaser, & Wagner, 1996; Kaser, 1992), as there is a “strong patriarchy, which still characterizes the Serbian sociopolitical context” (Bilić, 2016). Furthermore, the moment in which it is claimed that the author joined “Vučić’s party” – i.e. the party itself, the Serbian Progressive Party, was not named – speaks about the perception of the SPP as primarily the party of one man, Aleksandar Vučić. He is further described as a man with “charisma, intelligence, and the readiness to lead Serbia towards a better life and a better system of values”, in clear, blunt praise.

The article titled “Serbia in the vision of Aleksandar Vučić” engages in directly citing the then Prime Minister, wherein he praises himself, and promises a grand vision for Serbia within twenty years: “Serbia in 2036? A question of the exact length of twenty years, with a very short answer, Vučić says, and stresses that it is ‘everything that we do today. That is Serbia within twenty years. Every kilometer of the railway that we build. Every factory that we open. Every hope that we create by work’” (Informer, 2016f). Discursively positioning a betterment in the country has become Vučić’s forte, as for years, he and his ruling clique have been promising success in ‘two, two and a half years at worse’ (BETA, 2014) dur-

ing their six-year long rule. In this case, however, the betterment is pushed to two decades two decades in the future, indicating that he is of the opinion and design to be in power for decades to come. He further presents himself as modest, asks: "And please, without any false modesty, I have to ask something of you. To ask me about Serbia's future of 2036 in a hundred years", yet perhaps another time stressing that he has come to stay.

The 2016 *Informer* article with the bombastic title "THE KILLING OF VUČIĆ HAS BEGUN! Informer has proof, the EU and the USA are organizing extremists to create CHAOS IN SERBIA" claims that forces from above are ready to murder the Prime Minister. The rhetoric is declarative, with assertions lacking corroboration: "The ambassadors of the EU and the USA, Michael Davenport and Kyle Scott, are personally taking part in the attempt of creating chaos in Serbia and the destabilization of the rule of Aleksandar Vučić, Informer discovers!" (Informer, 2016c). According to the text, "the Informer is in possession of hard proof that the ambassadors are coordinating and organizing the financing of the protests, which, according to their plan, in the next few weeks, should turn into violent demonstrations and an introduction to a 'colored revolution' in accordance with the scenario already seen in Macedonia!". We can note the excessive use in exclamation marks as an intention to strengthen the importance of the falsehood. The alleged "hard proof" comes from a "verifiable", yet unnamed source, that is reported to have claimed that "all of this is organized by Davenport and Scott, who are already now taking part in the attempt of radicalizing the protests. The action is planned in their ambassadorial cabinets, and the leaders of the protests are submitting detailed reports to them...". The trope of the "verifiable source" that is never named is a common one in the *Informer*, and is seen in myriad articles.

## Conclusion

The *Informer* and *Alo!* can, without a doubt, be classified as what is today commonly referred to as "fake news" – bombastic, sensationalist tabloids that will go to great lengths to present Aleksandar Vučić as under constant attack, yet extremely competent and powerful. The discursive strategies of deception and falsehoods are attained by the use of hyperbole, vivid imagery, and specific lexical choices (primarily when Vučić is presented as under attack and the victim of unsuccessful assassination attempts). He is presented as under attack by forces within and without, from the USA, the CIA, to the European Union and Brussels, as well as by opposition forces, that are within the rhetoric presented as criminal and blood-thirsty. His competence overshadows those attacks, though, as he is "not afraid", and continues to work for the country's betterment in the future, that can be put within a short timeframe (two years), or a longer one (two decades). Almost all headlines are prone to use capital letters in an attempt of further emphasis.

Aleksandar Vučić is far from being the lone strongman populist ruler who is via the media presented as powerful and benevolent. Staunch similarities can be seen in media discourses about Viktor Orban in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, or Vladimir Putin in Russia, to name but a few. In all the abovenamed countries, freedom of the press is under constant attack, and all possess certain amounts of censorship, though to a varying degree. Yet whilst Erdogan, Orban and Putin figure as hubs of scholarly interest fairly regularly, Aleksandar Vučić – including Serbia, and most of the Western Balkans as well – is barely a figure of interest within the scholarly community.

This was a micro-to-meso level study, delving into the rhetorical practices of but two dailies within a single country. The *Informer* and *Alo!* have been chosen due to their noteworthy contribution to the creating of a power discourse surrounding the figure of the Vice Prime Minister-cum-Prime Minister-cum-President Vučić; they are the two most significant media outlets that discursively promote and support him. Yet there are many more, opening avenues for further research into the topic, from audience research into how abovementioned discourses are received by their intended audience, to a more general, broader analysis of Serbia under its president, Aleksandar Vučić.

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