UDK 342.849.2(497.11)"2023/2024"
https://doi.org/10.18485/fpn_saborp.2025.18.ch2

Siniša Atlagić*

University of Belgrade
Serbia

Jelena Vujanović**

Institute for Political Studies
Serbia

Elections in Serbia: Campaign Strategies in the Shadow of Polarization?

ABSTRACT

In the period from 2020 to 2024, four election cycles were held in Serbia. The election "tension" culminated in election campaign 2023 and lasted until new local elections in 2024. Given that those of us who followed it intensively can hardly remember any specific message, we can wonder how it is for other voters. What did remain as an impression is rising tension, both between the government and opposition and within the opposition itself, especially regarding the boycott of the June elections. Question arise what happened with campaign strategies? Some political actors stressed it is "pointless" to talk about strategy and the message box in a situation when we have political and media polarization and increasingly blatant electoral rule abuses. Given that

* Full Professor at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science. Contact email: sinisa.atlagic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

** Researcher at the Institute for Political Studies. Contact email: jelena.vujanovic@ips.ac.rs

campaign strategy involves considering external conditions (election and media conditions, etc.), strengths and weaknesses in relation to others, setting goals and target groups, and devising an action plan, we wanted to investigate how did the political actors perceive external conditions and how that perception affected other aspects of campaign strategies preparation. Whether strategic approach even existed in mentioned period or if campaign mostly devolved into improvisation in the shadow of polarization? In sense of this questions we will analyze the campaign strategies of political actors during the mentioned period. For this purpose, discourse analysis and content analysis will be utilized, along with conclusions from in-depth interviews with representatives of relevant political parties, conducted from September 2023 to June 2024.

KEYWORDS: political marketing, election campaign, campaign strategy, elections in Serbia, polarization

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ELECTION CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES, POLITICAL AND MEDIA CONTEXT

For some authors, strategic thinking and planning activities in election campaigns is the basis of modern political marketing (Collins & Butler 1996; Lees-Marshment 2009a, 2009b). But, when we say "election campaign" and "election campaign strategy" what we are talking about? From a legal point of view, election campaigns are the period from the announcement to the holding of elections in which electoral actors try to win the support of voters by conducting marketing and other activities.

In the period of permanent campaigning and the constant presence of parties and politicians through the media and social networks, as well as the frequent holding of special elections when it comes to Serbia, the distinction between the period of the election campaign and the period of regular political activities is sometimes "blurred". But even in this situation election campaigns represent a certain cross-section of the situation in society, they give a picture of current political, economic and national processes, and also divisions in society, and articulate political attitudes and the electoral decision of voters. Debates about campaign effects on the electoral decision itself are still ongoing, but it is clear that "everything that can be important for the electoral decision of voters is mostly mediated by the electoral campaign" (Slavujević 2017, 19). The electoral decision is shaped by long-term social and individual factors, but the importance of campaigns increases in situations of significant decline in trust in political parties and their role in society, as well as in situations when the election results are uncertain and the electoral strength of the election participants is equal. On the other hand, in situations of pronounced social

and political divisions, voters are pre-polarized and determined, if not for a specific party or candidate, then for a specific "side" (government/opposition; national/civic; left/right), and the effects of campaigns are smaller or different. As some authors think, when creating a campaign strategy, parties and candidates should consider the current situation and existing social divisions, objectively assess the current social situation and the balance of power on the political scene, realistically assess their positions and potentials and the characteristics of their target group, and based on that, set election goals and develop an election campaign strategy (Vujanović 2021). "For this reason, the election campaign achieves maximum effects if it is part of a planned long-term strategy of the political entity's propaganda performance" (Slavujević 2017, 22).

Election campaign strategy represents, therefore, a plan of activities aimed at the achievement of election goals, set on the basis of an assessment of one's own position, resources and segmentation of target groups (Newman 1994; Barber 2005, 9; Smith & Hirst 2001, 1059). Or, as Nielsen says in its minimal definition "it is the identification of the goals of a political entity and the scheme through which those goals will be achieved. A schema is a knowledge structure used by a political entity, whether it is an outline of action points, a trial-and-error pattern, a conceptual construction of symbols to change existing logic, or a precise long-term plan for enabling the political entity to respond to market demands" (Nielsen 2012, 294). Creating a plan of activities in election campaign includes choosing a general approach to communication, "positioning, choosing topics and backbones of the campaign, as well as means and forms of promotion" (Vujanović 2022, 128).

As we can conclude from the various definitions, the shaping of election campaign strategy is influenced by the general characteristics of society (the existence of deep ideological, social or national divisions; the type of political culture, etc.), the economic and political situation (the degree of well-being, the issue of social freedoms, etc.), the characteristics of the political and electoral system, as well as the characteristics of the election participants. "Campaign strategy is a very complex process consisting of various interdependent processes such as market analysis, research, polling, segmentation, strategic communication, opposition research, timing, constant analyzing process of political environment and of course crucial role-plays candidate itself" (Gregor & Matuškova 2014, 24). It seeks to define how political actors "should market their programs, policies, personalities and ideas to the relevant public, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the reality of the political environment" (Osuagwu 2008, 800).

When we talk about political environment and campaign strategies, we also need to consider the role of the media and the structure of the public sphere in Serbia. We start from research that began with Lippmann's famous work Public Opinion from 1922 and the conclusions about mediation of politics by the media (Lippman 1922) and people's decision-making in politics

through media-mediated images (Lou 2013). Margaret Scammell, back in 1999, presented conclusion that "the role of the media as the most important channels of political communication is of key importance in forming the image of candidates and political parties, which, by the way, represents one of the most important factors in politics" (Scammell 1999, 729). Authors who deal with political communication concluded that "the media not only cover social and political life and political and election campaigns, but also are the campaign itself" (Harrop 1989 according to Slavujević, 2009: 37).Media and election campaigns in Serbia are part of a public sphere divided into *center* and *periphery*, where first is "represented by television, more specifically the state television channel" (Atlagić 2020b, 33) and television's with national frequency, controlled by government, and *periphery* consisted of several cable news channels and online portals.

Starting from this understanding of the role of the media in campaigns and the structure of the public sphere in Serbia, in our research we start from the assumption that polarization in the public sphere over a longer period of time has led to shortcomings in the strategies of political subjects in the opposition, which we seek to verify through the findings of in-depth interviews with party presidents or member of parliament from both the government (SNS[1], SPS[2]) and opposition parties (New DSS, DS, SSP, PSG)[3], and also with public opinion researchers. The interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024, during research for the doctoral dissertation of the co-author of this paper, and the questions related to the political marketing strategies of parties in Serbia since 2008, as well as the influence of the electoral and media context on them. During the audio recording of these interviews, the respondents explicitly consented to have their statements cited by full name.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES IN SERBIA IN THE SHADOW OF POLARIZATION?

Political and media context

The main characteristics of the election context in Serbia, according to Slavujević (2017) is that there are frequent elections, both regular and snap, and

1 SNS is the abbreviation of the Serbian Progressive Party's name in Serbian, which we will use due to its general recognizability.

2 Socialistic Party of Serbia which is part of ruling coalition. Their leader is Ivica Dačić.

3 Serbian abbreviations for New Democratic Party of Serbia, Democratic party, Freedom and Justice Party and movement of free citizens.

constant changes in the political scene. Many parties are not clearly defined, new ones keep appearing while old ones disappear, and there are lots of short-term coalitions. Political parties often change their ideas and leaders, which adds to the confusion. That "reality of the political environment" (Osuagwu 2008, 800) inSerbia, "forced the parties to often change election campaign strategies in a short period of time, if not always as a whole, then at least in some significant parts" (Slavujević 2017, 30).

Authors point out that "the Serbian party system has gone through a kind of "rollercoaster" from a system with a dominant party, through polarized and moderate pluralism, and back to a system with a dominant party" (Kovačević 2020, 794) on the one hand, and a number of atomized opposition parties, on the other hand (Stojiljković 2017; Orlović 2020).

Since the elections in 2016 we obviously have asymmetric party scene in Serbia. On one side is the SNS, the dominant party, along with its steady partners – the socialists and national minority parties. This bloc is marked by steady leadership, clear ideology, and strong organization. "In other words, it is a highly institutionalized part of the party system" (Spasojević 2022, 17). On the other side is a divided and unstable opposition, with deep disagreements and frequent shifts in strategy and tactics. In literature we can find thoughts that in the last few years the government-opposition division becomes the most dominant division in Serbia, with a marked dominance of the government (Bešić 2020) and that "the polarized media world has become the propaganda backbone of the regime" blocking public criticism and meaningful debate on important issues (Matić & Milivojević 2020). Media analyses show a decline in reporting, "including the systematic polarization of the public under pressure from the authorities", restricted debate on key issues, and reduced media independence (Kovačević 2020, 1005).

Tensions led to the opposition leaving parliament in 2019, and due to unequal electoral and media conditions, most of the opposition boycotted the 2020 elections in Serbia. After that, in 2021, negotiations on electoral conditions were launched, and new elections were held in 2022, but tensions were not significantly reduced. Also, the already weakened opposition is further split up by conflicts for supremacy, accusations about who is the real opposition and who works for the government, radicalization of communication etc., which leaves almost no room for a well-thought-out campaign strategy (Stojiljković 2020; Spasojević 2020).

All of this deepened further in the pre-election period of 2023 and 2024. After less than two years since the previous parliamentary elections were held in Serbia (on April 2022), new parliamentary elections were announced for December 17, 2023[4], as well as elections for the city of Belgrade and a series

4 Elections were announced on November 1, 2023, which officially marked the beginning of the election campaign.

of local elections. The period before the announcement of the elections, and especially the period of the election campaign itself, was followed by increased social tensions related to the topics: violence in society, the issues of Kosovo and Metohija and the issues of election conditions.

First, tragic mass murders in May 2023 in a Belgrade elementary school and a village near Belgrade caused a series of protests with key message "Serbia against violence". The first few protests were extremely massive, and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) responded to them with the "Serbia of Hope" counter rally held on May 25. Protests "Serbia against violence" were held every weekend, but due to the lack of effects and clear leadership, their energy and mass decreased considerably, and they stopped when the elections were announced in November 2023. Nevertheless, on the narrative of the protests themselves, the election coalition *Serbia against violence* was formed, which consisted of pro-EU parties and movements[5]. Second, in September 2023, a still unsolved armed incident took place in the village of Banjska in Kosovo and Metohija, when the so called "Kosovo" police killed three young men of Serbian nationality in a confrontation, and one Albanian policeman was also killed. The secessionist government of the so-called Kosovo accused Serbia and increased pressure on the Serbian population, so the topic of Kosovo and Metohija came into focus again. And third, the topic of undemocratic election conditions and unequal access to the media was constantly present and emphasized by the opposition and monitoring missions, in addition to all other topics (CRTA 2023; OEBS 2023; Perišić & Simić 2024).

Political actors and different perceptions of the political and media context

Given that campaign strategy involves considering external conditions (like election and media conditions, party system etc.), one's own capacities (strengths and weaknesses in relation to other election participants), setting goals and target groups, and devising an action plan (see Vujanović 2021), the question arises how did the political actors perceive external conditions and how that perception affected different aspects of campaign strategies preparation. To answer that question, we analyzed in-depth interviews with representatives of relevant political parties and campaign experts, conducted precisely from September 2023 to June 2024.

---

5 The Freedom and Justice Party, the Democratic Party, the Green-Left Front, the Movement of Free Citizens, Together, the Heart Movement and several other movements. We call them pro-EU because it is difficult to find other appropriate term that unites them. This is a group of opposition parties and movements that share a pro-EU stance, the fight for democracy, justice and civil liberties, but also have significant differences in their understanding of politics and methods of action.

Through the analysis of those interviews, we have confirmed that among political actors in Serbia there are conflicting and deeply divided opinions on important topics, but that the majority of respondents agree that there is media and political polarization that affects creating election campaign strategy. According to the interviews, the following topics stand out: question about electoral conditions; media polarization and its impact on the possibility of planning media appearances in the campaign; relentless negative campaign of the "other side"; the influence of polarization on the possibility of choosing campaign topics; etc. What is interesting is that respondents blame the others for each of these aspects and interpret their influence and their own election campaign strategies in a completely different way. It is also interesting that precisely these topics were more dominantly present in the election campaign in 2023, and especially in 2024, than any policy or candidate proposals.

First, the impression of opposition political actors is that the legal framework for holding elections is uncertain, because it "changes almost until the last moment" (Pajvančić 2020, 18) and that changing the electoral rules is often part of the electoral strategy of the governing parties.[6] They also consider undemocratic and unequal electoral conditions as one of the most important topics and obstacles to the implementation of their campaign strategies. As we could see, this affects to such an extent that it becomes the central theme of the election campaign of the opposition bloc "Serbia against violence" before the 2023 elections, and especially in the period after those elections when the government is accused of electoral theft, of manipulation of the electoral law through mass transportation of people with dual citizenship in order to vote in Belgrade, etc.

Media conditions also stand out as an important theme in the perception of opposition political actors.[7] They point out that the media in Serbia is non-objective[8], that it is not the media but a direct actor in political processes, that there is unequal access and bias[9] in favor of the government, and that this renders the issue of campaign strategies meaningless (Jovanović 2023;

6 For example, in 2020 government reduced census to 3% in order to encourage some of the opposition parties that announced the boycott to take part in elections.

7 "And then we come to the problem of the media, accessibility to the media and availability to citizens" (Lutovac 2023)

8 "So, you have a large influence of foreigners, you have a lack of objective media, you have a lack of quality public discussion, and journalists as such, and of course all this affects the possibility of carrying out the campaign", says the president of New DSS (Jovanović 2023).

9 "The problem of the election campaign in Serbia is that it does not take place according to the models in democratic countries because we have a government campaign that lasts continuously. Less than two months before the elections, he (Vučić) will probably be a guest longer than the duration of the main daily TV news, while we cannot appear alone on the public service in any show. So, here in our country, the election campaign is not the same as

Lutovac 2023; Vukadinović 2024; Panić 2024). Some interviewees point out that both before and in the period to which this paper refers, they were negatively labeled day and night on the so-called regime media and that the question arises as to whether and how to approach the voters in the campaign if they think that you are either evil or thief (Đilas 2023). They point out that in situation when "the others" are seen as enemies towards whom everything is permitted, when political opponents' cars are set on fire and children are thrown out of kindergarten etc., authoritarian tendencies are so deep that there is only the semblance of democracy and elections, and therefore the semblance of election campaigns (Đilas 2023; Lutovac 2023). The opposition-oriented respondents also point out that the existing polarization limits both the possibility of conducting public opinion research (Vukadinović 2024) and the selection of campaign topics. An example is given that, on the one hand, public opinion researchers suggest that you should not mention Aleksandar Vučić so much, but when you don't mention him, the opposition media and the opposition public accuse you of having an agreement with him.[10]

As a particular negative influence on their own campaign strategies, actors of the right-wing political spectrum highlight the polarization of the media into "regime" media, which they do not have access to and which label them negatively[11], and pro-EU media, such as N1 and Nova S, which are closed or critical for national and patriotic topics, which limits their ability to implement political marketing strategies (Vukadinović 2024). "You have media that are absolutely in the service of either the regime in power or somehow the pro-Western opposition or the West as such. The party I lead is specific in terms of politics because those who rule do not like us, we are even less liked by those who like Hill (*US ambassador*) and whom Hill likes. So, we are not on his list, therefore we are not excessively on the list of his media either. And it's a strange situation where you already at the start, when it comes to the coming campaign, know that you won't have electronic media and that you only have a field campaign and an internet campaign", says the New DSS president (Jovanović 2023).

---

the election campaign in democratic countries. Here it is some illusion, I don't know what to call it" (Đilas 2023)

10 "I think that this is one strategy that is particularly dangerous and bad, especially for opposition parties. Especially in autocratic regimes or let's be more lenient – in these regimes with a rather low degree of media freedom. Very dangerous because it is the government that creates the narrative, it is the government that creates the dominant public opinion, and if you just adapt to it, you will hardly be authentic enough for the voters to choose you and not those who created that narrative" (Grbović 2024).

11 For example, on certain media, such as Informer or Pink, the president of the New DSS was derogatorily called "Milos the French" because of his dual citizenship.

On the other hand, some representatives of the government also point out that today's "journalists openly support one side or the other" (Vasiljević 2024), and that polarization of the media clearly exists. But they believe that in numerous other countries "there are media that are pro-government and that are opposition" but only in Serbia this is the main topic of the opposition's campaign (Jovanov 2024). For SNS, changes in the media and party system are a long-term process and certainly cannot be changed in the short campaign period. So, for them characteristic of the media and party system in that sense is only a context that should be considered when creating a campaign, together with considering results of public opinion researches. "As for SNS, I believe that our campaign is really done by taking all that into account and that people who are serious about campaigns do the same with the formation of the message, and marketing campaigns in politics and everything else", points out Jovanov (2024). According to their view, the image of the leader is the most important element of the campaign strategy created in this way (Jovanov 2024; Vasiljević 2024)

What they see as the influence of polarization on the campaign is that the election campaigns "became too aggressive" (Paunović 2024) and that topics that are important to citizens, such as social issues, in the campaign are overshadowed by the division into "for and against" someone[12] (Paunović 2024; Jovanov 2024).

Election campaign strategies in 2023 and 2024

Next question is how did these different perceptions affected different election campaign strategies in 2023 and 2024, whether strategic approach even existed in campaigns of individual actors or if campaigns mostly devolved into improvisation in the shadow of polarization. Through content analysis of media statements and campaign materials of the campaign participants, we sought to identify thematic frameworks of their campaigns because they "highlight the main political goals" (Atlagić 2020a, 198) and the direction of the campaign strategy.

As we mentioned, the strategy of several pro-EU parties and movements, for December elections, was to unite in a joint list "Serbia against violence" and to try to win over voters on the wave of May protests and the theme of uniting the opposition against the government. "Our eight organizations unite towards a goal that is stronger and more important than all of us. In the fight against violence", has been said in one You Tube spot in campaign (Srbija

12 "Are you for Vučić, are you for Đilas, are you for this one or that one, or as it used to be, are you for Vuk or are you for Sloba, are you for, I don't know, Boris or are you for Koštunica. It always comes down to that somehow" (Jovanov 2024)

protiv nasilja 2023). However, the campaign itself occasionally acted more like a response to what the government is doing, and messages were targeting clearly opposition-oriented voters, so the question of the existence of a clear strategy arises.

The topic of uniting the opposition dominated the media such as N1 and Nova S, so the right-wing opposition parties – New DSS, Dveri, Zavetnici and Peoples party, also negotiate a joint list. However, the negotiations failed and each of the parties ran an independent campaign. The strategy of the "NADA"[13] coalition (New DSS and POKS) was summed up in the slogan "Change Now" (Nova Demokratska stranka Srbije 2023a), which indicated a radical anti-government commitment, but also subtly indicated that uniting with other right-wing options did not occur because they are not so clearly oppositional. Under this main theme they send messages about their usual topics –Kosovo and Metohija, national identity, changes in political system, economic system and educational system (Nova Demokratska stranka Srbije 2023b).

The joint list of Dveri and Zavetnici was called the National Gathering, and the essence of the strategy was to picture themselves as protectors of sovereignty, the Serbian village (Dveri 2023a) and family (Dveri 2023b). Nevertheless, regardless of these topics, they spent most of the campaign in media excusing themselves why they did not unite with New DSS and whether this means that they are not "real opposition" (see RTV 2023).

On the other hand, the ruling SNS created its campaign strategy around the theme "Serbia must not stop". The goal of the strategy was to use the existing polarization (in which the SNS, according to resources, media presence, etc. represents a disproportionately stronger bloc) in order to show the country's progress in all fields and convince the voters that progress will stop if the opposition comes to power. The main message was legitimized by the appearance of respectable people from science, sports, and culture in election spots (SNS 2023) and events.

The SPS strategy was to personalize the campaign and highlight Ivica Dačić through the message "Dačić Prime Minister". The goal of this strategy was to mobilize their own supporters and try to avoid polarization. But considering the weaker election results of SPS, the question remains whether this strategy led to the passivization of a part of their voters or their voting for the SNS (Milenković 2023).

The existing polarization was more successfully used by the "WE – Voice from the people" list whose campaign strategy relied on the public recognition of Dr. Branimir Nestorović and several other persons and on creating the impression that it is an option that does not belong to any bloc – neither the government bloc, nor the pro-EU part of opposition (Anđelković 2023).

13 Word that in Serbian language means "Hope".

Table 1. Campaign strategies in 2023

SNS	Serbia against the violence	New DSS
Main message: "Serbia must not stop". **Goal**: to use the existing polarization in order to show the country's progress in all fields and convince the voters that progress will stop if the opposition comes to power. **Advantage**: SNS represents a much stronger bloc in existing polarization (in resources, media presence, etc.)	**Main message**: uniting the opposition against the government and against raising violence **Goal**: Gain voters on the wave of May protests **Problem**: No clear strategy; The radical communication only reached clearly opposition-oriented voters.	**Main message**: "Change Now" –change in politics about KiM, and political, economic and educational system **Goal**: point out a radical anti-government commitment **Problem**: Explaining why right-wing opposition did not unite.
SPS	**WE –Voice from the People**	**Dveri and Zavetnici**
Main message: "Dačić Prime Minister" – sends message „there are no government without us" **Goal**: to mobilize their own supporters and try to avoid polarization. **Problem**: But exactly that move some of their voters to SNS.	**Main message**: We are the ordinary people outside of polarization; **Goal**: Picture themselves as neither the government bloc, nor the pro-Western opposition bloc; **Advantage**: Public recognition of Dr. Branimir Nestorović in their target group.	**Main message**: National Gathering **Goal**: picture themselves as protectors of sovereignty, the Serbian village and family **Problem**: Explaining why they did not unite with New DSS and whether this means that they "work for Vučić".

The election results led to some changes within the opposition part of the political spectrum, but also to new tensions. Almost all opposition parties of the right-wing political spectrum remained outside the parliament, except for the New Democratic Party of Serbia (New DSS), as well as a new actor – the "WE – Voice from the people" movement. The pro-EU list "Serbia against violence" won around 24% votes, but that was certainly not enough for changes in government and after the election there was a regrouping in this opposition bloc.

The main postelection issue was about Belgrade city elections. SNS authorities were accused for election theft by opposition and there were protests and even a hunger strike by some opposition actors. It is important to note that all these activities were reactive, and didn't look like strategically planned and coordinated with all opposition actors. A repeat of the elections for the city of Belgrade was demanded at the protests, and the pro-EU (SSP, DS, ZLF...) and right-wing (New DSS) opposition parties held discussions about the minimum electoral conditions they require from the authorities led by the SNS. Second issue was that, even with pronounced election results, in the assembly of the city of Belgrade itself, no block had enough councilors for a majority without the councilors of the "WE – Voice from the people" movement, who

in the end decided to remain neutral. They didn't support the formation of the government of any party block, and formally new elections for Belgrade city had to be called.

At the same time, pressure from the European Union and calls for mediated talks between government and the opposition on election conditions were taking place. The opposition parties signed a document on the minimum electoral conditions without which they will not participate in repeated elections and announced a potential election boycott (Danas 2024). Nevertheless, when the deadlines for fulfilling the requested requirements had already expired and when the elections had already been announced in April 2024 (for June, 2024), the government, with the support of Western ambassadors, organized a round of talks with the opposition about election conditions. Some opposition actors (New DSS) thought that it is a manipulation because there wasn't enough time for change of election conditions and refused to came on this round tables, and the "Serbia against violence" members went on that conversations, but after that, split apart because there were disagreements about boycott (Blic 2024). A half of party's in this block stood with the deal that opposition will boycott elections if conditions are unchanged, and other half announce that they will participate in elections. The campaign period, until the deadline for submission of electoral lists, passed in an atmosphere of bidding as to which of the opposition actors will and who will not go to the elections. While the remaining part of the election campaign (only three weeks) was spent in mutual accusations about who is to blame for the disunity and who more "contributes to Vučić[14]" – actors who boycott, or actors who go to the elections despite unfulfilled conditions from the authorities.

Part of the former "Serbia against violence" coalition, which decided to go to the June elections after all, came with the slogan "*I choose fight*" as the key determinant of the campaign. The goal was to motivate the voters with the narrative that one should not give up the fight against the "autocratic" government even in unfair conditions. Radomir Lazović[15] claims that they are "people who decided not to leave any city, any municipality, any local community, any street to SNS and their criminal government. Today we choose to fight. We are aware that the election conditions were not good, and they are not good today either" (N1 2024). And Miroslav Aleksić[16] says that "we have to fight" because "government will never give us what keeps them in power, but we have to steal it and steal it one by one. Through struggle, through activism and no surrender" (N1 2024). But with this very slogan, the campaign strategy was reduced to a "justification" about why they are going to the elections in

14 President of Serbia, coming from SNS.

15 Co-chairman of the opposition Green Left Front.

16 President of the opposition People's Movement of Serbia.

the first place when they have been talking about a boycott for several months. They tried to send some messages about policy proposals about public transport or preservation of the Belgrade fair (Stefanović 2023)on social networks and in several election shows on public service (RTS 2024).But most of popular shows on the media watched by their voters, like N1 and Nova S, was about why they are not boycotting the elections[17]. And most of their election spots (Biramo Beograd 2024) and songs (Biramo Niš 2024) was about why is important to go on election.

At the last moment, the list of the movement "Kreni-Promeni"[18] entered the elections with the main slogan "I am Belgrade". They estimated that they could take part of the opposition voters who, due to the boycott of part of the opposition, would have no one to vote for. So, their strategy was to motivate and win over those voters, confused and disappointed by the divisions in the opposition with the help of several well-known actors and public figures and with recording positive pre-election songs (See KreniPromeni 2024). However, even though they did not participate in the agreements regarding the election boycott, they also spent most of the campaign explaining why they are running for the elections in the first place.

Also, after the movement "WE – Voice from the people" split apart, few recognizable members formed list "WE – Peoples power" and run for Belgrade elections with main strategy to show that they stay out from both government and pro-EU side, and to attract DSS voters because this party is boycotting.

On the other hand, since the announcement of the elections, the government has come out with a one joint election list that brought together not only the strongest ruling party SNS and smaller actors, but also the SPS, as well as some actors who were previously in the opposition, such as the Zavetnici party. The very name of the list "Belgrade tomorrow" and the slogan "Future in your hands" indicated the continuation of a campaign in which the focus is on progress, future and development. Under the narrative of unity for state and national interests, a permanent and joint campaign was conducted for Belgrade and every other local election together. We could see billboards with every party leader from that coalition together with state president Aleksandar Vučić and election spots with mentioning future projects like EXPO, new hospital in Subotica, new sport hall in Valjevo, etc. (SNS 2024). And in the same time through the media close to the government, such as Pink and Informer, a negative campaign was conducted accusing the opposition of disunity, frivolity, etc. So, we could say that main goal of this strategy was to set black and white picture of responsible, united, governing list and irresponsible, disunited opposition.

17 For example, TV shows "Impression of the week" on Nova S or "Behind the news" on N1, etc.

18 An NGO that dealt with political issues but did not participate in elections before 2024.

Table 2. Strategies in 2024: To boycott or not to boycott

Belgrade tomorrow (SNS, SPS, Zavetnici)	We chose Belgrade (ZLF, DS, PSG...)	New DSS
Main message: "Future in your hands". **Goal**: Conduct permanent and joint campaign for Belgrade and every other local elections together under the narrative of unity for state and national interests **Advantage**: United against divided opposition	**Main message**: „We chose fight" **Goal**: To motivate the opposition voters **Problem**: campaign strategy was reduced to a "justification" about why they are going to the elections in the first place when they have been talking about a boycott for several months.	**Main message**: „There are no elections" **Goal**: explain to the voters that, if the current election conditions are accepted, the government will rule undemocratically and betray national interests in Kosovo and the Republika Srpska in the long term **Problem**: Confused voters; conservative voters consider elections an obligation to the state
SSP, "Heart"...	**Kreni Promeni**	**WE -People's Power**
Main message: there are no conditions for democratic elections **Goal**: convince voters not to go to the polls **Problem**: Confused voters; Divided opposition;	**Main message**: I am Belgrade **Goal**: To motivate and take part of the opposition voters who, due to the boycott of part of the opposition, would have no one to vote for **Problem**: they also spent most of the campaign explaining why they are running for the elections in the first place.	**Main message**: „Peoples power"; Doctors for Belgrade" **Goal**: Be out of existing polarization **Advantage**: considering that DSS boycotted the elections, they could also address their voters

If we look at the entire described period from the beginning of the campaign for the December 2023 elections to the holding of the June 2024 elections, the policy proposals and campaign messages remained in the background. What did remain as an impression is predominant presence of the President, "which, along with the systemic advantage of the ruling party, created unequal conditions" (OEBS 2023, 1) and the polarization, both between the government and opposition and within the opposition itself, especially regarding the boycott of the June elections (see CRTA 2023; CRTA 2024). "In this way, people's emotional-affective attitude is provoked" (Atlagić 2020a, 203).

CONCLUSIONS

In the period from 2020 to 2024, four election cycles were held in Serbia. The election "tension" culminated in election campaign 2023 and lasted until new local elections in 2024. We could hear harsh words between the government and the opposition and within the opposition, accusations against the government for stealing elections and controlling the media, accusations against the

opposition for being frivolous and offering only hatred, accusations in the opposition about who works for the government and who doesn't, arguments about election boycott. There was the least space for policy proposals.

Representatives of both the government and the opposition agree that polarization obviously exists and affects the election campaign itself, but they have completely different perceptions about how it affects it and how it came about.

Representatives of the opposition blame the government for the polarization, accusing them of dividing society, usurping the media and institutions, and of constantly running a dirty campaign through their media, and that in such a situation there is neither the possibility nor the sense to plan an election campaign strategy and talk about policy proposals. On the other hand, representatives of the authorities agree that there is media polarization and increasingly pronounced aggressiveness in political communication, but they shift the blame to the opposition media. They consider such a situation as the context to which the campaign strategy should respond, which, according to them, is adequately done in the case of SNS campaigns.

Excluding the issue of election conditions, it seems like in opposition there is no room for strategy, and in SNS strategy is centralized and controlled but there is no room for different opinion. Almost as if they come from two parallel universes. In this situation the main functions of the election campaign remain "blurred" and election strategies remain in the shadow of polarization.

REFERENCES

Atlagić, Siniša. 2020a. „Vrednosni okvir izborne komunikacije i uloga medija u promociji dominantnih vrednosti u izbornim kampanjama u Srbiji od 1990. do 2020. godine", u *Trideset godina obnovljenog višepartizma u Srbiji – (Ne)naučene lekcije*, ur. Orlović Slaviša i Despot Kovačević, 197–208. Beograd: FPN – Centar za demokratiju i Hanns Seidel Stiftung.

Atlagić, Siniša. 2020b. "The public sphere and hybrid regimes in the digital environment: The case of contemporary Serbia". in *Digitalne medijske tehnologije i društveno-obrazovne promene 9*, 29–40. Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet.

Anđelković, Nataša. 2023. „Izbori u Srbiji 2023: Tajna Nestorovićevog uspeha na putu od medicine, preko numerologije, do politike". *BBC News na srpskom.* Last accessed 14.10.2024. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-67748202.

Barber, Stephen. 2005. *Political strategy: Modern politics in contemporary Britain*. Liverpool Academic Press.

Bešić, Miloš. 2020. „Vrednosne orijentacije i partijske preferencije u Srbiji", u *Trideset godina obnovljenog višepartizma u Srbiji – (Ne)naučene lekcije*, ur. Orlović Slaviša i Despot Kovačević, 99–113. FPN – Beograd: Centar za demokratiju I Hanns Seidel Stiftung.

Biramo Beograd. 2024. „BIRAMO Beograd! Biramo borbu!" *Biramo Beograd*. Last accessed 14.10.2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLfYYJdQsu4&ab_channel=BiramoBeograd.

Biramo Niš. 2024. „Biramo Niš – Biramo pobedu". *Biramo Niš.* Last accessed 14.10.2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzIQnPvTvKg&ab_channel=NovaGeneracija.

Blic. 2024. „OPOZICIJA PODELJENA PRED KONSULTACIJE Sutra nova runda razgovora o izbornim uslovima, tri poslanika OSTALA BEZ KLUBA". Last accessed 18.12.2024. https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/konsultacije-o-izbornim-uslovima-u-skupstini-srbije-psg-za-razgovor-nada-nece/bbergw5.

Collins, Neil and Patrick Butler. 1996. "Positioning political parties: A market analysis". *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1(2): 63–77.

CRTA. 2023. „Izbori 2023 – Prvi periodični izveštaj dugoročnih posmatrača". *CRTA.* Last accessed 18.12.2024. https://crta.rs/izbori-2023-prvi--periodicni-izvestaj-dugorocnih-posmatraca/.

CRTA. 2024. „Beogradski izbori 2024 – Završni izveštaj". *CRTA.* Last accessed 18.12.2024. https://crta.rs/beogradski-izbori-2024-zavrsni-izvestaj/.

Danas. 2024. „Nova: Opozicija će bojkotovati izbore ukoliko se ne promene uslovi". *Danas.* Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/nova-opozicija-ce-bojkotovati-izbore-ukoliko-se-ne-promene-uslovi/.

Dveri. 2023a. „Srpski seljak je zakon!" *Srpski pokret Dveri.* Last accessed 14.10.2024. https://bit.ly/3ZpSamX.

Dveri. 2023b. „Da srpska ekonomija radi za sve naše porodice". *Srpski pokret Dveri.* Last accessed 14.10.2024. https://bit.ly/3Bvcvzj.

Đilas, Dragan. 2023. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 26. oktobra 2023.

Grbović, Pavle. 2023. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 12. oktobra 2023.

Gregor, Miloš, and Anna Matuškova. 2014. "Electoral campaigns and marketing strategy–the case study of Karel Schwarzenberg's campaign". *Czech Journal of Social Sciences, Business and Economics*, *3*(4): 24–31.

Jovanov, Milenko. 2024. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 25. april 2024.

Jovanović, Miloš. 2023. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 2. oktobra 2023.

Kovačević, Despot. 2020. „Stabilnost partijskog sistema Srbije – izborna volatilnost u 30 godina višepartizma", u *Kako, koga i zašto smo birali: izbori u Srbiji 1990–2020. godine*, ur. Milan Jovanović i Dušan Vučićević, 793–814. Beograd: Institut za političke studije i Službeni glasnik.

KreniPromeni. 2024. "I ja sam Beograd". *You tube.* Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kIJeDebOmY&ab_channel=Kreni-Promeni.

Lees-Marshment, Jennifer. 2009a. "Global political marketing". In *Global political marketing*, eds. Jennifer Lees-Marshment, Jesper Strömbäck and Chris Rudd, 1–16. Routledge.

Lees-Marshment, Jennifer. 2009b. "Marketing after the election: The potential and limitations of maintaining a market orientation in government". *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 34(2): 205–227.

Lippman, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: "Harcourt Brace".

Lou, P. Erik. 2013. *Mediji i politički proces*. Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka.

Lutovac, Zoran. 2023. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 31, oktobra 2023.

Matić, Jovanka i Snježana Milivojević. 2020. „Tri decenije izborne komunikacije", u *Kako, koga i zašto smo birali: izbori u Srbiji 1990–2020. godine*, ur. Milan Jovanović i Dušan Vučićević, 347–399. Beograd: Institut za političke studije i Službeni glasnik.

Milenković, M. R. 2023. „Kako se kampanja 'Dačić premijer' pretvorila u kampanju 'Dačić predsednik SPS'. Sagovornici Danasa o mogućoj ostavci lidera socijalista I debaklu SPS na izborima". *Danas.* Last accessed 18.12.2024. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ivica-dacic-sps-ostavka-kampanja/.

Newman, Bruce I. 1994. *The marketing of the president*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Nielsen, Sigge Winther. 2012. "Three faces of political marketing strategy". *Journal of Public Affairs,* 12 (4): 293–302.

Nova Demokratska stranka Srbije. 2023a. „Zaokruži 5!" *Nova Demokratska stranka Srbije*. Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://youtu.be/o9SmqxCNmK0?si=ZbF5gb7cRfYY2sy4.

Nova Demokratska stranka Srbije. 2023b. „Srpska koalicija NADA počela kampanju". *Nova Demokratska stranka Srbije*. Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://youtu.be/g44rUSGFbnE?si=4cGx-psWl0B9A7zS.

N1. 2024. „Novi slogan dela opozicije koji izlazi na izbore: Biram borbu!" *N1*. Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://n1info.rs/vesti/novi-slogan-dela-opozicije-koji-izlazi-na-izbore-biram-borbu/.

OEBS. 2023. „Vanredni parlamentarni izbori, 17. decembar 2023. godine: Saopštenje o preliminarnim nalazima i zaključcima". Dostupno na: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/ 8/3/560701.pdf. Pristupljeno: 13. septembar 2024.

Orlović, Slaviša. 2020. „Političke institucije i partijski system Srbije", u *Trideset godina obnovljenog višepartizma u Srbiji – (Ne)naučene lekcije*, ur. Orlović Slaviša i Despot Kovačević, 41–70. FPN – Centar za demokratiju i Hanns Seidel Stiftung, Beograd.

Osuagwu, Linus. 2008. "Political marketing: conceptualisation, dimensions and research agenda". *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 26 (7): 793–810.

Pajvančić, Marijana. 2020. „Pravni okvir izbora u Srbiji", u *Kako, koga i zašto smo birali: izbori u Srbiji 1990–2020. godine*, ur. Milan Jovanović i Dušan Vučićević, 15–52. Beograd: Institut za političke studije i Službeni glasnik.

Paunović, Snežana. 2024. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 13. maj 2024.

Panić, Ljuban. 2024. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 31. maj 2024.

Perišić, Nikola i Savo Simić. 2024. „Medijske javne politike nevladinih organizacija u poboljšanju kvaliteta izbornog procesa u Republici Srbiji od 2019. do 2023. godine", u *Analitički centri: uloga u kreiranju javnih politika u Srbiji: tematski zbornik*, ur. Nada Raduški, 102–124. Beograd: Institut za političke studije.

RTS. 2024. „Takovska 10: Šta stranke nude građanima na gradskim izborima". *RTS sajt – Zvanični kanal.* Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6O8mFnoDIg&ab_channel=RTSSajt-Zvani%C4%8Dnikanal.

RTV. "PRAVI UGAO: Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski i Boško Obradović | 11.12.2023". *RTV.* Last accessed 18.12.2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1KlUxUKkRk&ab_channel =Radio-televizijaVojvodine.

Scammell, Margaret. 1999. "Political marketing: Lessons for political science". *Political Studies Association,* XLVII, 718–739. Blackwell Publishers.

Slavujević, Zoran. 2017. *Pohodi na birače u ime države i naroda: Izborne kampanje u Srbiji od 1990. do 2016. godine*, I tom. Fakultet političkih nauka, Beograd

Smith, Gareth, and Andy Hirst. 2001. "Strategic political segmentation: A new approach for a new era of political marketing". *European Journal of Marketing,* 35(9–10): 1058–1073.

SNS. 2023. „Srbija ne sme da stane". *Srpska napredna stranka.* Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://bit.ly/3ZG4z7E.

SNS. 2024. „Budućnost je u tvojim rukama". *Aleksandar Vučić – Youtube kanal.* Last accessed 15.10.2024. https://bit.ly/4f5LPmz.

Spasojević, Dušan. 2020. „Uticaj izbornog sistema na profilisanje stranačkih ideologija u Srbiji", u *Kako, koga i zašto smo birali: izbori u Srbiji 1990–2020. godine*, ur. Milan Jovanović i Dušan Vučićević, 775–792. Beograd: Institut za političke studije i Službeni glasnik.

Spasojević, Dušan. 2022. „Čudno da čudnije ne može biti – kontekst opštih izbora u Srbiji 2022. godine". *Srpska politička misao – posebno izdanje,* 4/22: 15–34.

Srbija protiv nasilja. 2023. „Nas je više". *Srbija protiv nasilja.* Last accessed 13.10.2024. https://youtu.be/k4b_zNnog10?si=8stgZqjbSl7j9Ovv.

Stefanović, Radoje. 2023. „Srušiti grad može svako, ali čuvati i razvijati ga ova vlast očigledno ne može". *Biramo Beograd.* Last accessed 15.10.2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k0Wc10L1iI&ab_channel=BiramoBeograd.

Stojiljković, Zoran. 2017. *Srbija traži vođu*. Vukotić Media, Beograd.

Stojiljković, Zoran. 2020. "Volja gradana i njeni interesni i politički zastupnici", u *Trideset godina obnovljenog višepartizma u Srbiji – (Ne)naučene lekcije*, ured. Orlović Slaviša

i Despot Kovačević, 99–113. Beograd: FPN – Centar za demokratiju i Hanns Seidel Stiftung.

Vasiljević, Suzana. 2024. „Kako savetuje predsednika – SuzanaVasiljević". *Telekom Srbija*. Pristupljeno: 16. septembar 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMx3Iq_u28c&t=20s&ab_channel=TelekomSrbija.

Vujanović, Jelena. 2021. „Politički marketing – stanje discipline i otvorena pitanja". *Godišnjak FPN*, 15(26): 99–119.

Vujanović, Jelena. 2022. „Publicitet u medijima i odnosi sa javnošću kao element strategije političkog marketinga partija i kandidata za parlamentarne i predsedničke izbore 2022. godine". *Srpska politička misao – posebno izdanje*, 4/22: 127–151.

Vukadinović, Đorđe. 2024. Intervju za potrebe doktorske disertacije jednog od autora, obavljen 17. juna 2024.