

Elections on the information margin

Preliminary analysis of media content for the most visited online media in Serbia
01 November - 17 December 2023

On Wednesday November 1, the President of the Serbian Parliament, Vladimir Orlić, [announced](#) local elections in 65 cities and municipalities in Serbia, including Belgrade. A few hours after Orlić's traditional protocol of signing the Decision on calling for elections in the hall of the National Assembly, the message "Long live Serbia! Happy elections!" arrived from the digital address of the President of the Republic of Serbia. Aleksandar Vučić's [cyber address](#) also announced snap parliamentary elections, which started the pre-election campaign that lasted until December 14 at midnight. Meanwhile, on November 16, provincial elections were announced.

Research shows that online media's importance as sources of information keeps steadily increasing, both in the world and [at home](#). Although television is still in the lead when it comes to sources of obtaining information, the role of online media, which is currently in third place, requires special research attention. Taking into account the importance of free, comprehensive and balanced information from the point of view of the level of democracy of the entire election process, this research focuses on digital media and the information environment they create. The aim of the research is to identify and explain the key features of the informational content published by the leading online media in Serbia, in order to determine to what extent and in what way citizens were informed about the elections in the pre-election period, but also about key social and political issues, and the ways in which the central themes were defined in the digital environment and specific forms of support to the ruling structures were shaped.

Methodology

The preliminary analysis was done using a cross-section of findings based on a weekly sample that aims to present the media image of the entire pre-election period. The week sample was made up of randomly selected days from each of the six weeks of the campaign period, as well as election day itself. However, the election day was analyzed separately, so that specific reporting during the election would not reflect on the rest of the sample.

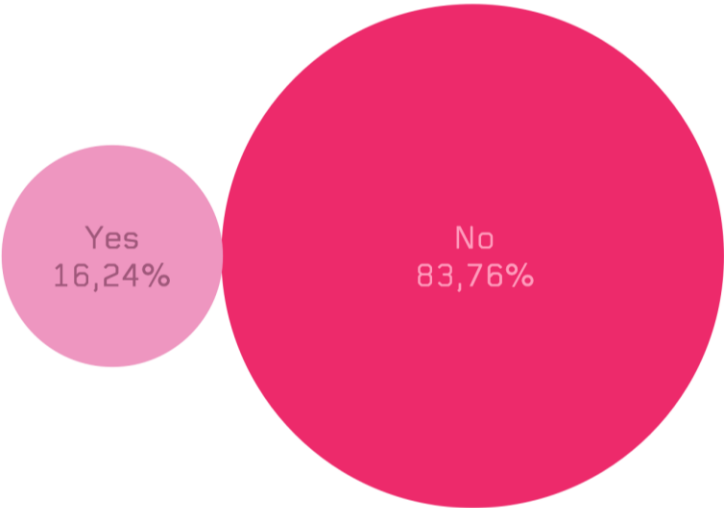
This analysis provides an overview of the digital information environment in which the campaign took place, by identifying themes related to the elections and the way in which the elections were interpreted. It also offers an overview of the overall thematic structures of key news stories, as well as the treatment of governing structures, including mapping the media that were the key generators and/or distributors of political support during the electoral process. In the report of the complete corpus of pre-election content, the results will be more comprehensive, so this analysis should be viewed only as part of a much more complex picture of the media ecosystem in Serbia.

The analysis includes the 15 most visited media portals in Serbia, according to data from [SimilarWeb](#). The sample was as follows (in order of reader size): Kurir, Blic, Mondo, Informer, N1, Nova, Novosti, Alo, B92, Telegraf, Espresso, Republika, Pink, O21 and RTS. The sample covers part of the media environment in which the majority of people in Serbia are informed on a daily basis. From each portal, central news, which are positioned at the very top of the site (between 4 and 6 texts, depending on the specifics of the appearance of the front page) was collected three times a day, at 10am, 2pm and 7pm. This sample was chosen for two reasons: (1) the decision was to treat this news sample as a counterpart to the front page of a newspaper or the beginning of a news program where the most important news from that day is summarized and (2) the aim was to determine to what extent and in what way the election campaign was positioned within daily reporting of the most visited online media in the country.

The analysis was conducted on the basis of 1404 texts published during the campaign period, as well as 234 texts which were published on election day. The research shows that the online media space in Serbia did not offer more pluralism or greater access to diverse information, but rather that the technological possibilities of the digital environment are used more to reproduce and consolidate the image that traditional media have already established, in which the ruling majority controls the bulk of the information space, while the rest remain on its margins.

Findings

In the leading online media in Serbia, the elections were a marginal topic of coverage. Among the key texts through which citizens in the digital environment were informed about issues of social and political importance, only 16% dealt with the issue of elections (Chart 1). However, the share of texts that in a narrower sense dealt with election procedures and activities of political parties, including various types of promotional content as well as articles that discredited political opponents, is even smaller - about 10%, since election communication also took place in the field other topics (security structures, media, violence, etc.). Among all the texts related to the elections, less than 30% were published as the first or central text on the front page of the portal.



Graph 1: What percentage of news included election coverage

The thematic structure of online media content also indicates that the election campaign took place in an information framework that is far from high-quality from the point of view of comprehensive information as a dimension of the democracy of the overall electoral process. Namely, the topic of elections (149 texts) was held in an information vacuum between the topics of war, tragedies and violence (396 texts) and texts about sports, entertainment, the lives of celebrities and reality personalities (374) (Graph 2).

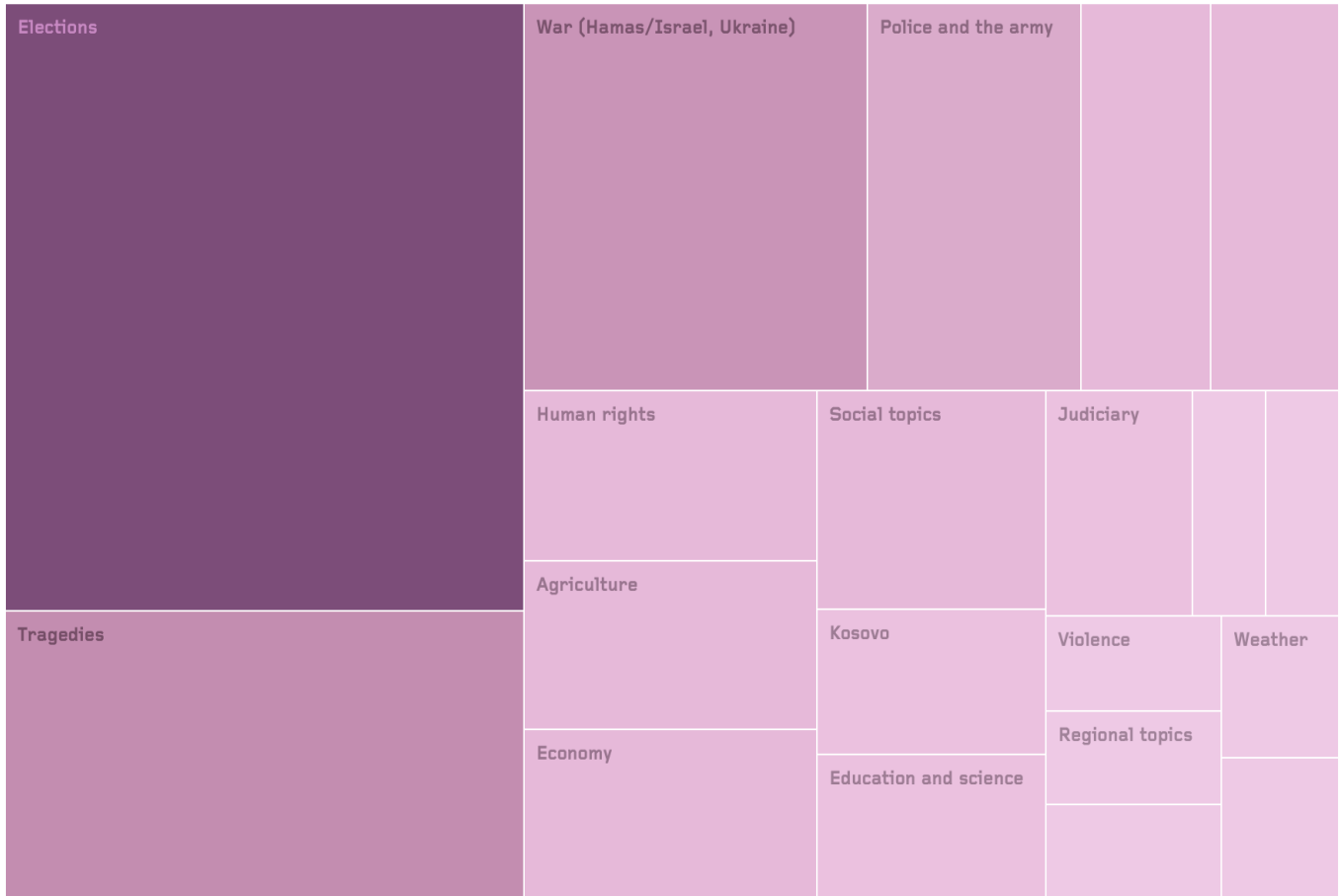


Graph 2: Dominant topics in the media during the coverage period

The online edition of Pink, which published as much as a quarter of that content (59 texts), contributed to the generation of topics related to entertainment and the lives of celebrities and reality personalities that it previously produced through its television edition. Celebrities' lives and pastime topics were also highly represented on Blic (38) and Kurir (32), while Mondo, B92 and Telegraf favored sports among content outside the sphere of socio-political information (24/19/17 texts).

The second information block, which focused on themes of violence, war and various tragedies was dominated by Informer (44), Republika (42), Telegraf (40) and RTS (37), with certain specificities. Informer mostly reported on the war in Ukraine and RTS followed events in the Middle East and the conflict in Gaza, while Telegraf and Republika focused on individual tragic events, accidents and cases of violence. (Graphs 3,4,5)

N1



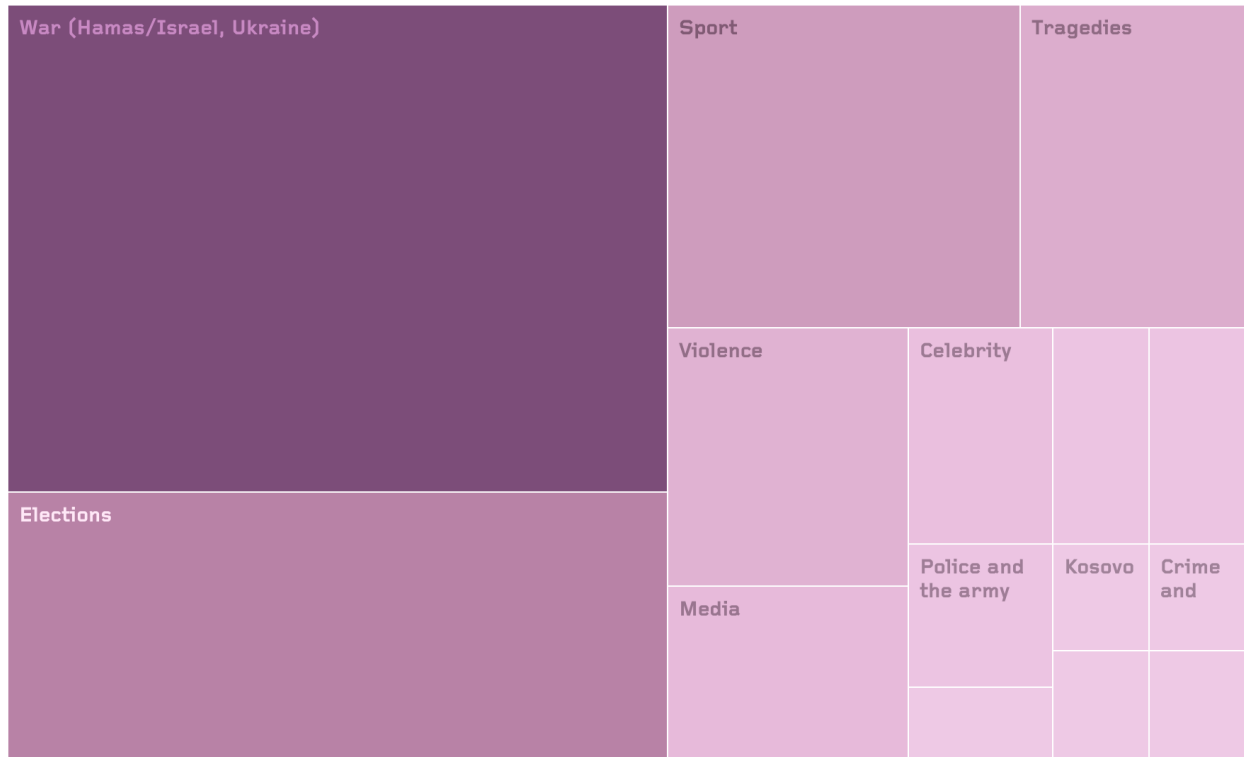
Graph 3: Thematic diversity - N1

PINK



Graph 4: Thematic diversity – Pink

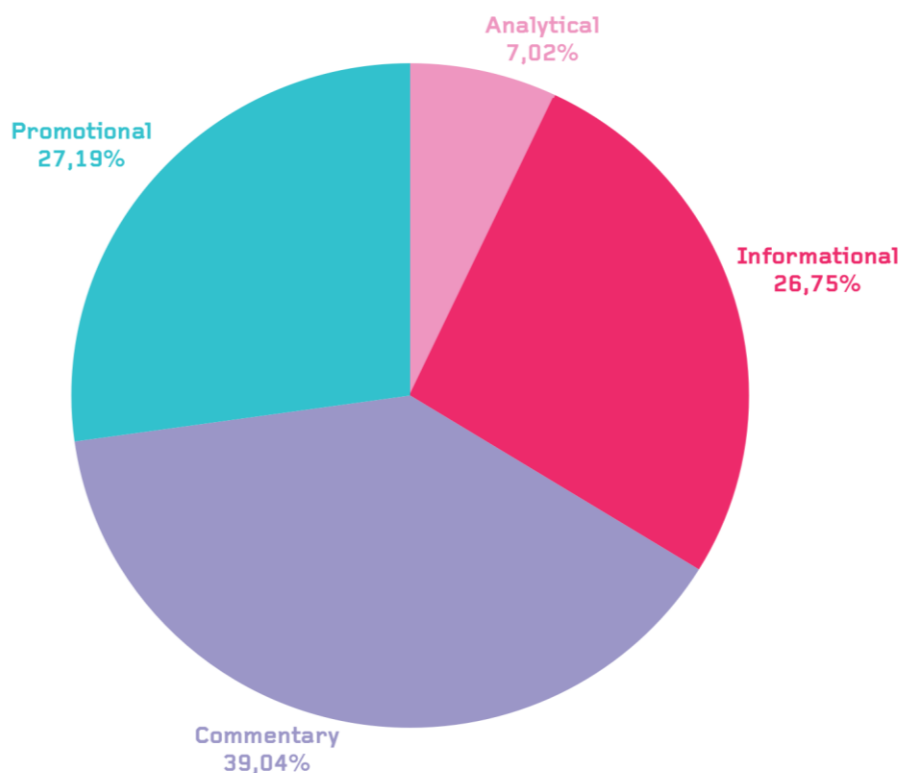
INFORMER



Graph 5: Thematic diversity - Informer

Commentary-promotional model of media election coverage

In addition to the reduced thematic spectrum in most media and the low representation of election issues, the analysis showed that the texts that referred to the elections were predominantly commentaries (39%). We are talking about textual units that contributed to the media image of the election with a direct commentary on certain events, procedures or persons, whether it was an attitude being expressed by the author of the text/media or a selected interlocutor, mostly without any informational value of the text. Together with promotional texts, which counted for more than a quarter of total texts, in more than half of their content about the elections, the media offered support, condemnation, attitudes or reviews, all to the detriment of information and extremely rare analytics. (Graph 6)



Graph 6: Types of election coverage

Commentary texts (examples):

[Rašković Ivić: Vučić is making lists of support and adorns himself with athletes and academics out of fear](#)

(021, 09.12.2023, 14h)

[WHATEVER VUČIĆ DOES, ITS NO GOOD FOR THEM Šolak's media use every second on N1 and Nova S to denigrate all the good things he does](#)

(Alo, 29.11.2023, 19h)

Promotional texts (examples):

[For the homeland, Kosovo, our children and the future! Vučić in Kraljevo: We are going to the elections to clean them up, stronger and more convincing than ever!](#)

(Informer, 24.11.2023, 19h)

[VUČIĆ PUBLISHED VIDEO: When a woman stops, the whole family stops \(VIDEO\)](#)

(Novosti, 09.12.2023, 14h)

The preliminary analysis identified specific models of promoting election lists through media content. The most glaring examples are the "news" that "Vučić published a new video on TikTok" (Figure 1), that is, that he "published a new campaign video" (Figure 2). Also, during the election campaign, the digital environment was also a platform for reproducing the privileged position of the government from traditional media, and through the "reporting" of Aleksandar Vučić's "addresses" to the "citizens of Serbia", mainly from TV PINK and TV Happy. Those texts were generally comprehensive and structured in a similar way, not according to specific information, but rather the announced campaign messages (eg: "About the attacks of the opposition media"; "Payout for citizens coming tomorrow"; "About the parents of children from Ribnikar"; "About the campaign", "About Miketić"). Portals often reported live on such television programs. For example, one front page of Novosti from the early days of the campaign contained a report on Vučić's appearance on PINK in three of the four front page news (Figure 3). Finally, the absence of selection or critical approach in the treatment of announcements coming from the ranks of the ruling structures, resulted in another model of media legitimization of political positions and attitudes. This is evidenced, for example, by the high representation of stories concerning the announcement of Aleksandar Vučić's resignation, which most media reported on in its entirety: *"I thank President Vučić for the opportunity to defend Serbs and Serbia and I ask him to remain the president of all Serbs, the last free leader in Europe, for the pride of all Serbs. I hope that in these elections we will fight for a free Serbia together"* (Informer, 03.11.2023, 2 p.m.), with the conclusion *"Long live Serbia / Long live Republika Srpska / Long live the Serbian world"*. (Kurir, 03.11.2023, 7 p.m.)

Vučić objavio novi snimak na TikToku: "Gde ima ljubavi, kuća nije tesna i za sve ima mesta" VIDEO

Predsednik Srbije Aleksandar Vučić objavio je novi video na svom nalogu @jasamaleksandar na TikToku.

ID: B92 | 5.007A, 9.12.2023. | 17:48

Članja me o Ojama Podeti



Kako se na snimku može videti, predsednik Srbije je još jednom pokazao koliko voli životinje, zbog čega je postao vlasnik još jednog psa. Do predsednika su, po svemu sudeći, stigle priče o jednom rundovu, pa je poželeo da ga upozna. Sudeći po snimku, rodila se ljubav na prvi pogled, a Vučić je napisao:

Figure 1: B92, 09.12.2023, 19h

"KAD ŽENA STANE, STALA JE CELA PORODICA"! Predsednik objavio novi predizborni spot! (VIDEO)

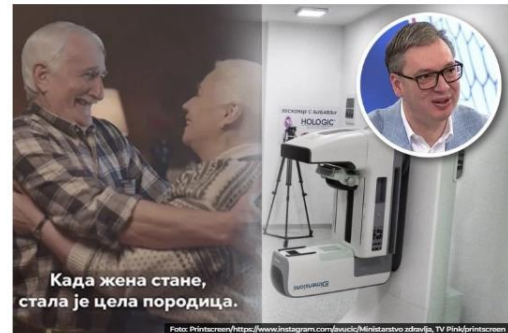
AUTOR: REPUBLIKA/1.B. VESTI | 09.12.2023 | 13:38



Pratite nas i putem Android ili iOS aplikacija



Predsednik Srbije Aleksandar Vučić, po kome nosi ime izborna lista SNS "Aleksandar Vučić - Srbija ne sme da stane", podelio je novi predizborni spot.



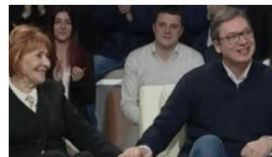
- Kada žena stane, stala je cela porodica. Zato Srbija ne sme da stane, jer ljudi su naša najveća snaga - poručio je **predsednik Aleksandar Vučić** u novom predizbornom spotu.

Figure 2: Republika, 09.12.2023, 14h



OVO SU UBICA I ŽRTVA IZ NOVOG SADA: Poznat motiv svirepog zločina

OLIVERA Š. ubila je jutros svog rođaka Slavišu D. u kući u kojoj je on boravio u Ulici Koste Hadži mlađeg u



VUČIĆ O NAPADU NA NJEGOVU MAJKU ANGELINU: Ovakve uvrede nisu viđene do

PREDSEDNIK Srbije Aleksandar Vučić prokomentarisao je u Nacionalnom dnevniku na TV Pink napade na njegovu



UŽIVO VUČIĆ NA PINKU: Predsednik o orkestriranom napadu na njegovu

PREDSEDNIK Srbije Aleksandar Vučić gost je Nacionalnog dnevnika na TV Pink.

"PRESUDA MORA DA BUDE NA SMRT" Vučić o sramnom filmu na N1: Dobili su

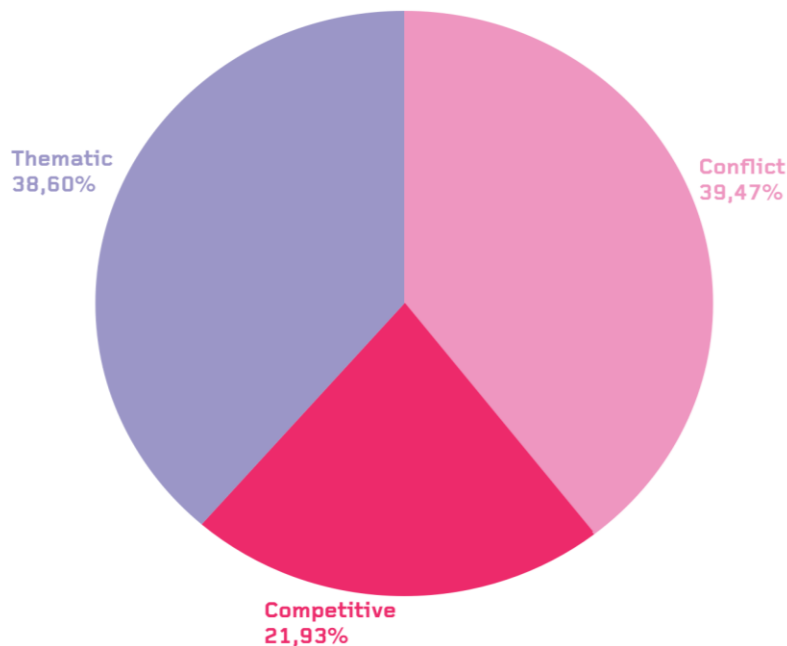
PREDSEDNIK Srbije Aleksandar Vučić komentarisao je sraman film N1 protiv njega koji je prikazan na prvi dan kampanje.

Figure 3: Novosti, 03.11.2023, 19h

No debate elections and favourable government coverage

Among the texts that referred to elections in a broader sense, preliminary findings show the absence of argumentative debate or any form of discussion in which political programs

and ideas would be presented. A debate meeting of different opinions was not identified, nor any more comprehensive reporting that would offer a balanced picture of the available political options. Politics were just not in the focus. The elections were framed as a competition, and almost twice as much as a kind of conflict. The first frame was mainly focused on the (self)representation of the "winning" option, while the conflict frame implied affairs and discrediting of political competition, often with open support for certain lists. Part of the content concerned election procedures, but also specific topics that were brought into connection with the elections, and that framework was labeled as *thematic*. (Graph 4) However, only around 12% of articles considered an analytical approach, which shows a modest reach in terms of a thematically guided "unpacking" of election topics of public importance. (Graph 7)



Graph 7: Election coverage frames

Competitive frame (examples):

[We'll win! We will beat them all and convincingly - And again they will look for alibis for their loss](#)

(Informer, 03.11.2023, 19h)

[Vučević: On December 17 the choice is between Vučić and Đilas](#)

(Telegraf, 29.11.2023, 19h)

Conflict frame (examples):

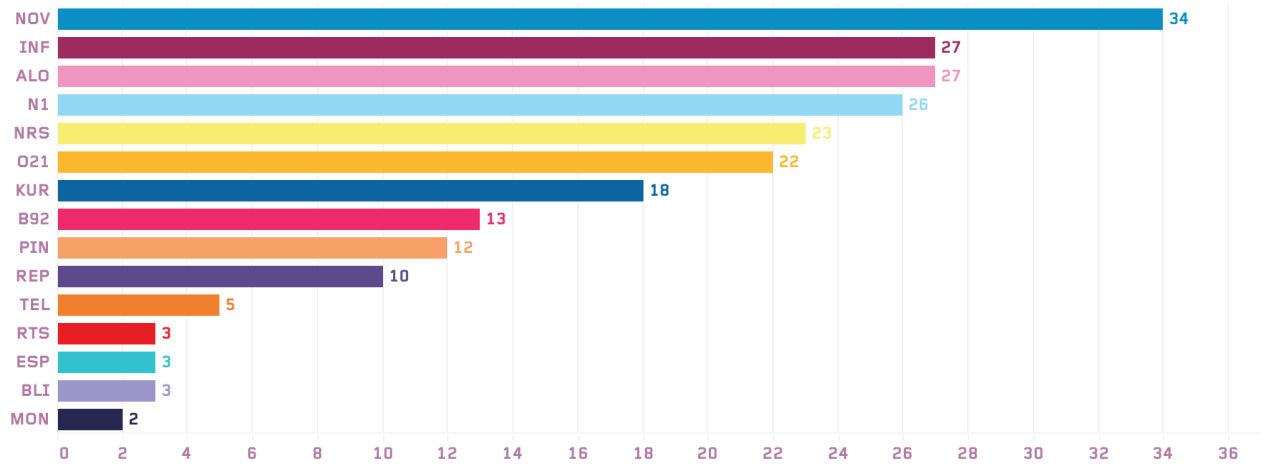
["THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT THE TRUTH, THEY'RE SETTING THE STAGE FOR POST-ELECTION CHAOS" Brnabić exposed the plans of the opposition: You heard it last night, I'm quoting them!](#)

(Alo, 13.11.2023, 10h)

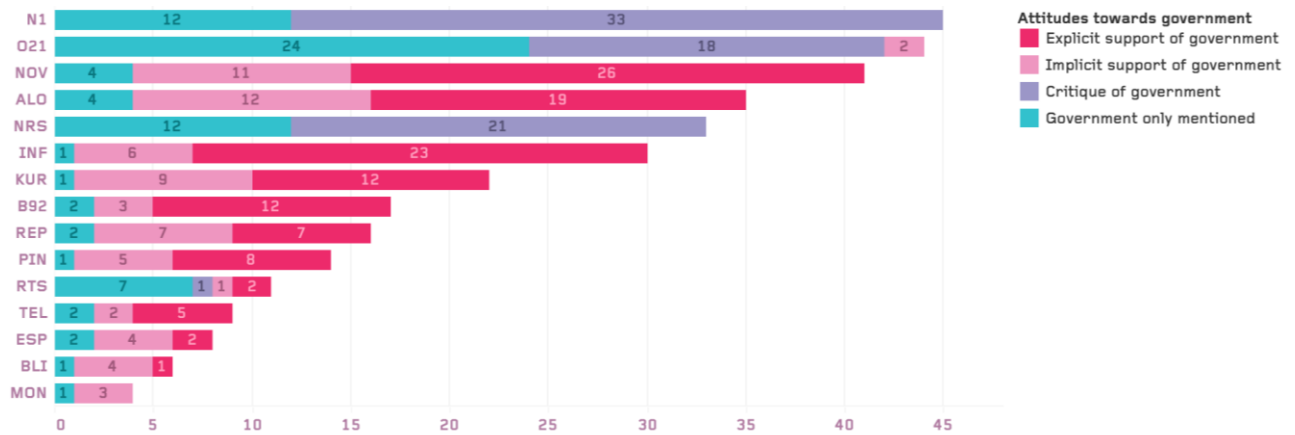
[Haters are pushing the boundaries of hatred! After Jokić, they also take a swing at Ristovski!](#)

(Informer, 09.12.2023, 14h)

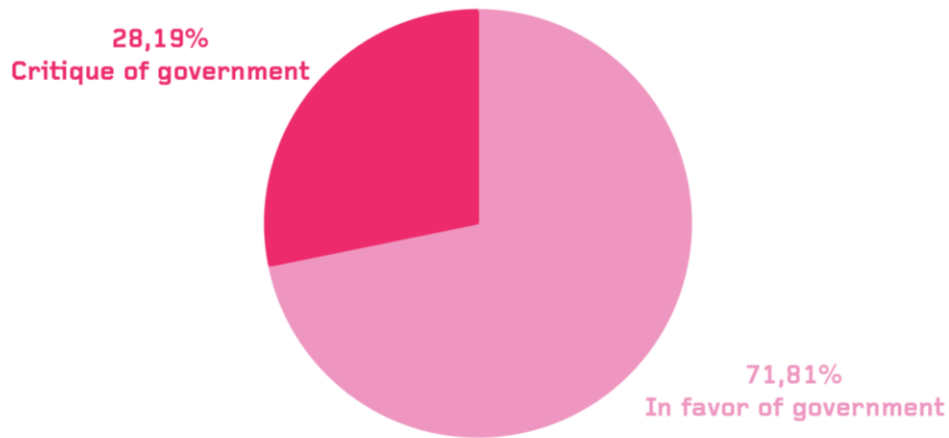
Based on preliminary findings, the news portal Novosti had the most election coverage, followed by Informer, Alo, N1, Nova.rs, and O21 (Graph 8). This finding coincides with the finding regarding the level of support for government structures, or a critical approach in reporting. Namely, regardless of whether articles were about the elections or some other topic, Novosti, Informer and Alo mostly supported the government through the selection of information, value positioning and the space designated for the expression of views, in an explicit and implicit way, while the problematization of the actions of the ruling structures is most often on portals N1, Nova.rs, and O21. (Graph 9) However, viewed as a whole, content favoring the ruling structures is more than twice as frequent as critical content. (Graph 10)



Graph 8: Frequency of election coverage by media

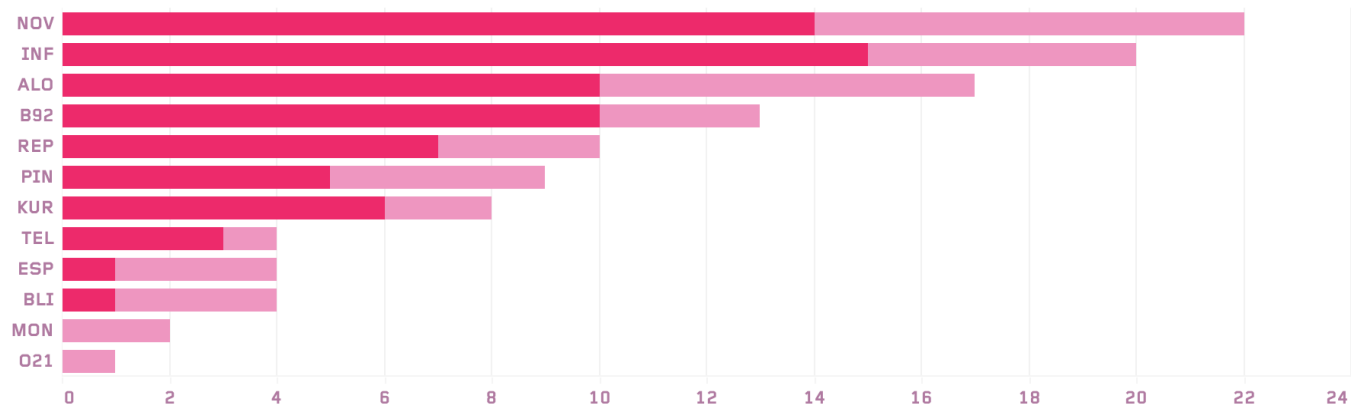


Graph 9: Treatment of government by media



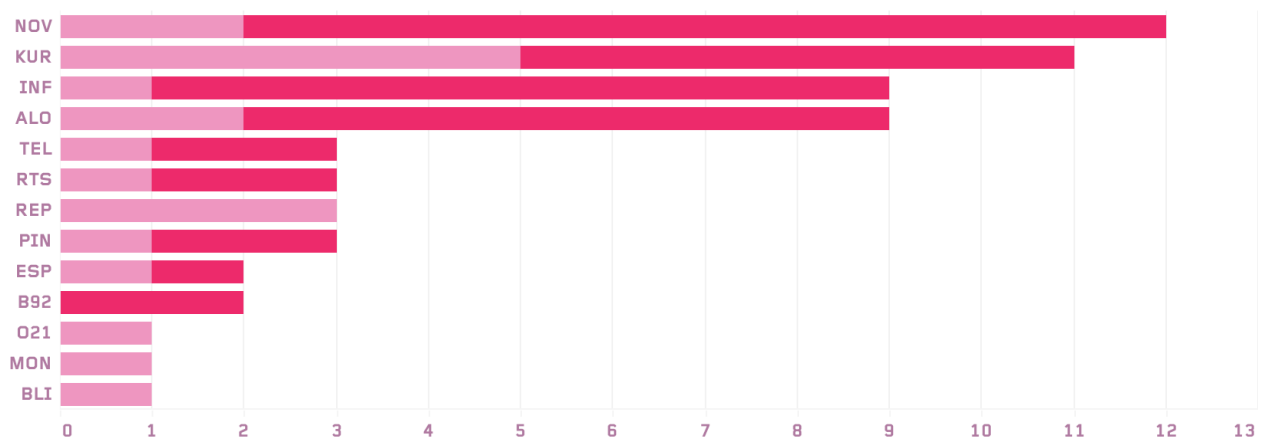
Graph 10: Treatment of government in reporting

Favoring the authorities is structured in a specific way - certain media are key generators of support: Novosti, Kurir, Informer and Alo. They are the primary sources of new articles, which other media then distribute further and make this content relevant and highly position it on the media agenda. (Graph 11) Often the same media are also in the function of distributing content that favors the government (Novosti, Informer, Alo), while some initiate less new topics, but take over existing ones (eg, B92, Republika, Pink) (Graph 12)

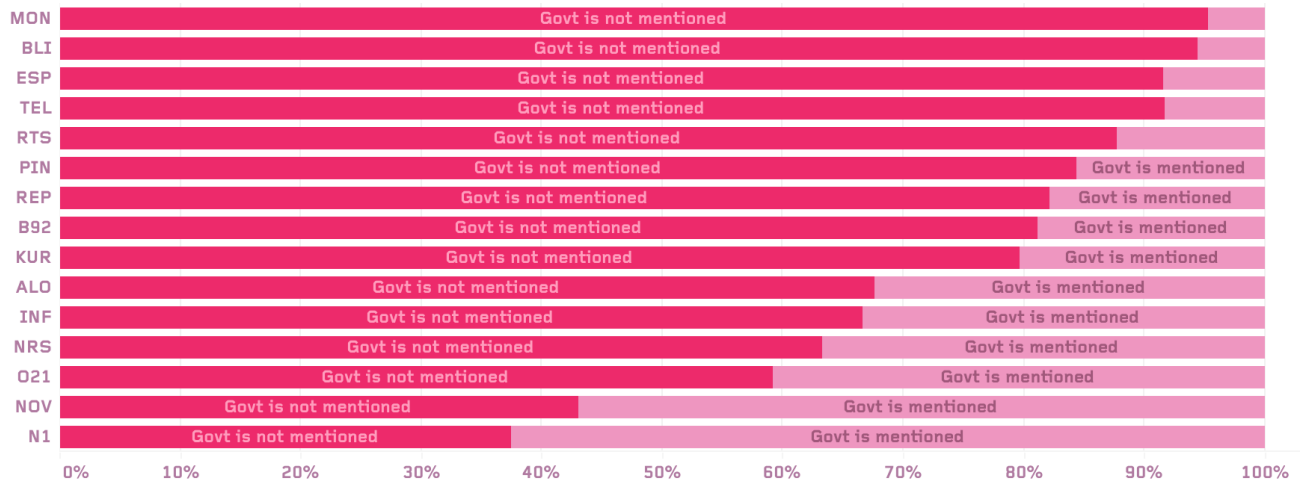


Graph 11: Distributors of support

Finally, a significant contribution of the privileged media position that the government enjoys is reflected in the fact that a significant share of media content rarely reports on the government or even mentions representatives of parties that entered the electoral process from ruling positions (Graph 13).



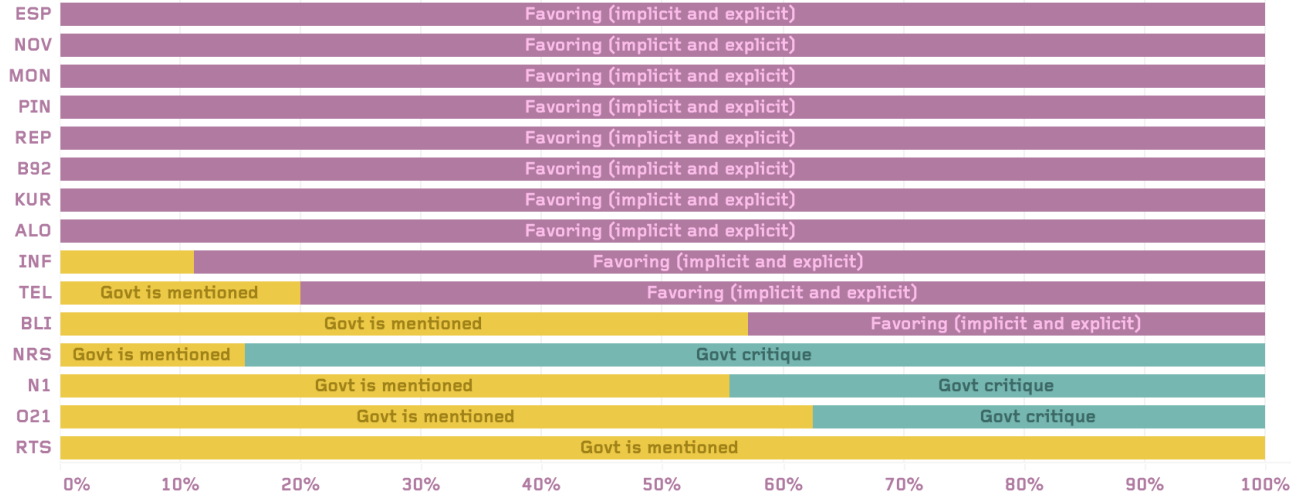
Graph 12: Generators of support



Graph 13: Share of government mentions by media

Election day

Despite current laws that order a two-day election silence on the eve of the vote itself, preliminary findings indicate a high representation of content that profiles the media as representatives of political structures that entered the election process from the position of power (30% of the texts during election day expressed implicit and explicit support to the ruling party) (Graph 14). During election day, the same amount of articles about the elections were published as in the six randomly sampled days analyzed for the purposes of the preliminary report. Among them, 14% maintained a conflicting election framework, and their initiators were Alo, B92, Informer, Kurir, Novosti and Republika.



Graph 14: Treatment of gov't on election day

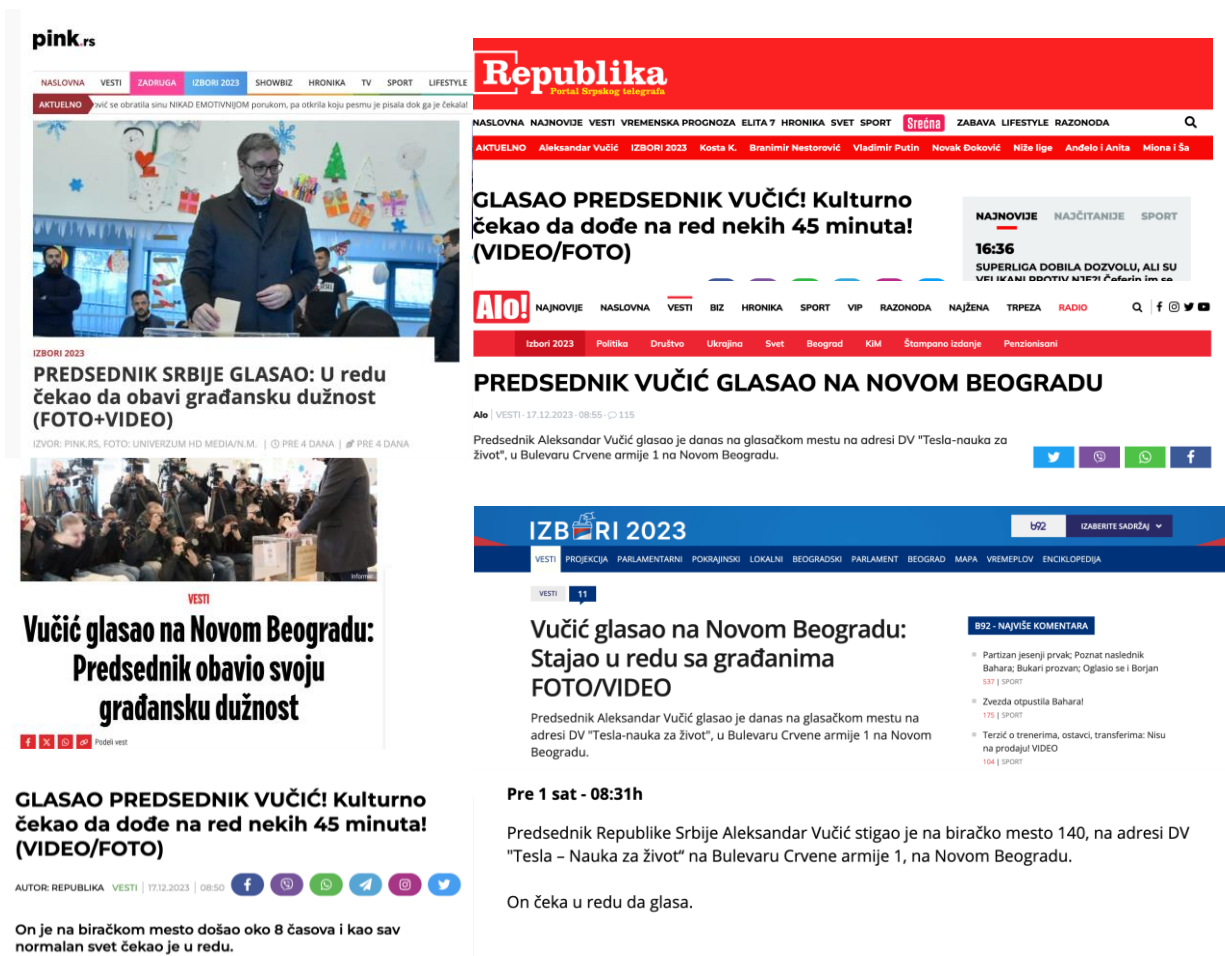
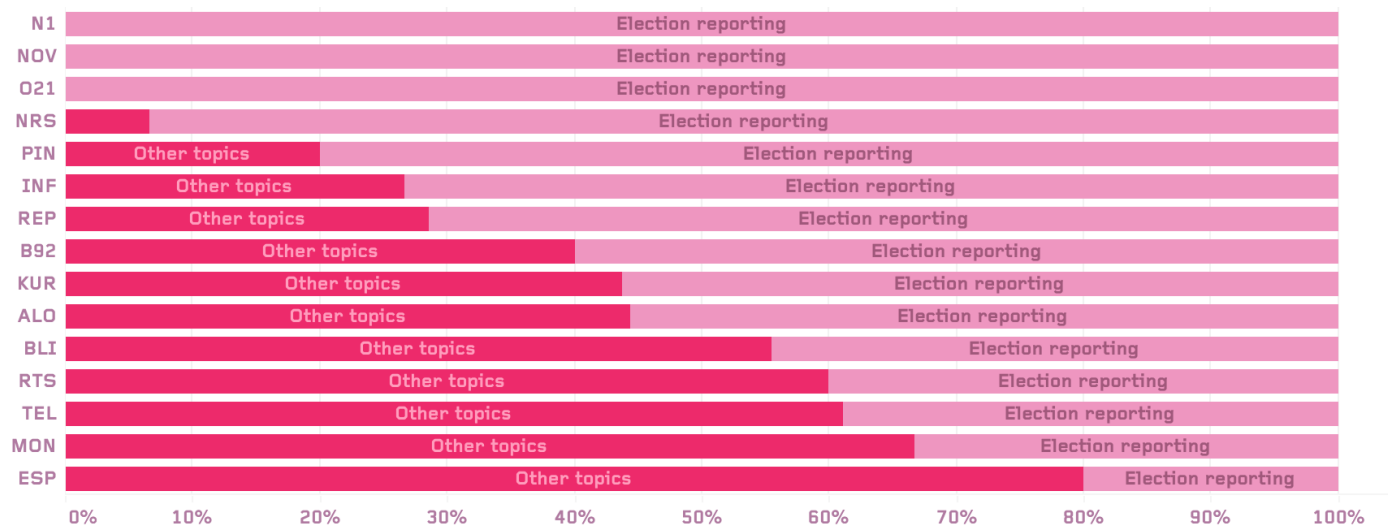


Figure 4: Collage of election day reporting

Despite the specific circumstances that characterize election day, there was no lack of an entertainment approach as part of the overall information environment that marked the entire election process. Interesting facts about the elections, such as the way politicians stood in line at the polling booths, or how pop personalities voted and where were dominantly initiated by Pink, which was then further distributed by other media.

Only in the cases of N1, Novosti and O21, whose central texts on the day of the vote exclusively provided election-themed reporting, were elections a dominant topic on December 17. (Graph 15).



Graph 14: Election reporting on election day

Conclusions

The preliminary analysis showed that the elections were a marginal topic for the leading online media, which occupy an increasingly important place as a source of information for the citizens of Serbia. Elections, as well as other topics of public importance, were sidelined from the media agenda by two solid thematic blocs around which the overall digital information environment in the country is shaped. One is built on stories about wars, violence and tragedies, coinciding with a thematic block dedicated to entertainment, leisure, celebrity life and sports. The main distributors of entertainment, which in more than half of the analyzed cases included reality shows, are in most cases also its creators. In the vacuum between these two poles, there was no space for information or discussion regarding political options which citizens were called to vote for on December 17.

Favoring the government happened both implicitly and explicitly, and in some media, it is an integral part of the way of reporting on most topics that concern both internal political issues and international ones (such as the country's cooperation with foreign partners). Also, the government's privileged media position is maintained by completely excluding topics related to political activities of its representatives, decisions and consequences they have for citizens and society. Finally, with a critical approach that was only mapped on the margins, the data showed that at the time of the local, provincial and parliamentary elections, the digital information space was highly controlled and favored by the ruling majority.