

The Framing Potential of Headlines: Student Protests in Serbia 1996–1997 and 2024–2025

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Abstract

This article analyzes how Serbian print media framed student protests during two periods of political contention, 1996–1997 and 2024–2025. Drawing on a comparative content analysis of 3,042 newspaper articles from state-aligned and independent outlets, the study examines protest visibility, evaluative orientation, and headline language. The findings reveal a high degree of continuity in editorial framing strategies across both periods. State-aligned coverage consistently minimized protest visibility and emphasized disruption and public order, while independent newspapers framed student protests as legitimate civic action, foregrounding protest demands and institutional accountability. The study further demonstrates that ostensibly neutral reporting can function as a strategy of de-politicization in polarized media environments. By combining quantitative indicators with framing theory, the article contributes to research on media and protest in competitive authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: student protests; media framing; print media; Serbia; protest visibility; evaluative orientation; headline analysis.

Introduction

Although the student protests of 2024–2026 may appear unprecedented in their scope, persistence, and capacity to mobilise citizens across diverse social groups, they belong to a long-standing tradition of student and civic activism in Serbia. This tradition can be traced back to the mid-1960s and reached its first major peak with the 1968 student demonstrations against the Yugoslav communist leadership. Subsequent waves of protest steadily reemerged

during the 1990s, amid the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the economic crisis, and the consolidation of authoritarian rule under Slobodan Milošević.¹

Within this historical trajectory, the protests of the winter of 1996–1997 represent one of the most significant episodes of civic and student mobilisation in Serbia. Triggered by evidence of electoral fraud following the local elections of 3–17 November, these protests initially focused on the annulment of opposition victories by the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Altered electoral records, first publicly exposed in Niš, provided tangible proof of irregularities and served as a catalyst for mass demonstrations organised by the opposition coalition Together (*Zajedno*) as well as by independent student movements.

On 22 November 1996, students at the University of Belgrade launched their own protest, initiated by a hunger strike of a group of students from Niš (*Naša Borba*, 22 November 1996), followed by daily marches, street performances, and symbolic actions (*Naša Borba*, 23 November 1996). The movement quickly expanded to other universities across Serbia, transforming academic institutions into focal points of civic resistance. While opposition parties primarily framed the protests around electoral integrity, students articulated a broader set of demands, including the resignation of University of Belgrade rector Dragutin Veličković, the defence of university autonomy, increased public funding for education, and freedom of expression. Importantly, they explicitly declared independence from political party structures.

Public support for the student protests grew steadily. Institutions such as the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) and later Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church publicly expressed support. At the same time, the regime attempted to counter the mobilisation through media delegitimation and orchestrated counter-protests. A pro-government rally held on 24 December 1996 resulted in violent clashes; estimates of attendance diverged sharply, with *Politika* reporting 500,000 participants (25 December 1996) and *Naša Borba* citing closer to 100,000 (25 December 1996). One protester was killed and hundreds injured. International pressure and an investigation by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) eventually forced the regime to recognise the opposition's electoral victories. Although the student protests continued until March 1997, they confronted not only electoral fraud but the broader apparatus of the Milošević regime,

¹ For an introduction to student movements and social movements in Serbia and Yugoslavia in general between 1968 and the 2000s, see the volume: Tomić and Atanacković, 2009. The literature dealing with the 1996–1997 student protests from 1997 onwards naturally shows similarities with the development of current research. The first articles that appeared in the months following the protests lack analytical depth, but they describe first-hand sociological and anthropological observations, often by researchers who participated in the protests (see Gorunović, Erdei 1997). After this “first wave” of research, theory and methodology diversified. Researchers from numerous disciplines, including sociology, history, anthropology and political science, made an important contribution to understanding the events. Prošić-Dvornić (2000) focuses on elements of ritual, especially carnival, in the practices of the protesters. She identifies “trademarks” of the protests such as whistling, noise and egg throwing together with humor and satire as the central symbols of the protests (Prošić-Dvornić 2000, 136–137). Steinberg (2004) discusses the use of popular music to express student demands, while Jansen analyzes motifs of victimhood, underdogs, and rebellion in protests 1996–1997 and 1999 (Jansen 2000). Petrović Trifunović opted for a discourse analysis, using the daily newspapers *Naša Borba* and the weekly *Vreme* as primary sources. First, she briefly compared the approach of pro-government and opposition media to the coverage of the protests, followed by a statistical analysis that explained the structure of the participants, including age, education, expectations and attitudes towards the opposition leaders (Petrović Trifunović 2017, 480). She demonstrated that the reports published in *Naša Borba* and *Vreme* mostly did not take a neutral stance, but strongly supported the protests, which is most evident in the wording used to describe both the protesters and the government or counter-demonstrators. Petrović Trifunović showed a dichotomy that was often presented in oppositions typical of postcolonial criticism, such as urban-rural, civilized-barbarian, European-Balkan, progressive-backward, often focusing on the assumed physical characteristics of the participants.

including pro-government media, political intimidation, and institutional repression (Antić 2006).²

Nearly three decades later, Serbia witnessed another major wave of student-led protests. On 1 November 2024, a newly renovated section of the canopy at Novi Sad's central train station collapsed, killing sixteen people. While state officials initially denied responsibility, investigations by independent journalists revealed that the renovation had been carried out without the necessary permits (*NI*, 2 November 2024). The tragedy thus exposed systemic patterns of corruption, negligence, and weakened institutional accountability. In response, students across the country mobilised, first through commemorative marches and subsequently through nationwide protests articulating demands for responsibility, transparency, and institutional reform.

A silent protest march held in Novi Sad on 5 November 2024 escalated when a masked group attacked the town hall, prompting President Aleksandar Vučić³ to publicly condemn the protesters and attribute responsibility to them (*Danas*, 6 November 2024). Internal disagreements within the opposition, including debates over whether protests should be centralised in Belgrade, initially slowed mobilisation (*Danas*, 8 November 2024). Momentum was renewed on 25 November, following an attack on demonstrators by members of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) during a 15-minute silence,⁴ which led students at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade to initiate a building blockade. In the weeks that followed, the protests expanded nationwide, encompassing universities, secondary schools, and broad segments of civil society, while students continued to resist attempts at party-political co-optation.

Large-scale demonstrations marked the subsequent months, including the rally at Slavija Square on 22 December 2024, attended by more than 100,000 people (*Arhiv javnih skupova*, 22 December 2024), the blockade of Mostarska interchange on 10 January 2025, and the 24-hour occupation of Autokomanda on 27 January. The protest titled "15 for 15," held in Belgrade on 15 March 2025, drew an estimated 300,000 participants (*Danas*, 17 March 2025). During the event, panic erupted following a sudden loud sound, later linked in public

² Čedomir Antić was one of the leaders of the 1996–1997 student protests and a critic of the leading party. Interestingly, his media appearances, whether on television or in written media, are today openly in favor of the Serbian Progressive Party and against the student protests. He regularly writes columns for the daily newspaper *Politika* in which he criticizes the student protests (see e.g. *Politika*, 26 January 2025).

³ To understand Aleksandar Vučić's rule since 2012, we should take a closer look at his political career before 2012. He joined the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which was led by the later convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj. In 1998, Vučić's he became Minister of Information in a parliament formed by SRS, Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and Mirjana (Mira) Marković's Yugoslav United Left (JUL). During this time, a notorious law was put into effect, according to which all media "working against the government" had to pay a heavy fine within 24 hours, which led to the shutdown of a number of independent media outlets. Vučić was a member of the SRS until 2008, when together with the former Deputy Prime Minister in Milošević's Serbia Tomislav Nikolić decided to found a new party - the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) - and cut ties with Šešelj, who was still in prison at the time. The rise of the SNS began in 2012 after the parliamentary and presidential elections that took place that spring. After fairly close election results, its presidential candidate Tomislav Nikolić won against the democrat Boris Tadić, and the Progressive Party formed a parliamentary majority together with the SPS. The elections were marked by a now historic statement by the then SPS leader Ivica Dačić: "Maybe in Serbia we don't know who will be the president, but I think we know very well who will be the prime minister." ("Možda se u Srbiji ne zna ko će biti predsednik, ali mislim da se dobro zna ko će biti premijer") (*NI*, 6 April 2022). At the moment it seemed that the biggest winner of the election was indeed the SPS, but in retrospect the elections were the beginning of the rise of the SNS and one man in particular - Aleksandar Vučić.

⁴ The "15-minute silence" demonstration, held from 11:52 to 12:07 to commemorate the exact time of the canopy collapse, was introduced prior to this incident, but it is then when the ritual became a major symbol of the protest movement. It was soon adopted by schools and universities, but also more than 200 cities and villages across the country.

discourse to the alleged deployment of sonic devices. Although government officials initially denied the existence of such technology, subsequent evidence and insider testimony suggested that sonic devices had indeed been procured and distributed (*Danas*, 20 March 2025). These developments generated new protest demands, including calls for independent investigation and accountability.⁵ By spring 2025, the protests were marked by the emergence of local assemblies (*zborovi*), road blockades, and decentralised actions, particularly following the Vidovdan protests on 28 June.

What connects these two protest waves⁶ 1996–1997 and 2024–2025 are not only the central role of students as political actors, but also the role of the media in framing their actions. Serbian newspapers, from state-aligned dailies such as *Politika* to independent⁷ outlets such as *Naša Borba* and *Danas*, did not merely report on protest events; they actively shaped how protests were interpreted, legitimised, or discredited. Recognising media as an actor in protest dynamics rather than a neutral observer forms the conceptual foundation of this study and motivates the comparative analysis that follows. By linking historical and contemporary student protests in Serbia, this study demonstrates how media framing mediates the relationship between civic mobilisation and political authority in Southeast Europe's increasingly constrained democratic environments.

⁵ Considering that the student protests began in November 2024, without a clear picture of how they would develop and when and how they would eventually end, it can be assumed that the literature on the subject is still scarce. Between November 2024 and August 2025, the time we are writing this article, there was simply not enough time for a more in-depth analysis, bearing in mind that the process of editing and publishing takes time, even if a paper or research has been produced. The result is a few mostly shorter texts describing the current state of the protests and the factors surrounding them. Pollozhani and Bieber (2025) briefly mention the ongoing student protests in Serbia and focus their analysis on the protests and their outcomes in North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in the last decade. The paper gives an overview of activism and social movements, highlighting crucial similarities and differences over the years, while listing the main characteristics of each movement, including demands, time span, outcomes, etc. Pollozhani and Bieber attempt to analyze the factors that influence the outcome of social movements, including (1) the learning process between the different waves of protest, (2) the social base of the movements, (3) the alliances with political parties, (4) the demands of the protest, and (5) the international support (Pollozhani, Bieber 2025). In a more direct analysis of the 2024–2025 student protests, which incorporates Lotman's concept of cultural explosion, Damčević (2025) analyzes popular expressions such as “pumpaj” and “ćaci” and shows how expressions become symbols and transform, gradually changing their meaning or falling into oblivion and being replaced by others, revealing their unpredictable dynamics. Beširević (2025), on the other hand, acknowledges the difficulties of writing a text about the ongoing student protests, pointing out that the text was written in February 2025, but at the time of publication it is not yet clear how the protests will develop. She gives an overview of how student plenums work and comments on the EU's reactions, comparing them to the protests in Slovakia and Georgia. Knežević (2025) opted for an autoethnographic essay in which she described her first-hand experience of participating in protests, plenums and other student activities, but apart from a very personal point of view, the essay did not offer a deeper analysis. A first-hand experience is also provided by an interview with Dubravka Stojanović, conducted by Ivana Dinić. In her answers, Stojanović bases her point of view primarily on her research work, but also on her own participation in the protests in the 1990s. She draws a brief comparison, focusing on the demands, the socio-political situation and external factors such as support from the EU and the US. Stojanović emphasizes that an important difference is that the ongoing student protests do not have a formal leader, which makes it difficult for the pro-government media to use already known mechanisms to discredit individuals and thus the entire social movement. Krsto Lazarević wrote more extensively on political violence (Lazarević 2025, 51–53).

⁶ Other protests also played crucial roles in challenging state policy and shaping public discourse in the past. The 2006 protests, while less prominent in public memory, opposed the commercialization of higher education and rising tuition fees. Organized through general assemblies and rejecting party affiliations, the movement emphasized direct democracy and solidarity (Kurepa 2007). Its critique of neoliberal reforms—summed up in slogans like “Knowledge is not for sale” (*Znanje nije roba*) (Kurepa 2007, 10) – resonates with the anti-systemic tone of the 2024–2025 protests. From 2014 onward, Serbia witnessed a broader wave of civic mobilizations. The illegal demolition on Hercegovačka Street in 2016 led to the founding of the citizens' initiative Don't let Belgrade d(r)own (*Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*), protesting against corruption and non-transparent urban policy. Subsequent years saw large demonstrations under the banners “1 of 5 Million” (2018–2020), anti-lockdown and anti-lithium-mining protests (2020–2022), and, most recently, the “Serbia Against Violence” movement in 2023, sparked by two mass shootings and directed against state inaction, media violence, and political impunity.

⁷ The adjective “independent” is used to describe a media outlet that is independent from the mainstream, pro-government media, and is not state-aligned. We, however, recognize that every media outlet has its political agenda, and thereby is not independent of any political influence.

The main difference between the media representation of the two waves of protests lies in the emergence and growing importance of social media and digital platforms. While television and print media were the main sources of information in 1996–1997, we are seeing a shift toward social media and digital platforms in 2024–2025. Apart from a few television programs and podcasts, the student movement communicated almost exclusively via social media, which enabled it to communicate directly with the public. However, in 2024–2025, a significant portion of the population still consumes traditional media, especially older people and those in rural areas, which is why we still consider print media to be relevant and suitable for framing analysis.

In the contemporary Serbian context, media capture operates less through direct censorship than through structural alignment between political power and media economics. Control is exercised through regulatory influence, preferential access to state resources, and the creation of financial dependencies that shape editorial incentives. This produces a media environment in which pro-government narratives are often reproduced without requiring overt coercion. When large segments of mass-audience media consistently reproduce government-aligned narratives, the framing of protest movements acquires heightened political significance, as it directly shapes the perceived legitimacy of dissent and the boundaries of acceptable political contestation.

Object of the Study, Methodology and Theory

Building on established scholarship on framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000) and media gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), as well as the concept of “threatened orders” (Frie, Kohl, and Meier 2018), this article examines how Serbian print media rendered student protests publicly legible across two distinct historical moments. The analysis focuses on how newspapers diagnosed the causes of protest, attributed responsibility, and emphasised either protest demands or the perceived threatened social order.

The central research question guiding this article is: How did selected Serbian daily newspapers frame student protests in the periods 1996–1997 and 2024–2025 in terms of visibility, evaluative orientation, and headline language, and how did these framings differ between state-aligned and independent outlets?

Based on previous research on Serbian media during periods of political contention (Prošić-Dvornić 2000; Petrović and Trifunović 2017), the study advances three empirically testable expectations. First, it is expected that state-aligned media will grant student protests lower visibility, reflected in a smaller number of articles and less prominent placement. Second, state-aligned outlets are expected to frame protests predominantly in neutral or negative terms, while independent newspapers will display higher levels of positive evaluative orientation. Third, headline language is expected to differ systematically, with independent media foregrounding student demands, accountability, and institutional responsibility, and pro-government media emphasising disruption, public order, and the consequences of protest for everyday life.

The study does not aim to provide a comprehensive mapping of the Serbian media landscape in either period. Instead, it adopts a comparative design based on selected print outlets guided by two criteria: (1) their relevance and reach within the Serbian public sphere during the respective protest periods, and (2) their positioning along the spectrum from state-aligned to independent media.

As journalist Safeta Biševac,⁸ who reported directly on the 1996–1997 protests for *Naša Borba*, emphasises that the media landscape of the 1990s was highly polarised yet institutionally fragile. While major national dailies such as *Politika* and *Večernje novosti* were firmly controlled by the regime of Slobodan Milošević, a small but influential independent press sphere persisted. A central case within this sphere was the daily *Borba*, which had gained recognition as an independent newspaper in the early 1990s under Prime Minister Ante Marković. In 1994, however, the Milošević regime reasserted control over *Borba* through legal and police intervention, effectively dismantling its editorial autonomy. This intervention directly led to the founding of *Naša Borba*, a newly established independent daily run by former *Borba* journalists.⁹ In contrast, the contemporary media environment is characterised by a proliferation of digital outlets and platforms, yet print newspapers such as *Danas* and *Politika* continue to function as agenda-setting actors and reference points within broader public discourse.

The weekly press landscape in the 1990s was somewhat more diverse but equally shaped by political influence. The weekly *Nedeljne Informative Novine* (NIN), historically affiliated with *Politika*, underwent a gradual process of editorial emancipation in the mid-1990s following internal struggles over control, resulting in increasingly critical coverage of the regime. Other weeklies such as *Vreme* maintained a consistently oppositional stance, while publications like *Duga* combined critical voices with contributions sympathetic to Milošević, including diary entries by his wife, Mira Marković. Magazines such as *Svet* and *Osmica* represented attempts to exert influence over the weekly press but had comparatively limited reach. Although these weeklies are not included in the quantitative dataset, they form an important part of the broader media context in which daily newspaper coverage was produced.

Although the internet already played a role during the 1996–1997 protests – particularly as a tool for addressing international audiences through student-run websites¹⁰ hosted abroad (Tomić 2009, 203f) – this study deliberately limits its empirical focus to print media. This decision serves analytical comparability across periods, even as it acknowledges that print outlets occupied different positions within the broader media ecosystem in the 1990s and the 2020s. Accordingly, the findings of this study speak specifically to print media framing strategies rather than to the entirety of media representations or public opinion formation.

Considering the above, for the 1996–1997 protests, the analysis focuses on *Naša Borba* as the leading independent daily newspaper and *Politika* as a historically influential, state-aligned outlet. For the 2024–2025 protests, the study examines *Danas* – established in 1997 and widely recognised as a central independent daily – and *Politika*,¹¹ allowing for

⁸ When we started working on this topic, we found the media landscape in the 1990s somewhat confusing and decided to seek clarification. Safeta Biševac was kind enough to answer all our questions and give us an overview of the media landscape at the time, but also to provide the most valuable first-hand information that can only come from contemporary witnesses. We would like to thank her for her knowledgeable and friendly support.

⁹ Personal communication with Safeta Biševac, 2024.

¹⁰ The website address is unfortunately not functional anymore: <https://galeb.etf.bg.ac.yu/~protest96/>

¹¹ In contemporary media environment, the most significant media dichotomy would not be between *Danas* and *Politika*, but rather *Danas/N1* vs. *Informer/Pink*. Although *Informer* is a more relevant media than *Politika*, we found *Naša Borba/Danas* and *Politika* to be more suitable for a comparison. They operate by daily political reporting, while aiming for an earnest political analysis, although with opposite editorial policies. Tabloids, on the other hand, aim primarily for sensationalism, and report not only on daily politics, but also on topics such as crime and scandals. The state aligned media today is similarly, if not more, privileged, as it was the case in the 1990s. The media outlets are, at the same time, operating on different platforms – traditional media, such as print and television – and digital media platforms, be it social networks or online outlets. The state aligned media, in this sense, has a monopoly over television, including national frequencies and cable network. As for print media and online outlets, the state aligned media is simply more numerous.

longitudinal comparison of editorial strategies within the same newspaper across different political contexts. The sample for analysis consisted of two time periods: November to March 1996–1997 and the same period 2024–2025. Although the protests in 2024–2025 are still ongoing, we decided to take approximately the same time period (November to March) so that the analysis could be conducted in comparison.¹²

The contemporary media environment reflects a transformation of pre-existing structural weaknesses into a more consolidated and systemically embedded model of political influence. The result is a media system in which pluralism formally persists, while structural asymmetries increasingly shape agenda-setting power.

The analysed dataset consists of a total of 3,042 newspaper articles documenting student protests in Serbia across two distinct periods: 1,555 articles from 1996–1997 and 1,487 from 2024–2025. It includes all articles covering the protests, regardless of whether this was their main topic. The most frequently represented newspaper in the dataset is *Danas* (1,268 articles), followed by *Naša Borba* (1,130) and *Politika* (425 articles from 1996–1997 and 219 from 2024–2025).

The dataset was structured using a total of 15 variables, some of which are relevant for quantitative analysis and others for qualitative reference: newspaper name; newspaper type; time period; article title; article date; author; secondary author; article type; sentiment; page number; section; word count; keywords; notes; and archive folder.

We identified three basic categories that would help us better understand reporting on student protests from a quantitative perspective: number of articles, sentiment, and most common words. From these three categories, it is possible to identify empirically observable indicators of framing processes as conceptualized by Benford and Snow (2000), particularly with regard to evaluative orientation, attribution of relevance, and the visibility of protest claims.

The metadata was processed in Excel and Python, whereas the volume and sentiment of articles were further analysed with Excel, and the Python programming language was employed for the more complex textual analysis. Python was used to process the headline text, perform lemmatisation to address Serbian grammar features, and calculate the frequency of words. This automated counting allowed for the efficient identification of the most salient lexical items across the entire dataset. While the first part of the analysis was mostly conducted using pivot charts, for the second part we analysed the most common words in newspaper headlines and therefore had to be careful regarding Serbian language and its grammar features. The procedure involved tokenisation, conversion to lowercase, and the removal of punctuation, numbers, and common stopwords to reduce noise. The lemmatisation was applied to reduce different grammatical forms of the same word to a common base form.

¹² After Milošević's fall, the media landscape did not improve suddenly, but rather underwent a lengthy process that only began in the early 2000s. Serbian radio and television infamously waged a brutal campaign against then-Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, who was assassinated in 2003, thereby continuing to demonstrate its allegiance to the former regime. The media landscape began to change slowly but remained largely clientelistic and pro-government. The privatization process of state media did not proceed as smoothly and quickly as planned, limiting the independence of the media. The laws designed to guarantee media freedom and the safety of journalists were not passed in time, which allowed for a rapid takeover of the media as soon as Vučić came to power. According to reports by Freedom House (Freedom House 2026), political and democratic rights in Serbia have been steadily eroded since Vučić came to power, resulting in Serbia being classified as a hybrid regime in 2024 (Freedom House 2024). Media freedom is also steadily declining: in 2011/2012 report (Reporters Without Borders 2012), Serbia ranked 80th out of 180 countries according to Reporters Without Borders, and in 2025 it ranked 96th (Reporters Without Borders 2025).

This step was necessary to avoid artificial inflation of word frequencies resulting from case, number, or tense variation.

Each article headline was manually coded for its overall evaluative orientation toward the student protests and categorised as positive, negative, or neutral. The analysis focuses on headlines because they function as central framing devices that shape first impressions and guide reader interpretation, often independently of the full article text (Bonyadi and Samuel 2013; Reis et al. 2015, 357).

To ensure consistency, sentiment categories were defined using explicit decision rules. Headlines were coded as positive if they explicitly legitimised student protests, emphasised public support, framed protest demands as justified, or foregrounded accountability and institutional responsibility. Negative headlines were those that delegitimised protest actions, emphasised disruption, disorder, violence, or external manipulation, or attributed responsibility for conflict to protesters. Neutral headlines reported protest-related events without explicit evaluative markers or normative judgments. In cases where the evaluative orientation could not be reliably inferred from the headline alone, the sentiment coding was informed by a brief reading of the article text in order to clarify unclear framing.

Given the highly politicised nature of protest reporting, particular attention was paid to ambiguous cases. When evaluative intent was not clearly discernible, headlines were coded as neutral. This conservative coding strategy was chosen to reduce the risk of overstating polarisation and to avoid attributing evaluative meaning where it could not be reliably justified.

Manual coding was employed due to the poor quality of scanned archival material from the 1996–1997 period, which rendered optical character recognition (OCR) tools and automated sentiment analysis unreliable. Focusing on headlines therefore ensures comparability across time while concentrating on the most visible and editorially controlled element of newspaper coverage. In addition, automated sentiment analysis tools for the Serbian language remain limited in their ability to capture context-dependent meaning, political insinuation, and irony (Liu 2012, 90). Manual coding therefore allowed for greater linguistic sensitivity and contextual awareness.

At the same time, the authors acknowledge the limits of headline-based lexical analysis. Word frequency counts do not capture syntactic relations, metaphorical usage, irony, or evaluative meaning expressed through adjective–noun combinations or narrative context. Consequently, the headline analysis does not aim to exhaustively reconstruct framing processes but to provide a systematic and comparable indicator of lexical emphasis across a large corpus. Interpretation of headline vocabulary is therefore confined to aggregate patterns and is integrated with other indicators – such as visibility and evaluative orientation – in the Results section.

The authors acknowledge that sentiment coding conducted by a single coding unit entails limitations with regard to reproducibility. For this reason, sentiment is treated not as a precise measurement of tone but as a heuristic indicator of editorial orientation. Its analytical value lies primarily in comparative patterns across newspapers and time periods rather than in absolute proportions. To mitigate this limitation, sentiment analysis is interpreted alongside article volume and headline vocabulary, allowing converging indicators to support the identification of framing strategies.

This combined approach enables a systematic yet cautious assessment of evaluative differences in protest coverage while remaining transparent about methodological constraints. Although sentiment coding cannot capture the full complexity of framing within complete articles, it provides a comparable indicator of editorial orientation across a large corpus when interpreted alongside article volume and headline vocabulary.

Capturing Framing in a Form of Data

Framing theory emphasises that social movements and protest events are not merely reported but interpreted through selective patterns of emphasis, evaluation, and attribution of meaning (Benford and Snow 2000). Frames rarely appear in explicit or isolated form; instead, they emerge through recurring combinations of visibility, evaluative cues, and linguistic emphasis across media coverage. This poses a methodological challenge for comparative research: while framing is inherently interpretive, large-scale comparisons require systematic and traceable indicators. Rather than coding diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames directly, as conceptualised by Benford and Snow (2000), this study operationalises framing through a set of empirically observable proxies introduced below.

Within our broader research project on media coverage of student protests in Serbia in 1996–1997 and 2024–2025, qualitative close readings have already been conducted to identify dominant framing patterns and threatened order narratives in selected newspaper articles (Simon and Trifunjagić 2026, forthcoming). These analyses provided detailed insight into how protest was constructed in narrative terms, including diagnostic attributions of responsibility, prognostic visions of order or reform, and implicit or explicit calls for action. However, the size of the corpus made it neither feasible nor analytically desirable to rely exclusively on qualitative interpretation.

The present study therefore adopts a complementary strategy that translates core dimensions of framing into empirically observable proxies. These proxies are operationalised through three analytically distinct categories: visibility, evaluative orientation, and lexical emphasis. Rather than treating quantitative measures as direct representations of frames, they are understood as indicators that allow framing tendencies to be traced comparatively across newspapers and time periods.

First, visibility captures editorial decisions about relevance and agenda-setting. The frequency with which protests are reported reflects whether they are constructed as marginal events or as socially significant phenomena requiring sustained attention. Second, evaluative orientation addresses how protest is normatively positioned, indicating whether it is framed as legitimate civic action, neutral occurrence, or problematic disruption. Third, lexical emphasis captures how meaning is condensed through recurring headline vocabulary, where specific terms function as cues for diagnostic framing and threatened order narratives.

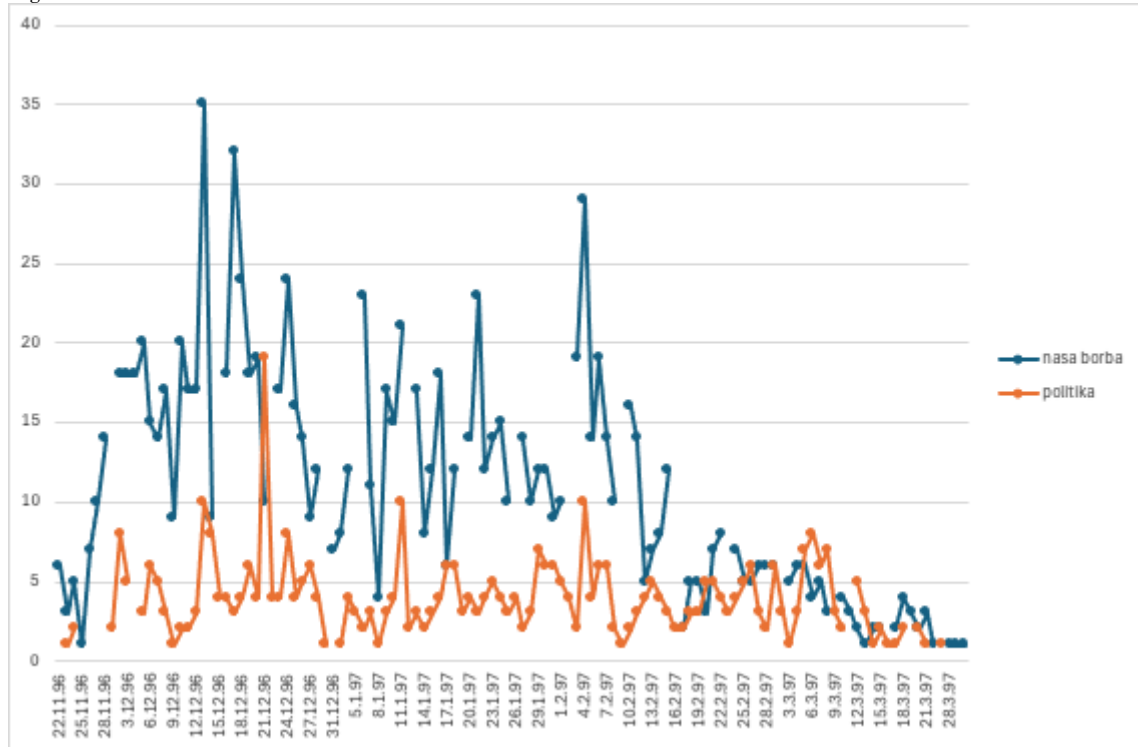
This approach is grounded in the understanding that frames are produced through patterned regularities rather than single textual elements. Quantitative indicators therefore do not replace interpretive analysis but extend it, allowing insights derived from close reading to be examined across the entire dataset. Interpreted together, visibility, evaluative orientation, and lexical emphasis make it possible to compare how student protest was rendered publicly intelligible under different political and media conditions while remaining transparent about the limits of quantification in the analysis of meaning.

Results

The comparative analysis of 3,042 newspaper articles from *Naša Borba*, *Danas*, and *Politika* reveals systematic differences in how student protests were framed across outlets and periods. Interpreted through the three analytical dimensions: visibility, evaluative orientation, and lexical emphasis, the results point to stable editorial patterns as well as context-specific adaptations.

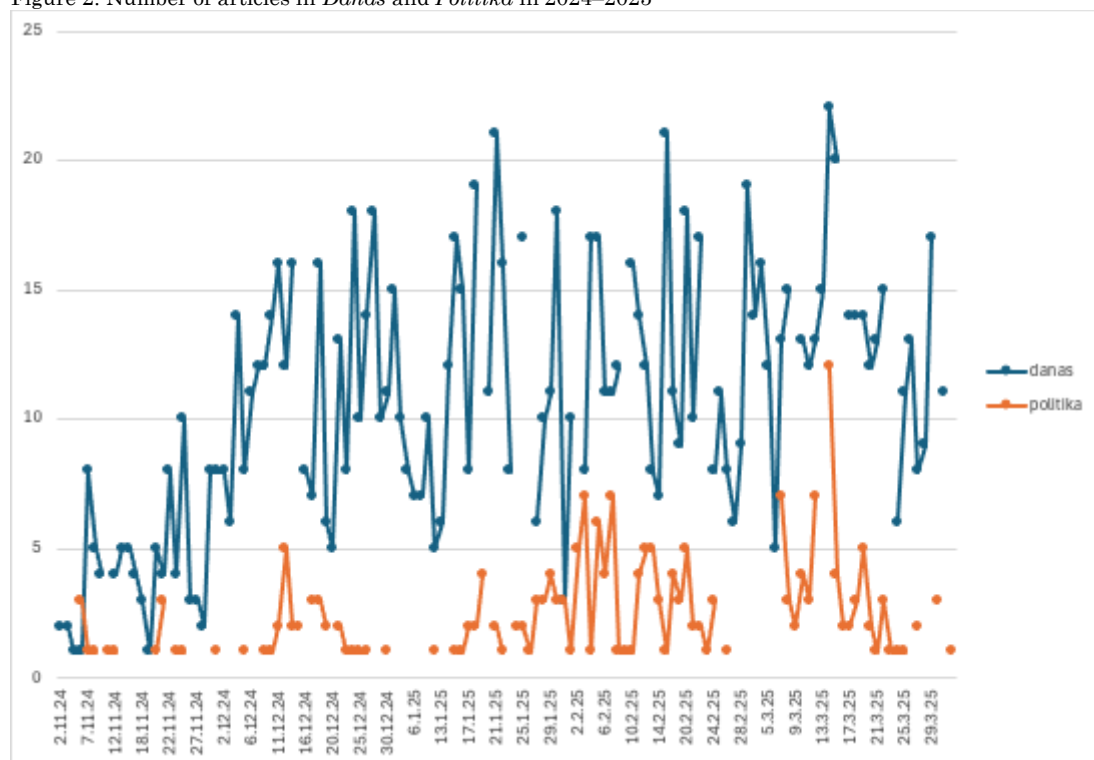
Article volume provides a first indicator of how newspapers assessed the relevance of student protests. In 1996–1997, *Naša Borba* published 1,130 protest-related articles, more than twice the number published by *Politika* (425). This disparity suggests that reduced visibility functioned as a framing strategy in itself, particularly in the case of *Politika*. Analyzing the protests of 1996–1997, Prošić-Dvornić described this as a legitimate tactic to downplay the significance of the protests (Prošić-Dvornić 2000, 127). Rather than ignoring protests entirely, the newspaper selectively minimized their presence, thereby limiting their perceived societal importance. As shown in Figure 1, peaks in coverage coincide with major protest events, indicating that even state-aligned media could not fully avoid reporting during moments of heightened mobilization.

Figure 1: Number of articles in *Naša Borba* and *Politika* in 1996–1997



Source: Own illustration, author's personal archive.

A similar pattern appears in the contemporary protest wave. In 2024–2025, *Danas* devoted 1,268 articles to the protests, while *Politika* published only 219. Again, this difference reflects divergent editorial assessments of the relevance of protest rather than mere differences in journalistic capacity. As illustrated in Figure 2, coverage intensity increases around large-scale demonstrations and moments of state intervention, underscoring the event-driven nature of protest visibility across outlets.

Figure 2: Number of articles in *Danas* and *Politika* in 2024–2025

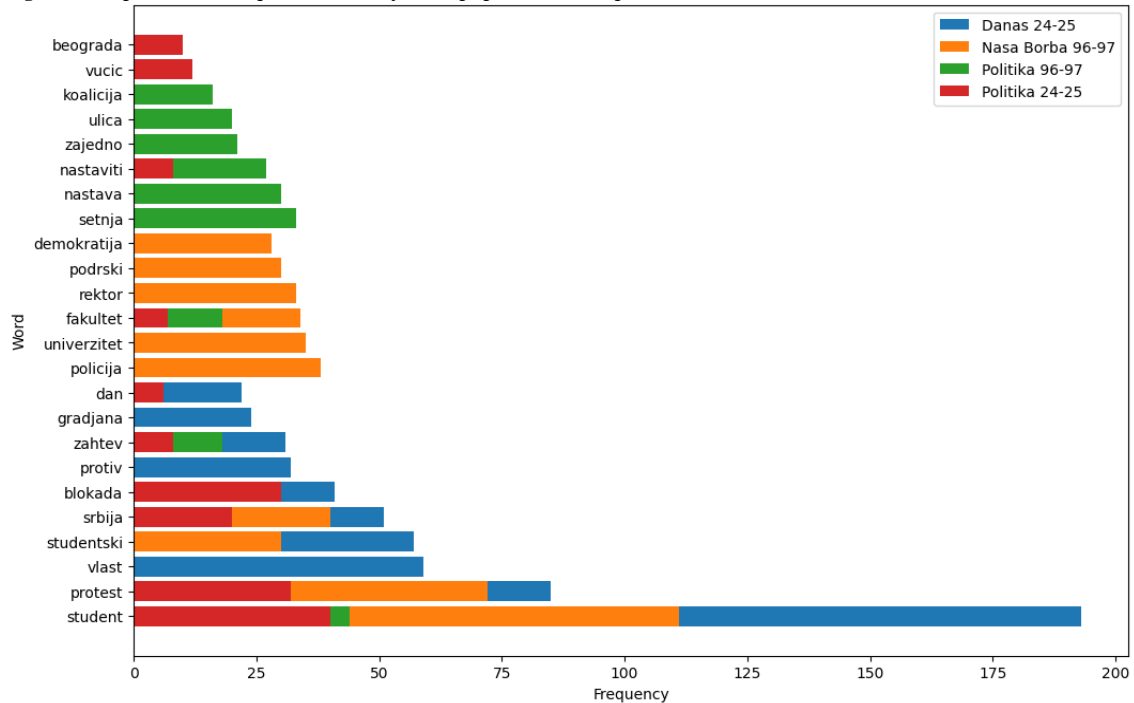
Source: Own illustration, author's personal archive.

Sentiment coding reveals pronounced differences in evaluative orientation across newspapers and periods. Across the entire dataset, a clear majority of articles expressed a positive orientation toward the student protests (1,766 articles), while 946 were coded as neutral and 330 as negative. However, these aggregate figures conceal substantial divergence at the level of individual publications. During the 1996–1997 protests, *Politika* published 425 protest-related articles, of which only six were coded as positive, 233 as neutral, and 186 as negative. In contrast, *Naša Borba* displayed a strongly supportive orientation, with 654 positive headlines, 474 neutral ones, and only two negative cases. A comparable polarisation emerges in the contemporary period. In 2024–2025, *Politika* devoted significantly fewer articles to the protests, with 13 coded as positive, 64 as neutral, and 142 as negative. *Danas*, by contrast, published more than five times as many articles, none of which were coded as negative, while 1,093 were positive and 175 neutral. Importantly, “neutral” reporting in *Politika* often coincided with the amplification of official statements, suggesting a form of depoliticisation rather than balanced reporting.

A closer inspection of the most frequent headline terms illustrates these contrasting lexical emphases more concretely. In independent newspapers, high-frequency lemmas included words such as *demokratija* (democracy), *izbori* (elections), *podrška* (support), *institucije* (institutions), and *univerzitet* (university), which foregrounded normative claims, political responsibility, and the legitimacy of student demands. In contrast, *Politika* more frequently employed terms such as *nastava* (teaching), *ulica* (street), *blokada* (blockade), and references to policing and traffic, shifting attention toward disruption, public order, and the impact of protest on everyday routines. These lexical patterns, summarized in Figure 3, indicate how different outlets selectively condensed protest meaning through headline vocabulary.

Taken together, these lexical patterns point to a systematic divergence in headline framing: independent outlets emphasized legitimacy and political claims, while *Politika* framed protests primarily through disruption and order-related concerns.

Figure 3: Top 10 most frequent words by newspaper and time period



Source: Own illustration, author's personal archive.

Lexical differences also capture changes in protest repertoire over time. During the 1996–1997 protests, the term *šetnja* (march) dominated headlines, corresponding to the daily protest walks organised by students. In 2024–2025, *blokada* (blockade) emerged as a defining term, reflecting the occupation of universities and key infrastructure. While descriptively accurate, these terms also carry distinct normative connotations, shaping whether protest is perceived as routine civic participation or as a disruptive intervention.

The distribution of named actors further illustrates framing dynamics. In 1996–1997, headlines frequently referenced Slobodan Milošević, Vojislav Šešelj, the opposition coalition *Zajedno*, and University of Belgrade rector Dragutin Veličković, framing protest as a contest over electoral legitimacy and institutional authority. In 2024–2025, executive figures—most notably President Vučić, followed by Miloš Vučević and Ana Brnabić—dominated coverage, while opposition actors appeared far less frequently. This shift points to a personalisation of political conflict and a framing of protest as a direct challenge to executive power rather than as a pluralistic institutional confrontation. In addition, it can be understood as an indicator of an autocratic regime, in which power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and, in this case, it indicates the irrelevance of the oppositional actors.

Taken together, the findings indicate a high degree of continuity in *Politika*'s editorial strategy across three decades, characterised by reduced visibility, emphasis on disruption, and reliance on neutral or negative evaluative frames. At the same time, coverage intensity fluctuates around moments framed as security risks or institutional crises, suggesting situational modulation rather than rigid uniformity. Independent outlets, by contrast,

consistently framed student protests as legitimate civic action, foregrounding demands and accountability while expanding coverage during moments of heightened mobilisation.

With regard to the framing of social movement theory, it is possible to distinguish between competing frames. The dominance of negative sentiments and disruption-oriented language in *Politika* problematizes the protests themselves in terms of diagnostic framing, presenting them as sources of instability, disorder, or threat. Such framing implicitly blames the protesters and delegitimises their demands, thereby supporting the status quo and reinforcing the interpretive frameworks promoted by the regime. In contrast, the more numerous and positive articles in *Danas* and *Naša Borba* suggest alternative framing processes. Independent media seem to offer a space for interpretation in which the grievances, goals, and legitimacy of the protesters can be articulated, facilitating an alignment of frames between the social movement and potential target audiences. The stark differences between the media sectors in both periods underscore how media systems function as competing frames and influence whether protests are understood primarily as legitimate collective action or as disruptive challenges to the social order.

Conclusion

This article examined how Serbian print media framed student protests during two periods of heightened political contention – 1996–1997 and 2024–2025 – by analysing protest visibility, evaluative orientation, and headline language. Based on a comparative content analysis of selected state-aligned and independent newspapers, the study demonstrates a notable continuity in editorial framing strategies across distinct political contexts. Across both periods, state-aligned coverage, represented by *Politika*, consistently minimised protest visibility, relied predominantly on neutral or negative evaluative frames, and emphasised disruption, public order, and the consequences of protest for everyday life. Independent outlets, by contrast, devoted substantially greater attention to student protests and framed them primarily as legitimate civic action, foregrounding protest demands, institutional accountability, and democratic claims. These patterns were evident not only in evaluative orientation but also in the lexical condensation of protest meaning through headline vocabulary. The findings further suggest that “neutral” reporting should not be equated with balanced coverage. In the case of *Politika*, neutral headlines often coincided with the amplification of official statements and the marginalisation of protest claims, indicating a strategy of de-politicisation rather than impartial mediation. This observation supports existing research on media behaviour in polarised and competitive authoritarian contexts. By operationalising framing through visibility, evaluative orientation, and lexical emphasis, this study contributes to methodological debates on how protest framing can be examined systematically across large corpora and historical periods. While quantitative indicators cannot capture the full complexity of framing processes, their combination allows for transparent comparison and complements qualitative approaches. The Serbian case highlights the broader relevance of media framing for understanding protest dynamics beyond immediate political outcomes. Media do not merely reflect social mobilisation but actively structure the symbolic space in which protest claims are interpreted and evaluated. Future research should extend this approach to digital media environments and comparative regional contexts.

The political dominance of SNS is not limited to electoral outcomes but extends into administrative structures, local governance networks, and parts of the public sector. This

broad political embeddedness increases the importance of media narratives as mechanisms through which political authority is normalized and contested.

Since our research project consisted of qualitative and quantitative analyses, we were able to compare the results and point out the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. The qualitative text analysis enabled a deeper understanding of the framing context and referred to the most effective events or reactions of leading personalities. Quantitative analysis, on the other hand, revealed patterns that recurred in both periods, both in terms of sheer numbers and in terms of sentiment and lexical analysis of headlines. In particular, the analysis of headlines showed how the choice of words portrayed the protests as legitimate or as disruptive. The comparison also allowed us to reevaluate our single-code sentiment coding, as it was based not only on headlines but also on content. However, the most significant feature of the comparison is that both quantitative and qualitative analysis yielded consistent results.

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