Framing Protest in Online News and Readers' Comments: The Case of Serbian Protest "Against Dictatorship"

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This research examines the "protest paradigm" in the digital news environment of a politically polarized media system by considering relations between news and online readers' comments about the Serbian protest Against Dictatorship, which was held in 2017. Applying content analysis to news and comments from two news websites, our study indicates the need to account for opposing framing of the protest (violence/peacefulness, de/legitimizing and un/democratic) in a polarized environment. The results show that the distribution of opposing frames is guided by the media relations with the government. Online readers' comments generally enhance this polarized pattern of frame distribution, with the exception of the performance frame, which remains prolific in the media, but absent from readers' comments.

Keywords: protest paradigm, user comments, online media, framing, polarized media system

Organized in the aftermath of the 2017 presidential elections, the protest Against Dictatorship was the first articulation of public disapproval of the decline of democratic standards and the rise of illiberal leadership in Serbia. Following the path of other postcommunist countries, such as Poland and Hungary, the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader Aleksandar Vučić systematically weakened the oversight institutions. As important tools for gaining popular support, the loyalist media were generously rewarded, while critical media were verbally harassed, and targeted in smear campaigns run by pro-Vučić tabloids. This created a highly polarized political and media environment in which Vučić won the presidential elections on April 2, 2017. Triggered by a Facebook post, the protest Against Dictatorship started the next day and lasted for a month.

The protest attracted much attention in the Serbian media and became the primary theme of opposing interpretations of the political reality. As such it opened the opportunity to examine the relation

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between the media and protest in a polarized media environment. The interplay between media and protest groups has been a research focus for a long time, revealing that journalists follow certain patterns and scripts in representing protests. They tend to rely on official sources that contend protest groups, frame protests as deviant and inefficient, and focus on protest tactics rather than goals. Such a template of protest coverage has been widely studied as the "protest paradigm" (Chan & Lee, 1984, p. 188). Within this rich field of research, attention is mostly given to North and South America, Asia, the Middle East, and the UK (e.g., Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012; Du, Zhu, & Yang, 2018; Harlow, Salaverría, Kilgo, & García-Perdomo, 2017; Oz, 2016), while the rest of Europe (Harlow, 2019; Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna, 2017; Wouters, 2015), especially postcommunist countries, remain largely underexplored. The relevance of addressing this gap lies both in the past and in the present. Looking at the past, there is a specific protest history in which social movements took their dissatisfaction to the streets and managed to usher in democratic transformation of postcommunist countries. Focusing on the present, the deep divisions on the values of checks and balances, human rights, and freedoms no longer remain confined to Central and Eastern Europe, but rather occur, to lesser or greater degrees of difference, throughout the world.

Contemporary protest action is nested in technosocial assemblages, in which digital communication technology allows articulation of protesting voices and creates new relations among journalists, protest groups and the public. While previous studies have considered blogs and social media (Araiza, Sturm, Istek, & Bock, 2016; Harlow, 2019; Poell, 2014), online reader comments have been largely overlooked in the existing literature. The examination of readers' comments presented in this article starts from the observation that comments are much more dependent on the news than on other channels of alternative framing. While other studies have identified a gap between media and the public when it comes to the protest paradigm (Harlow, 2019, p. 17), it remains to be seen whether this gap is present within the space opened to the public, but nevertheless gated by the media.

Examining the "protest paradigm" in the digital news environment of a politically polarized media system, our study indicates the need to methodologically account for opposing framing of the protest. We do so by conceptualizing three sets of opposing frames and further demonstrate that their distribution is guided by the media's relations with the government. When it comes to the user comments, our research demonstrates that commenters generally repeat and even enhance some media frames. We show that in polarized societies, comments sections can become a discussion forum for arguing in favor or against protest groups, reflecting wider societal divisions. In that respect, we argue that investigation of comments sections offers valuable insight into the character of public debate and polarization of the public sphere.

The Protest Paradigm

The protest paradigm is rooted in the observation that the media employ a set of marginalization devices and frames that discredits protest groups and their causes (Dardis, 2006; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). In the core of the paradigm is an assumption, neatly captured by Wouters (2015), that "mass media act as agents of social control, support the status quo, and hence always mirror the paradigm and rarely deviate from it" (p. 477). However, the conditionality of the protest paradigm was addressed early in its formulation (Chan & Lee, 1984). More recently, the changes in sociopolitical and

technocommunication realms have led to the paradigm being revisited, in three main directions, by examining (1) protest nature or type (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014); (2) external factors inherent to the context in which protests happen; and (3) "mediation opportunity structures" (Cammaerts, 2012, pp. 119–120), which mostly emerge within Internet-enabled communication platforms.

Following the second strand of research, several comparative studies have examined how the same movement, issue, or event can have "varying faces" because news media performance is generally confined within the political and social systems, or more particularly, dependent on the national politics, public sentiments, and journalistic culture in a specific historical moment (Du et al., 2018; Veneti, Karadimitriou, & Poulakidakos, 2016). Scholars have also assessed the applicability of the paradigm outside the Western context and evaluated it as a highly useful approach that summarizes various features of news coverage into a meaningful ideal type (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014; Shahin, Zheng, Sturm, & Fadnis, 2016). Comparisons against this ideal type have identified that the paradigm forms different shapes in different media systems, and that media can even provide positive publicity to protest groups (Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna 2017; Mourão, 2019; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014).

The third strand considers "mediation opportunity structures," to use Cammaerts' (2012) overarching notion, which encompasses the media opportunity structure (the mainstream media representation of protests); the discursive opportunity structure (strategies of protests' self-mediation, production of counternarratives that circumvent mainstream media); and the networked opportunity structure (resistance practices mediated through technology; pp. 119–120). Following this strand, typical mass mediation of protests is questioned even in liberal democracies (Boykoff & Laschever, 2011; Weaver & Scacco, 2013). Harlow and Johnson (2011) have shown how three actors (*The New York Times*, the Twitter feed of a *Times* reporter, and the citizen media site Global Voices) differed in coverage of the Egyptian protest. Another analysis of the Twitter feed from one news organization, during the protests in Ferguson, discovered that journalists' tweets had generally marginalized protesters, and only visual journalists were more sympathetic (Araiza et al., 2016). On the other hand, Harlow's (2019) comparative analysis of the #Ferguson Twitter hashtag, which included journalists in the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, and France, suggested that individual journalists take less traditional "objective" or "neutral" stances in their reporting on Twitter and thus rupture the protest paradigm (p. 13).

The overview of the communication in social media ecology indicates that potential for protest self-representation that bypasses mainstream media image should be investigated further. Based on the study of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests, Poell (2014) warns that social media can bring about a shift in media power only if used for more than just mere reflection of mainstream media reporting. A similar perspective comes from Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo, and Salaverría's (2018) comparison of the coverage of domestic and foreign protests in American news shared on Facebook and Twitter. In the case of domestic protest in Ferguson, they revealed amplification of the delegitimizing effects of rioting and looting coverage, while the coverage of the Mexican Ayotzinapa protest included fewer riot frames with no significant social media sharing differences. These findings highlight a tendency of social media to replicate mainstream media portrayals. On the other hand, Harlow and colleagues (2017) showed that social media users more frequently shared legitimizing rather than delegitimizing news. Extending the work with the #Ferguson study, Harlow (2019) underlines the existence of a gap between media and the

public when it comes to the protest paradigm (p. 17). Though this research expands our knowledge about the paradigm mainly in the U.S. and on social networking sites, it leaves readers' comments underexplored.

Readers' Comments in Online News Media

Described as forms of user-generated content (Hermida & Thurman, 2008), or emanations of participatory journalism (Reich, 2011), comments posted by readers below news stories on media websites are specific genres with three key characteristics. First, they are integrated within the structures of media: They enter the gated space and appear in the closest proximity to journalistic products. Second, comments are mostly anonymous, allowing for mock nicknames to serve as the only identity marker for those reading them. Third, comments' sections are semi-open spaces with varying degrees of editorial control, either in the form of pre- or postmoderation (Reich, 2011; Watson, Peng, & Lewis, 2019). In that sense, they should not be mistaken for free articulation of public sentiments, and their participatory potential has often been debated. For some authors, user comments represent the public "talking back" to the reporters (Graham, 2012, p. 114), while others wonder whether they represent an "empowerment of citizens or interactive illusion" (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011, p. 127).

In the abundant research about online readers' comments, most relevant for this article are the lines of inquiry pertaining to the democratic qualities of the debate, and relations between journalistic texts and subsequent comments. The latter body of research has demonstrated that news-related factors influence the number of comments and interactivity between commenters (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Ksiazek, 2018) and that commenters do challenge journalistic authority by providing competing discourses (Secko, Tlalka, Dunlop, Kingdon, & Amend, 2011; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016).

Using a toolbox of framing analysis, several studies have indicated frame divergence between online news and readers' comments (Milioni, Vadratsikas, & Papa, 2012). Baden and Springer (2014) observed how commenters used frame fragments to construct their views, but reached the conclusion that comments remain within media supplied repertoires, complementing "news information using popular wisdom and historical analogies, but rarely bringing genuinely different information" (p. 545). Similarly, Brooker and associates (2018) and Holton, Lee, and Coleman (2014) showed that there is no immediate effect of media frames and that counternarratives in the comments do not challenge dominant journalistic framing.

Research on deliberation "below the line" showed that comments can provide factual information, expressions of alternative position, and supporting rationales (Graham, 2012; Rowe, 2015). However, as demonstrated by Ruiz and colleagues (2011), there are differences between media and journalism cultures because in the liberal systems of the UK and U.S., commenters form "communities of debate," supportive of argumentative comments and cooperation, while polarized systems in Italy, Spain, and France prove to be fertile ground for "homogenous communities," showing little interest in others' arguments, and frequently casting insults (p. 482).

Despite the proliferation of the protest paradigm, on one hand, and academic interest in online readers' comments, on the other, the two rarely complement each other. Although not specifically linking their research to the protest paradigm, McCluskey and Hmielowski (2012) compared letters to the editor

and online comments about the protests following the Jena Six incident and observed that anonymity, lack of traditional gatekeeping, and nature of technology led to greater differences in opinions expressed in comments. Further, Graham's (2012) study on climate change marches established that comments serve as a platform for public debate, presenting "adversarial journalism" (p. 122) that challenges news with firsthand accounts.

Considering the revisions of the protest paradigm and earlier studies on readers' comments, this research aims to add to the nuanced understanding of the paradigm's endurance in digital media. It does so by exploring comments sections on news websites as sites of citizen participation in protest mediation that have the potential for reinforcing media frames, reframing, and counterframing. It also adds to the existing scholarship by examining the paradigm in the postcommunist, transitional, and polarized media system, following Oz (2016) and Weaver and Scacco (2013), who have indicated potential application of the protest paradigm in a polarized media environment.

Politics, Media, and Protest in Serbia

Serbia entered the democratic transformation with almost a decade of delay. Introduction of multiparty system during the 1990s had opened the doors for articulation of diverse interests and ideologies, but the grip of Milošević's ruling party over the state, economy, and media prevented the creation of a level playing political field. In such a situation, popular mobilization was frequent and, on several occasions, led to regime concessions, culminating in 2000 with the protests that resulted in the overthrow of Milošević (Vladisavljević, 2014). Democratic consolidation started afterward, with the establishment of free and fair elections, and the creation of democratic institutions. However, as with some other postcommunist countries, like Hungary or Poland, new democracy has proven to be fragile in the face of populist and illiberal rulers (Spasojević, 2019). In the Serbian case this is represented by Aleksandar Vučić, leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), who formed a government in 2012, and from the position of prime minister entered the presidential race in April 2017. Winning 55% of the popular vote, Vučić secured the presidency in the first round of elections—an event which triggered the protest Against Dictatorship.

The protest was a popular articulation of dissatisfaction not so much with the election outcomes, but with the broader context in which the elections took place. Since 2012, SPP has gradually secured control over key media in the country and seriously undermined the fairness of elections. Media control was achieved through a mixture of parallel measures that included state ownership of influential media; clientelistic relations with major private TV channels; political influence on the appointment of broadcasting regulator and public service media boards; and use of public funds to reward loyal media (Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Veljanovski & Štavljanin, 2017). This lack of political independence of the media system is noted in the continually declining country scores in the reports of Freedom House (2018). As one part of the media aligns with the ruling party and becomes its mouthpiece, independent media outlets are under frequent verbal and physical attacks. In an already politicized media system, this creates even deeper divisions between progovernment and independent media.

All of the mechanisms of media control act in synergy during the election period, resulting in the lack of institutional monitoring of media representation of candidates and in substantially larger media coverage of ruling parties and their candidates (CRTA, 2017). For example, during the 2017 election campaign, Aleksandar Vučić was present on 58% of newspapers' front pages, 80% of which placed him in a positive context (CRTA, 2017, p. 25).

In this context, the protest Against Dictatorship began spontaneously a day after the presidential elections. Initiated by a Facebook post, it spread from Belgrade to different parts of the country. At its peak, the marches gathered tens of thousands of Serbian citizens. The protest lasted for a month, until the beginning of May 2017, and during the entire period it was not connected to any political party or other organization. It carried the self-attached label "citizens' protest," highlighting the fact that politics is practiced without politicians, even those from the opposition. These two characteristics—use of Facebook for organization and coordination, and the absence of a recognizable leadership—make it the first Serbian case of Internet-native protest (J. Petrović & Petrović, 2017).

In terms of reporting, this protest pattern opened an interpretative space for the media to speculate about protest organizers, motives, and goals. In fact, the first demands were formulated only after the protest began and referred to presidential elections: the absence of monitoring of media coverage of presidential candidates; uneven representation of candidates on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS); the work of the electoral commission; and the blockade of the Parliament. During the protests, a request for the annulment of the controversial doctoral degrees of public officials was added, followed later by a series of socioeconomic demands.

Although the protest lasted for more than a month, none of its demands were fulfilled. The ruling coalition's strategy was to reject the claims of demonstrators and present itself as a democratic government that could endure criticism from the streets. As the newly elected president said, "Serbia is a democratic country and everyone has the right to be dissatisfied with the result of the election" (Milenković, 2017, p. 2). With the number of protestors declining, as spontaneously as it started, the protest ceased.

Research Design and Method

Recent overviews of existing scholarship have abstracted framing, language devices and sourcing patterns as the three main components of the protest paradigm (Kilgo et al., 2018; Kilgo, Mourao, & Sylvie, 2019; Weaver & Scacco, 2013). In this article, we focus on framing, because sourcing patterns are not reflected in user comments and do not offer fruitful grounds for comparison with news stories. Paradigm examination generally relies on the "toolbox" of media frames set by Gitlin (1980) and McLeod and Hertog (1999). Only a handful of studies use frames that have emerged entirely inductively (Boykoff, 2006; Boykoff & Laschever, 2011) or complement the "toolbox" with a few inductive frames (Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna, 2017; McFarlane & Hay, 2003).

Aligning with scholars who consider framing and devices in unison (Kilgo et al., 2018), we developed our instrument by observing several devices as part of a predefined frame corresponding with

the paradigm toolbox. We constructed the frames based on the literature review and initial reading of news stories and comments. Similar to Boykoff and Laschever (2011), and with the aim of capturing the sociopolitical specificities of the context, we developed opposing sets of frames to understand how mediation of protest varies between media with different political orientation and editorial independence, along with their respective comments sections. The sets of frames are (1) violence/peacefulness frames; (2) de/legitimization frames; and (3) un/democratic frames.

Emphasis on appearance and performance is one of the most recurrent ways of representing protests. They are often discredited by the freak-show frame (Boykoff, 2006; McFarlane & Hay, 2003), which highlights the physical oddity, strange hair, or dress style of protesters. Also, marginalization of protest groups comes from a focus on theatrical, dramaturgical elements of protesting, labeled as carnivalesque aspects (McLeod & Hertog, 1999), carnival (Dardis, 2006), performance (McFarlane & Hay, 2003), spectacle (Gitlin, 1980; Harlow & Johnson, 2011), or show (Xu, 2013). Therefore, we regard a focus on protestors' slogans, requisites, theatrical acts, or appearance as a *performance frame*, without assigning an oppositional pair to it.

Another universal manifestation of the protest paradigm is reference to violence. According to McLeod and Hertog (1999), media marginalize protests by frequently applying confrontation (conflict between protesters and police) and riot frames (conflict between protesters and society). Dardis (2006) distinguishes general lawlessness or disruption (vandalism, blocking traffic, trespassing) and confrontation with police. Xu (2013) considers confrontation with police a form of lawlessness and treats it as one framing device. Boykoff (2006) introduces the label violence frame and, beyond actual violent acts, underlines that the frame remains even when journalists anticipate violence. Following such insights, we have treated any mention of real or potential violent incidents, implication of police forces, clashes, and vandalism, as well as any public plea to peace addressed to protestors, as the evocation of a *violence frame.*

Following the studies that have observed the interplay between violence and peacefulness (Harlow et al., 2017; Kilgo et al., 2018; Kilgo et al., 2019), we have defined a *peacefulness frame*, as the opposite to violent depictions of protests. The existence of the frame was noted by explicit descriptions of the protest as peaceful and nonviolent, through remarks that protesters did not cause any violence, or that there was no need for police to be on the streets.

Several studies have also considered the interplay between legitimizing and delegitimizing frames (Harlow, 2019; Harlow & Johnson, 2011), mostly considering McLeod and Hertog's (1999) sympathetic (provoking support, compassion, or sympathy for protesters) and protest frames (expressing recognition and support for protesters motives, goals, and claims) as legitimizing; and already discussed spectacle, freak show, and violence as delegitimizing frames. We have adopted a (de)legitimizing dichotomy as a useful approach for the polarized media landscape, but with adjustments that reflect protest type and political context. Our definition of *legitimizing frame* corresponds with some aspects of Laschever's (2017) legitimacy operationalization, which was based on Tilly's (1999) classic concept of WUNC displays (public presentations of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment). Similar to political frame (Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna, 2017), grassroots frame (Boykoff & Laschever, 2011), and Laschever's (2017) authenticity

aspect, we have detected a legitimizing frame when the protests were described as grassroots, genuine, nonpartisan, self-organized by citizens, or independent from political parties. Analogous to commitment and numbers (Laschever, 2017), we have considered estimations of protests as widespread, gathering a lot of people, growing in numbers or overflowing the streets, and qualifications of protesters as persistent, resilient and enthusiastic, as legitimization. In contrast, negation of these characteristics (e.g., affiliating protestors with political parties and foreign powers, claims that they are paid to protest, estimation of protest as weak, small in numbers) was considered as the occurrence of *delegitimizing frame.*

This research includes the *(un)democratic protest frame*, which has emerged inductively, although in a broader sense it can be linked to a rights-master frame, which highlights thematic occurrences of injustice across civil, women's, and gay rights (Kilgo et al., 2018). Also, it broadly links to the examinations of civil rights debates surrounding hate groups or right-wing organizations (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). In both cases the core issue is the legitimacy of the protest and its demands. In new and unconsolidated democracies, arguments behind the competing values of human rights and freedoms can be raised for defending or attacking protest groups in the name of democracy building (e.g., Lankina, 2016). In our case, a debate was raised between those who claimed that protest is a sign of democracy and those who claimed it threatens democracy. As a threat, protest was regarded as an abuse of the right to assembly aiming to question the popular vote on elections, and such statements were considered as an *undemocratic frame*. For example, when president Vučić claimed, "They [protesters] cannot stand our victory, they think they are better than us. But I think that the most important thing is what the people say. The protesters would not allow for democracy to win" ("Vučić: Ne mogu da isključim," 2017, para. 3). On the other hand, protest was taken as a sign of civil liberties and the country's democratic standing: "It is everyone's democratic right to freely articulate their political opinions, to organize different political actions, and that cannot be denied" ("Gradonačelnik prekrečio grafite mržnje," 2017, para. 3). Such statements, and any other association of protest with democratic rights for assembly and free speech, were treated as manifestations of a *democratic frame.*

The analytical framework used for the news stories was, with slight modifications, applied to the online readers' comments. Although comments and news provide different types of discourses (Secko et al., 2011), the decision to use the same tokens for identification of frames was motivated by the research's aim to examine the resonance of the journalistic frames in the readers' comments. Preliminary coding and deep reading of the material led only to adjustment of the de/legitimization frame: all exclamations of support/opposition, as well as statements of intention to join the protests (e.g., "Bravo," "I'll be there tomorrow," "Shame on you") appearing in the comments were observed as devices of a de/legitimizing frame, accompanying those already identified for news stories. Variation in occurrence of certain frames between media and comments points to the frames that can be considered inherent to the media and the journalistic process, and to the frames that resonate with the public the most. Thus, in line with the theoretical discussion about the existence of a gap between media and the public, we examine the following:

RQ1:   What are the prevalent frames in online news/readers' comments?

Furthermore, we examine the paradigm's endurance in the polarized context, in which the media often take up advocacy roles in covering important societal issues. In that respect, we have selected two online news outlets with different political orientations, ownership, and editorial independence to answer the following:

RQ2:   How does distribution of frames vary between media?

In analyzing the comments sections of online media, we are primarily interested in capturing similarities between patterns of frame distribution in media texts and user comments. Because a substantive body of research shows that comments sections can be a space for alternative framing, or frame resonance, we aim to investigate the extension of protest paradigm in readers' comments by asking the following:

RQ3:   How do frames vary between comments sections of Blic *and* Telegraf*?*

In line with theoretical discussions, the objective of our research was also to investigate the following:

RQ4:   Do users bring up frames that were not previously set by journalists?

To identify such frames, we have allowed inductive frames to emerge during preliminary coding of comments. Only one frame had significant appearance to be added in the codebook. Labeled *sanctions against protesters*, it included calls for legal actions and different forms of punishment, as well as physical violence against the protestors.

Content Analysis: Sampling, Coding, and Reliability

The census of online news and subsequent readers' comments carried out for this research originated from two online news outlets—*Blic.rs* and *Telegraf.rs.* Representing one Internet-native media (*Telegraf*) and one online edition of the daily newspaper (*Blic*), they are among the top five news sources for Serbian citizens (rated by Alexa). Founded in 1996, daily newspaper *Blic* positioned itself as a tabloid, midmarket news outlet. In 2004, it was purchased by the international media company Ringier. The experience of the international publisher allowed Blic to smoothly transition to a digital edition and become one of the digital news leaders in the country. Furthermore, foreign ownership allowed the outlet to keep the government at arm's length and provide relatively balanced reporting (Spariosu, 2014). *Telegraf* was founded in 2012, and although its ownership structure is unknown, it is linked to the Serbian IT company Comtrade ("Media Ownership Monitor," n.d.), which may explain its progress as a top news source. *Telegraf* is also a mid-market tabloid outlet, but it vocally supports the government, especially during election campaigns (Joler et al., 2016).

Online media texts were collected by the authors for the period from April 3, 2017 to May 3, 2017—for the entire duration of the protest Against Dictatorship. We used Google's in-site option and search terms (protest, Against Dictatorship), and included all the texts (news, interviews, op-eds,

commentaries) that mentioned the protest. Readers' comments were collected manually and stored in a separate Excel database. The students of the University of Novi Sad received links to news articles, and they copied readers' comments to the Excel file. A total of 5,501 comments were collected, and 3,257 were included in the analysis. Commenters are known to diverge from the main topic and to engage in meta-linguistic discussions, thus we excluded all the comments that were not thematically related to the protest Against Dictatorship.

The analysis was performed on all media texts ($N = 130$), and on the comments that mentioned the protest ($N = 3,257$). Presence or absence (yes/no) of each framing device was coded on the basis of the code sheet and the accompanying coding guidelines. As the framing devices were observed at the within-story micro level, this type of coding allowed for the existence of several frames within a single article or comment. Online articles were coded by the authors, while comments were coded by students of the University of Novi Sad. The coding reliability test among all coders of readers' comments was conducted on the sample of 182 comments (5.59%). The standardized S-Lotus coefficient (Fretwurst, 2015) of the mutual correspondence of coders across the coding categories was 0.90. The intercoder agreement was also tested against the "golden standard" (Fretwurst, 2015, p. 17), yielding the average Standardized Golden Standard (S-GS) results of 0.88.

Results

In answer to RQ1, which asked what the prevalent frames in online news/readers' comments are, analysis shows that journalists most frequently used the performance frame (see Table 1). On the other hand, the carnivalesque elements, protest dramaturgy, and visual appearance of protesters were almost entirely absent in the comments. This finding is in contrast to research showing that articles without the spectacle frame received significantly fewer shares on Facebook (Kilgo et al., 2018, p. 18). Contrary to the user behavior on social media, readers were not prone to commenting on the spectacular elements of the protest Against Dictatorship.

Table 1. Frames in Online News and Readers' Comments.

	Online media ($N = 130$)		Readers' comments ($N = 3,257$)	
Performance frame	80	61.53%	15	0.46%
Violence frame	34	26.15%	318	9.76%
Peacefulness frame	20	15.38%	25	0.77%
Delegitimizing frame	55	42.31%	1,792	55.02%
Legitimizing frame	68	52.31%	847	26.01%
Undemocratic frame	24	18.46%	437	13.42%
Democratic frame	21	16.15%	64	1.96%
Sanctions for protesters	/	/	145	4.45%

Note. % of the total number of news stories/comments
/ not identified only for online media

However, oppositional frames resonated well in user comments. Namely, the legitimizing frame was present in half of the news stories, and a quarter of comments. The delegitimizing frame, which

occurred in 42% of news stories, was by far the most prevalent frame, present in more than half of all comments. In the media coverage, the violence frame was present slightly more often than its counterpart, the peacefulness frame. Similarly, the undemocratic frame had a little higher frequency than the democratic one. In the comments sections, the violence and undemocratic frame appear occasionally, while the peacefulness and democratic frame were not frequently used. Overall, media frames which marginalized protest groups and their aims, were critical of their actions and mobilizing strategies (violence), as well as questioning the democratic character of protests, resonated more than their positive counter frames in the comments sections.

When considering RQ2, which asked how distribution of frames varies between news items in the analyzed media, it was established (see Table 2) that 73.26% of *Blic* news used a performance frame, compared with 38.64% of *Telegraf,* and the difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1)$ = 14.739***, $p <$ .001. A total of 66.28% of *Blic* stories employed a legitimizing frame, compared with 25% in *Telegraf,* and the difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1)$ = 19.882, $p <$ .001. The opposing delegitimizing frame was more frequent in *Telegraf* (59.09%) than in *Blic* (33.72%), with a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(1)$ = 7.676, $p <$ .01. In *Telegraf*, 45.45% of stories mentioned violence compared with 16.28% in *Blic*, and the difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1)$ = 12.829, $p <$ .001. The peacefulness frame occurred more frequently in *Blic* (19.77%) than in *Telegraf* (6.82%), but chi-square results revealed no statistically significant difference. Both democratic and undemocratic frames were rather evenly distributed between the two outlets—however, with no statistically significant difference. Obviously, this distribution of the un/democratic frame does not follow the established pattern of the other opposing frames. The key reason can be found in the fact the elected president and his party members, as official sources, employed both frames. They articulated an undemocratic frame to indicate that the protests were a tyranny of the minority who wanted to overthrow democratic elections, but at the same time they used the democratic frame as a face-saving maneuver performed for the domestic public and EU partners who monitor Serbian progress as part of the EU accession process. By saying, "This government respects the democratic right of minority to protest without violence, but it also has to protect the democratic right of the majority who elected Vučić for Serbian president" ("Šta se krije," 2017, para. 6), one high-ranking SPP official marginalized the protest as undemocratic, while at the same time signaling that SPP will endure protests to demonstrate its democratic nature.

Table 2. Distribution of Frames in Blic *and* Telegraf *Online News.*

	Blic (N = 86)		Telegraf (N = 44)		χ^2
Performance frame	63	73.26%	17	38.64%	14.739***
Violence frame	14	16.28%	20	45.45%	12.829***
Peacefulness frame	17	19.77%	3	6.82%	3.749
Delegitimizing frame	29	33.72%	26	59.09%	7.676**
Legitimizing frame	57	66.28%	11	25.00%	19.882***
Undemocratic frame	12	13.95%	12	27.27%	3.430
Democratic frame	12	13.95%	9	20.45%	0.908

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

The answer to RQ3 (How do frames vary between comments in *Blic* and *Telegraf?*) offers a more complete and clearer pattern than one observable from distribution of the opposing frames in news, since the distribution of all the frames except the performance frame is statistically significant (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of Frames in Blic and Telegraf Readers' Comments.

	Blic (N = 1,595)		*Telegraf (N = 1,662)*		χ^2
Performance frame	11	0.7%	4	0.2%	3.579
Violence frame	97	6.08%	221	13.30%	48.100***
Peacefulness frame	18	1.13%	7	0.42%	5.346*
Delegitimizing frame	546	34.23%	1246	74.97%	545.798**
Legitimizing frame	767	48.09%	80	4.81%	792.080***
Undemocratic frame	159	9.97%	278	16.73%	31.999***
Democratic frame	50	3.13%	14	0.84%	22.204***
Sanctions for protesters	37	2.32%	108	6.50%	33.363***

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Comments about the democratic potential of the protest provide disambiguation of the mixed messages sent by the official sources and the media. The results show 16.73% of readers' comments on *Telegraf* frame the protest as undemocratic, claiming that "government cannot be changed on the streets" and "protest cannot change the electoral will," compared with 9.97% comments on *Blic,* $\chi^2(1) = 31.999$, $p < .001$. And vice versa, the comments on *Blic* employ a democratic frame more frequently (3.13%) than comments on *Telegraf* (0.84%), $\chi^2(1) = 31.999$, $p < .001$, stating that, for example, the right to protest is granted by the constitution.

A similar pattern of distribution is observed among other, more salient frames in the comments sections. Readers of *Blic* generally use a legitimization frame (48.09%), compared with *Telegraf* readers (4.81%), and the difference is statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 792.080$, $p < .001$. And vice versa, 74.97% of comments on *Telegraf* delegitimize the protests, compared with 34.23% of comments on *Blic,* $\chi^2(1) = 545.798$, $p < .001$. Commenters pick fragments of news items and rearticulate them through popular jargon. For example, after media insinuations that the protests were incited from the outside, a commenter labeled the protesters as "Walkers paid by [George] Soros money" (Siniša, 2017, para. 1)

Statements about the peacefulness of the protests are used by 1.13% of *Blic* readers, and by 0.42% of *Telegraf* readers, $\chi^2(1) = 5.346$, $p < .05$. Portrayal of protests as violent is present in 13.30% of *Telegraf* comments, compared with 6.08% *Blic* comments, $\chi^2(1) = 545.798$, $p < .001$. The commenters on *Telegraf* choose the labels "vandals" and "hooligans" provided by the journalists and condone "destruction of Belgrade" (Davor, 2017, para. 1).

The only frame created by the users that was not previously set by journalists in media texts (RQ4) is the sanctions against the protesters frame. Calling for imprisonment, sending protestors to work camps or threatening them with physical punishment occurs in 6.5% comments on *Telegraf*, and in 2.32% of comments on *Blic,* $\chi^2(1) = 33.363$, $p < .001$. Marginalization of the protest in *Telegraf* news, especially portrayal of protests as violent, leads commenters to conclude that something has to be done, but without

media-supplied repertoires, they diverge from "all who destroyed yesterday, should face justice" (Dusica, 2017, para. 1) to "this cattle must be battered good, to think twice before doing something like this again" (xxxx, 2017, para. 1).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our results show that the performance frame was the least echoed in the comments sections of online media. The distribution of opposing frames in news shows slight polarization between *Blic*, which fostered a legitimization and peacefulness frame, and *Telegraf*, which mostly employed a delegitimization and violence frame. Commenting sections complete and extend this polarized pattern of frame distribution: User comments in *Blic* were dominated by legitimization, peacefulness, and democratic frames, whereas *Telegraf*'s comments undermined protests with delegitimization, undemocratic, violence, and sanctions frames. Such a polarized pattern corresponds to the political orientation, editorial independence, and ownership structure of the selected online news outlets and reflects the broader polarized character of the media landscape in Serbia. These findings lead to several conclusions in line with the two main goals of this study: to examine the validity of the protest paradigm in a politically polarized, partly democratic media landscape, and to expand the field of interest in diverse spaces in which protests are portrayed, by considering online readers' comments.

Applying the protest paradigm to Serbia for the first time, this research adds to our knowledge about the paradigms' standing in different contexts. Serbia represents a postcommunist country with backsliding democracy and a highly politicized, polarized media system in which media freedoms are in decline. In such an environment, the media provide opposing publicity to protest groups. Several previous studies have already demonstrated that different media types, with different ideological leanings and levels of partisanship, vary in framing right-wing movements (Boykoff & Laschever, 2011; Weaver & Scacco, 2013). Another strand of literature showed that media can assign positive publicity to protests— for example, during different stages of protests (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), when elite groups support protests (Mourão, 2019), or in the case of international antiausterity protests with wide popular support (Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna, 2017). Our conclusions bridge those two strands that question the paradigm and, going beyond those identified conditions, reveal that the portrayal of protests can diverge between two opposing images in accordance with the political affiliation of the media. In polarized contexts, media can divide into two camps: one that supports protest and provides positive publicity to it, and another that manifests classic postulates of the protest paradigm.

Therefore, this study underlines that the protest paradigm is not universal and that affiliation with the government plays an important role in media portrayal of the protest beyond the Western contexts (Shahin et al., 2016). It also aligns with arguments about paradigms' potential for examination of polarized media environments (Oz, 2016; Weaver & Scacco, 2013). Thus, we find that application of the opposing frames as an analytical toolkit might be particularly useful for capturing conflicting public narratives, and given the growing political polarization (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Lu & Lee, 2018), not limited to polarized media systems.

With respect to the potential of reader' comments to offer an alternative to media framing, the results of this research provide a couple of insights. In connection with literature about comments, our study corresponds mostly to previous findings on frame resonance in comments (Baden & Springer, 2014; Brooker et al., 2018). Namely, all of the opposing media frames resonated in comments, and only one new frame emerged, which we have considered as an enhancement of the violence frame. Moreover, resonance of media frames clarified or extended a polarized portrayal of protest. When it comes to the un/democratic frame, bound by the logic and standards of media work, the media failed to interpret the mixed messages of prominent political actors in line with the already established way of framing protest. However, users have managed to read between the lines and rearticulate politicians' statements in line with the editorial stance toward the protest.

When we take into account that the commenting spaces of *Blic* and *Telegraf* are premoderated, it can be concluded that media and user frames are mutually supportive. Moderated commenting spaces can be observed as lightly steered to serving as an extension of the media with slightly more freedom from political pressures, although users greatly contribute by fostering frames that follow editorial orientation. As much as the journalistic work of *Telegraf* was guided by biases toward government, its moderation policy could be viewed as an extended form of gatekeeping, thus explaining such a high frequency of the delegitimizing frame in the readers' comments.

Results related to resonance of frames in comments also contribute to the understanding of the gap between the media and the public regarding the protest paradigm, as noted by Harlow (2019). Our study confirms the existence of a certain gap, but a different one from that manifested on social media and in the public at large (Harlow, 2019; Harlow et al., 2017). From our study it can be concluded that users largely accept, but do not respond equally to, all media frames. One of the most prominent frames within the protest paradigm—focus on spectacle, carnival, dramaturgy of events—could be more bound up with the logic of the journalistic work. Commenters seem to be more interested in adding pros and cons to the oppositional framing of the protest, rather than contributing to the performance frame. This is also evident from the fact that inductively formed sanctions against protesters frame represents the radical variation of violence frame. Its occurrence in the media that rarely employ violence frame can be attributed to trolling as a manipulation mechanism used to askew the public perception of the protest (D. Petrović, 2018).

Conclusions on the relations between frames employed by the media and commenters need to take into account that we do not provide statistical validations of the links between a single news item and its subsequent comments. In future research, counterframing and frame resonance could be observed at this level, to provide additional insights about rearticulation of news fragments in comments sections. Further research is also needed to test the level of abstraction of the un/democratic frame. It remains to be examined whether it is specific to the protest coverage in Serbia, or it can be applied to similar protests elsewhere.

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