

*Nemanja Zvijer*¹
 University of Belgrade, Serbia
 Faculty of Philosophy
*Marija Radoman*²
 University of Belgrade, Serbia
 Faculty of Philosophy
*Aleksandra Marković*³
 University of Belgrade, Serbia
 Faculty of Philosophy

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THE FORMAL FEATURES OF PROTEST SLOGANS AS AN ELEMENT OF SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE IN SERBIA'S FACULTY BLOCKADES (2024–2025)

Abstract: This paper examines the visual and formal characteristics of student protest slogans that emerged during the wave of university blockades and mass demonstrations in Serbia that played a pivotal role in shaping Serbia's socio-political landscape from late 2024 through 2025. As a continuation of previous research focused on slogan content, this study shifts the analytical focus to the visual dimension of protest communication. The analysis is based on a dataset of 929 photographs of protest banners collected between December 2024 and February 2025 across 35 faculties at five universities in Serbia. Using a deductive coding approach, the study explores features such as script type, language, text-image interplay, and the distinction between internal and external banners. Findings show that most slogans were written in Serbian and predominantly used Cyrillic script, often combining text with visual elements to enhance symbolic impact. The use of national script functioned both as an identity marker and as a strategy of symbolic resistance. Visual stylisation, multimodal composition, and emotional vocabulary played a crucial role in shaping public perception and internal group solidarity. Protest slogans thus operated as multimodal forms of symbolic struggle, linking visual design with political critique in a context of shrinking democratic space.

Key words: student protests, slogans, symbolic struggle, Serbia.

1 nzvijer@f.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6401-2460>

2 marija.radoman@f.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1589-3393>

3 aleksandra.markovic@f.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5219-4220>

Formalne karakteristike protestnih parola kao elemenat simboličke borbe tokom blokada fakulteta u Srbiji (2024–2025)

Apstrakt: Rad analizira vizuelne i formalne karakteristike studentskih parola nastalih tokom talasa blokada univerziteta i masovnih protesta u Srbiji, koje su imale ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju društveno-političkog pejzaža zemlje od kraja 2024. i tokom 2025. godine. Rad predstavlja nastavak prethodnog istraživanja sadržaja studentskih slogana, a ova studija pomera analitički fokus ka vizuelnoj dimenziji protesne komunikacije. Istraživačku građu čini baza podataka koja obuhvata 929 fotografija protesnih transparenata, prikupljenih u periodu između decembra 2024. i februara 2025. godine, na 35 fakulteta sa pet univerziteta u Srbiji. Korišćenjem deduktivnog pristupa, kodna shema je primenjena na karakteristike poput vrste pisma, jezika, odnosa teksta i slike, kao i razlike između unutrašnjih i spoljašnjih transparenata. Rezultati pokazuju da je većina parola bila ispisana na srpskom jeziku, pretežno ćirilicnim pismom, često u kombinaciji sa vizuelnim elementima radi pojačavanja simboličkog efekta. Upotreba nacionalnog pisma funkcionisala je i kao marker identiteta i kao strategija simboličkog otpora. Vizuelna stilizacija, multimodalna kompozicija i emocionalni vokabular igrali su ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju javne percepcije i unutrašnje grupne solidarnosti. Protestne parole su se, stoga, ispoljile kao multimodalni oblici simboličke borbe, koji povezuju vizuelni dizajn sa političkom kritikom u kontekstu sužavanja demokratskog prostora.

Ključne reči: studentski protesti, parole, simbolička borba, Srbija

Introduction

The student protests that began in late 2024 and extended well into 2025 represent one of the most prolonged and symbolically charged civic mobilisations in Serbia's recent history. Sparked by the tragic collapse of a newly renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad, which claimed sixteen lives, and by the violent assault on students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) as they paid tribute to the victims, the protests quickly grew from localised student blockades into a nationwide movement. In the absence of timely institutional accountability, students initiated demonstrations characterised by faculty occupations, public actions and protest marches, and most prominently, slogans displayed on banners. These slogans emerged not only as tools of resistance but also as expressive acts of political and symbolic communication.

This paper builds on the previous study by Zvijer, Marković, and Radoman (2025), titled *Svi u blokade! An Analysis of Slogans during the*

Student Occupations in Serbia 2024/2025, and serves as its continuation. While the earlier research focused on the content and thematic dimensions of protest slogans, the present study shifts attention to their visual and formal features, aiming to uncover how these contribute to the broader communicative and symbolic functions of protest. By analysing slogans through the lens of multimodality, symbolic struggle, and collective identity, the paper explores how language, form, and visual design intersect to convey layered political messages. These slogans—whether internally directed to mobilise peers or externally addressed to the public and government—operate as powerful carriers of meaning in a context where traditional channels of democratic dialogue have been eroded. Through the use of national scripts, emotional vocabulary, and creative visual forms, student protesters have claimed visibility, challenged dominant narratives, and articulated a shared sense of injustice. In doing so, they reshaped and enriched the landscape of political expression in contemporary Serbia.

Theoretical Framework

One of the central features of the student faculty blockades, which later took the form of a protest movement, was banners with slogans.⁴ Looking at protest slogans from a broader perspective, it can be said that they are a very efficient and even effective way of communicating. Slogans are usually defined as pointed terms, phrases or expressions, fittingly worded, which suggest action, loyalty, or cause people to decide upon and to fight for the realisation of some principle or decisive issue (Veg, 2016, p. 675). Essentially, the slogan conveys the message in a short, clear and quick way and, as can be seen from the previous statement, has a certain action potential. Although this type of communication has its limitations (Sardoč & Prebilič, 2023), this does not diminish the communication potential of slogans, which is particularly suitable in the modern social circumstances of fast, short and short-lived information. This is especially true for the characteristics of slogans such as expressiveness embodied in the “writing act” which allows emotional and personal connection, as well as the diversity embodied in the different ways of creating slogans (handwritten, coloured, printed...) and in their various themes and content (Van de Velde, 2024).

Communication through protest slogans used by a particular social group can be directed inwards, to the members of their own group, or out-

4 Banners and slogans are not considered synonyms. Slogans represent the content in the form of a symbolic message, which is transmitted by banners as a medium, i.e. as a means of this transmission.

wards, to the wider society. The direction of communication, internal or external, determines the content of the slogans, their meaning and function. In addition to the basic functions of slogans such as transforming perceptions of reality, altering self-perceptions of protestors, legitimizing the movement, prescribing courses of action, and mobilizing for action (Veg, 2016, p. 674), slogans created specifically for internal communication can have additional integrative and solidarity functions, as well as functions of encouragement, strengthening morale within the group morality etc. Similarly, slogans intended for external communication may have additional informational functions aimed at wider recognition of the protestors themselves and the goals they are fighting for. There are some variations within this type of slogan communication, such as using the English language as a *lingua franca* to convey the message beyond the local setting into a wider global context and to a broader audience (Bekar, 2015).

In addition, external communication can also have a corrective function. This function is seen here in the light of Habermas's theory of the public sphere (Habermas, 1969), according to which public opinion is a corrective and critical factor in relation to normatively postulated political authorities. By going out in public, on the streets and squares, the students with their banners and slogans critically point out different aspects of the political government (its decisions, actions...) and the characteristics of the social system as well, thus forming a specific form of critical publicity with other citizens who support them. This type of communication through slogans is particularly important in situations where public expression of criticism (e.g. through the public media services) of the ruling discourses is impossible.

The students' protest activities, which include the public expression of critical views through banners and slogans against the centres of political, legal, economic, cultural and any other established power, introduce them to the field of symbolic struggle. Since slogans operate through language and express their criticism through it, such type of communication implies relations of symbolic struggle, because language rarely functions exclusively as a means of communication in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1992). Outside of the communication perspective, language as the main medium of the meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination (Thompson, 1984), and is a channel through which power relations are manifested. Of particular importance is official or legitimate language, which is the basis for the dominance of political power and one of the conditions for symbolic dominance (Bourdieu, 1992: 24). On the other hand, language can serve to shake and challenge dominant positions of power. Such resistance can be based on a deliberate antagonistic interpretation of the meanings derived from official language (Hall, 2006), as well

as on the meaning inversion and parody of common cultural or political references (Alhasnawi & Mizhir Radhi, 2023). It is through the relations between symbolic domination and symbolic resistance that the terrain of symbolic struggle is constituted, in which language and communication are the channels for its manifestation.

In the case of slogans, the expression of a critical or other attitude and the perception of this expression depend largely on their formal structure, i.e. their appearance. This implies the importance of the denotative level in the context of the well-known distinction between denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1979). The denotative level refers to the formal character of slogans (their appearance) and therefore to what is directly accessible to the senses, in this case, the sense of sight. Therefore, denotation is often based on a description. The connotative level, on the other hand, comprises associative meanings that are much more flexible, can change and can be interpreted more freely. Nevertheless, the denotative level should not be regarded as meaningless, because denotation can also convey meanings and meaningful messages (Hall, 2006). In the case of student slogans, the denotative level would include the size of the letters, the type of font, the combination of pictorial and textual content, their positioning on the banner, the use of colours and the like. In the broadest sense, the appearance of what is written is important, so in the case of slogans, the way the text is designed and styled can significantly affect the meaning of what is written as well as its interpretation (Philipps, 2012). In this way, certain meanings were conveyed through the formal features of the slogan, and thus the form possessed a certain kind of symbolic potential.

Although student protest slogans predominantly appeared in written form, this was not the only form. In addition there were slogans that included a combination of text and pictorial elements, as well as those that were entirely in the form of an image. The predominance of written slogans did not imply a neglect of the visual dimension. On the contrary, textual elements were often visually stylised through the use of colour,⁵ varied font sizes, graphic symbols, and other visual enhancements that merged text with pictorial features. This interplay between textual and visual elements aligns with the concept of “imagetext”, which denotes composite, synthetic works that combine image and text (Mitchell, 1994, p. 89). The notion of imagetext challenges the binary opposition between image and text, recognising that many protest slogans represented a kind of amalgam of textual and pictorial elements. Such different ways of

5 The formal composition of the image (Philipps, 2012) is very important when it comes to slogans, especially those where different letters are emphasized through different colours.

expression that are present in student slogans can also point to multimodality as their intrinsic characteristic. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple semiotic modes – most commonly textual, visual, and graphic elements – to produce meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In this way, multimodality enhances the communicative potential of slogans, enabling them to convey complex messages more effectively and affectively.

Contextual Framework

To understand the student wave of protests and the slogans that were an integral part of it, it is necessary to consider the broader contextual framework. The collapse of the canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad, in which 16 people lost their lives and an assault on the students of the FDU, was merely a trigger, while the roots of growing discontent can be traced to the socio-political environment in which Serbian citizens have lived for decades, with varying degrees of continuity. The regime in Serbia can be characterised as *creeping authoritarianism* (Hasanbegović, 2020), *networked autocracy* (Petrović, 2018), or *(new) competitive authoritarianism* (Milutinović, 2022; Spasojević & Lončar, 2023). Features of such systems include unfair electoral conditions, tight media control, and the use of demagoguery and populism (Vladislavljević & Krstić, 2023), as well as a fragmented and weak opposition (Laštro & Bieber, 2021), where ruling parties operate as machines supported by clientelist networks (Günay & Džihic, 2018).

This also highlights the close link between the level of democracy and the prevalence of corruption. According to Transparency Serbia, the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) places Serbia 105th out of 180 countries—its worst ranking since 2012.⁶ One major consequence of widespread corruption, government opacity, and the poor state of public institutions in Serbia has been the recurrence of scandals, the most notorious being the 2016 Savamala affair (Backović, 2019), involving illegal demolitions tied to the “Belgrade Waterfront” project—now a symbol of political corruption and abuse of power. Several major protests followed, including those against Belgrade Waterfront (2016), the “Protest Against Dictatorship” (2017), and the “1 of 5 Million” movement (2018–2020) (see Pešić et al, 2018; Jovanović, 2019). The most recent and largest protest was “Serbia Against Violence,” which followed the school shootings in Belgrade and village shootings near Mladenovac on May 3 and 4, 2023, raising serious questions about government accountability (Fridman, 2024). These

6 https://www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/Saop%C5%A1tenje_CPI_2024.pdf (accessed February 25, 2025)

events are important for tracking major protest movements and showing the continuity that led to today's student protests. They did not arise suddenly, but are the result of long-standing dissatisfaction, electoral frauds, and systemic failures.

Although civic discontent has persisted through protests, the Serbian regime adopts a strategy of passive tolerance, allowing demonstrations to occur while ignoring them, expecting they will eventually die out. This did not happen with the student protests, which, sparked by the tragic incident on November 1, 2024, and the government's response to public demonstrations, have continued for over six months.⁷

Method Notes

The banners featuring students' slogans and visual elements that emerged during the student blockades and protests form the primary focus of this study. The main objective is to identify key visual patterns and interpret them within the broader socio-political context of the country, as well as in relation to the characteristics of the student movement itself. This goal leads to the central research question, which analyses the formal aspects of the banners: language, the use of scripts (Cyrillic or Latin), the combination of narrative and visual elements (symbolism, design, composition) and direction of communication through banners (internal or external). To address this question, the study utilises an analysis of photographs of student banners, collected due to the impracticality of directly observing the numerous banners. The collection process, lasted from December 2024 to mid February 2025, involved elements of visual and photographic documentation (Zvijer, 2022).⁸ While the data consists of photographs of the banners, the core focus of this study remains on the visual expression of the slogans and their role in conveying the students' messages.

The analysis in this study is based on a photographic database of student protest banners collected by the authors (Markovic et al., 2025). The dataset comprises 929 photographs of protest materials gathered during visits to 35 faculties across five universities in Serbia.⁹ The initial

7 At the time of writing, student-led faculty blockades and broader student and civic protests are still ongoing.

8 The data was collected within the project „The Wave of Student Revolt in Serbia: University Blockades 2024–2025“ of the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade.

9 University of Belgrade, University of Arts in Belgrade, University of Niš, University of Novi Sad, University of Kragujevac. For a complete list of faculties, see the archive Markovic et al., 2025.

organisation of the visual data involved sorting the photographs according to their place of collection, facilitating a contextual understanding of the material. The selection of images for analysis was guided by the researchers' subjective judgment,¹⁰ reflecting a purposive sampling approach rather than aiming for statistical generalisation. This decision acknowledges the fluid and dynamic nature of the protest environment, where banners were continuously produced, removed, or destroyed. Field observations indicated a phenomenon of banners *hyperproduction*, and the fact that many banners photographed in December 2024 might no longer have been present by February 2025. Hence, no claim of exhaustive coverage can be made.

A significant methodological consideration was the treatment of images featuring the bloody hand symbol, which serves as a prominent emblem of the larger social movement that emerged at the end of 2024 in Serbia beyond the student blockades.¹¹ Given that many posters and documents displaying only this symbol were discovered within and on university buildings, and recognising that not all were documented, we opted to exclude photographs showcasing solely the bloody hand in order to maintain analytical clarity.

In contrast to our previous study, which utilised an inductive approach for coding slogans and banners, allowing themes to emerge from the data through open coding (Zvijer et al., 2025), the current study employed a deductive coding process guided by predefined variables. To address the research question focused on the visual aspects of protest banners, we established a coding scheme in advance, informed by theoretical considerations and specific visual features of interest. These features included language, script type (Cyrillic or Latin), the presence of narrative elements versus purely visual elements or their combination, and the distinction between external and internal banners. The photographs were systematically coded according to these established categories. Furthermore, all narrative slogans were systematically transcribed from the photographs to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the most frequently occurring words. This structured approach facilitated a consistent analysis of the visual data, enabling comparisons across the dataset while maintaining alignment with the study's specific objectives. Furthermore, the coding process was conducted collaboratively to ensure reliability. This deductive coding method

10 The analysis excluded the following items: duplicate photos, lists of student demands, logistical notices, three-dimensional banners, banners displayed by employees in their offices, and messages of support received by students from various social actors.

11 The bloody hand symbol used during the protests conveyed the message 'you have blood on your hands' alluding to corruption blamed for the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on November 1, 2024, which caused multiple fatalities.

complements the inductive approach of our earlier work by shifting the analytical focus from content meaning to visual form and function. The research material was coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2022.

The Form of Protest Slogans

The visual form of protest slogans and banners plays a vital role in amplifying the messages conveyed during student protests and faculty blockades, adding layers of meaning beyond the textual slogans themselves. This section analyses key visual and formal aspects of the slogans, including the language and script type (whether written in Cyrillic or Latin), the presence of purely narrative elements (text), purely visual elements (image), or a combination of both (imagetext), as well as the distinction between external and internal banners. Examining these features reveals how students use language, design, and symbolism to communicate and engage a broader audience. By focusing on these formal characteristics, this analysis complements previous content-based analysis of student slogans (Zvijer et al., 2025) and deepens our understanding of how form and function intertwine in the visual rhetoric of student protest.

Script type

As many as four-fifths of slogans (80%) were written in Cyrillic, while only 20% were in Latin script. Notably, among the faculties in Novi Sad (the capital of Vojvodina autonomous province), Cyrillic appeared in 56% of the sampled slogans, with 44% recorded in Latin. Although the Cyrillic alphabet is the official state script and a significant aspect of national identity – evident in laws that promote its use in official communications – Vojvodina’s multinational community includes a substantial presence of national minorities that utilise the Latin alphabet.¹²

The utilisation of the Cyrillic alphabet could serve as a deliberate symbolic practice that expresses the collective national identity of students while engaging in the political struggle for the legitimacy of their protest. This practice gains particular significance amid the intense delegitimisation of protests by authorities, who frame students as “foreign mercenaries”, “foreign agents”, “an extended arm of the Croatian services”

12 Most national minorities in Serbia live in Vojvodina, an area known for its ethnic diversity, which includes communities such as Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Romanians, Roma, Bunjevci, Ruthenians, Macedonians, Ukrainians, and Germans (RZS, 2023).

or “anarchists”.¹³ In this light, writing slogans in Cyrillic can be seen as a *counter-discursive act*, aimed at emphasising the importance of national identity and national as such. The Cyrillic alphabet may thus embody “true” patriotism, signalling to a broader audience that students’ actions are free from “foreign influence”. Consequently, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet can be interpreted as a *discursive delegitimisation strategy of delegitimisation itself*, as a means of subverting the dominant narrative by reclaiming the very symbols that typically serve to legitimise authority. In this sense, the Cyrillic alphabet transforms into a *multi-faceted symbol*: an expression of internal unity and shared identity, as well as a weapon in a symbolic battle.

Language

Given this context, it is not surprising that a significant majority of slogans (97%) are written in Serbian, while other languages are represented at a negligible level. Among the latter, the highest numbers of banners were in English (12), followed by Latin (6), and a total of 8 in various other languages, primarily from the Faculty of Philology. The predominant use of the Serbian language further indicates that these slogans were intended to communicate with a broader audience “within the state,” addressing either government representatives or citizens, rather than targeting the wider international community.¹⁴ A different example can be found in the student protest in Belarus in 2020 against the authoritarian Belarusian government and President Alexander Lukashenko, when slogans were often written in English, university student performances were in English, and playwrights wrote in English in the hope that European theatres would organize readings in solidarity with the Belarusian people (Brown, 2023; Korosteleva & Shadurski, 2025).

The most frequently used words, as can be seen on Image 1, are: students (71, studenti), for (61, za), blockade (59, blokada), we (46, mi), justice (39, pravda), system (37,), all (33, svi), us (32, nas), you (25, vi), corruption (25, korupcija), now (23, sad), state (22, država), RTS (19, The national radio and television broadcaster of Serbia).

13 Report on the situation and threats to human security, human rights and freedoms in the Republic of Serbia (Reporting period: January 15 - March 31, 2025), accessed 22.05.2025.

14 This does not imply that there were no strategies for engaging the international community. For instance, one initiative involved a bicycle tour to Strasbourg, which is home to the headquarters of the Council of Europe, while another featured a relay marathon of students from Belgrade to Brussels to deliver a letter to the European Parliament.

Image 1. Word cloud, the most frequently used words (in Serbian)



The most frequently used words – such as students, we, justice, system, and blockade – not only highlight the dominant themes of the slogans but also serve as condensed signifiers in a broader symbolic struggle regarding the meanings of protest, legitimacy, and social order. These commonly used terms reveal a distinct emphasis on the collective identity (students, we, all, us, you), central demands and targets (blockades, justice, system, corruption, state, RTS), as well as a sense of temporal urgency (now, when, until when, today, tomorrow). Furthermore, many of these key words reflect emotional intensity and moral engagement, encapsulating concepts such as freedom, fight, justice, accountability, injustice, conscience, empathy, life, blood, and truth.

Words like justice, accountability, and freedom are not neutral descriptors. They are invoked to challenge the moral legitimacy of dominant institutions, to reframe the public narrative, and to lay claim to ethical superiority. Especially salient is the strong collective register: the repeated use of we, all, us, and students constructs a solidaristic “we”, positioning students as a unified moral subject. This discursive collectivisation can be seen as a *performative enactment of solidarity*, not only among students but with a broader imagined community that includes “the people” (narod), the “oppressed”, or the “just”. The slogans thus do not merely call for solidarity – they do solidarity, linguistically and symbolically.

The performative repetition of specific terms such as “justice”, “system”, and “we” serves to entrench the values of protest within a shared group. These keywords not only carry descriptive significance but also

embody normative weight, delineating the distinctions between those “on the right side” (justice, students, solidarity) and those “on the wrong side” (corruption, lies, state power).

What is particularly interesting in this corpus is the simultaneous presence of institutional critique (system, corruption, state, government) and affective vocabulary (love, empathy, life, heart, conscience). This juxtaposition points to a *dual register of protest*: rational–structural and emotional–moral. In this way, slogans serve to connect personal and political realms, mobilising not only arguments but also deep-seated attachments.

Visual dimension of slogans

The interplay between textual and visual elements represents the multimodality of banners. It's essential to grasp the significance of symbols and signs while also examining the iconic characteristics of an image (Imdahl, 1994, as cited in Philipps, 2012). Unlike texts, images communicate through the constellation of elements within a single frame, where the position, proportion, and interaction of visual components generate meanings that often exceed what language alone can convey. Therefore, in analysing protest banners and slogans, it is not enough to interpret slogans at the semantic level.

Hence, one of the basic and most noticeable visual characteristics of slogans is whether they were in narrative (text), visual (image) or combined form (imagetext). Narrative or textual form was recorded in 48% of cases, the other half (49%) was in a combined format. We recorded an exclusively visual form in only 3%. Despite the kind of dominance of the text, the visual aspect was still not negligible. Even with those slogans that were in text form, the text itself was in many cases stylised in different ways, most often through the specific shaping of letters, their colouring or combining and mixing with different visual and graphic elements. This directly points to the importance of the visual plane, which was also contributed to by the fact that such slogans were carried on banners that resembled a picture in their two-dimensional form.

The text itself was structured in a specific way and its presentation, as well as its reception, were influenced by the composition, size and type of letters, spacing between lines, etc., which means that the way the text was designed must also be taken into account (Philipps, 2012, p. 8). Accordingly, it could be noted that most of the banners were individualised and handwritten (Van De Velde, 2024, p. 578), which means that they were not made serially and mechanically, but a personal effort was made during their creation. These forms of personal creativity correspond in a broader sense to folk art, or what de Certeau calls folk culture (de Certeau, 2002).

Image 2. – Narrative, combined and visual slogans

In the textual slogans the predominant colours were black and red. The use of black and red colours in protests carries deep symbolic meaning rooted in a long tradition of social movements since the late nineteenth century. Red became associated with the labour and socialist movements, serving as a visual marker of solidarity and workers' rights. Black, on the other hand, has a strong political history linked to anarchism as a symbol of resistance and opposition to established power. These colours not only function as visual identifiers but also help foster a sense of community and collective identity within the movements (Sawer, 2007).

Direction of communication

The communicative function of the slogans was particularly evident, indicating that the banners served as a form of communication. During the collection of slogans, it became clear that one part of this communication process was inward-facing; that is, certain slogans were intended for communication within the student group, which resulted in banners placed inside the faculty that were not visible from the outside. In addition to this internal communication, there was also an external aspect, as some banners were displayed on the faculties where they could be seen from outside, along with those carried by students during public protest marches. This allowed for both formal and substantive communication with the broader audience.

The analysis revealed that 68% of the slogans were designed for external communication purposes, while those aimed at internal communica-

tion constituted 32% of the sampled corpus. This indicates a predominant focus on external messaging in the overall distribution of slogans.

The previous study focused on the thematic analysis of slogans that emerged during the student protests, identifying and analysing the most common thematic codes. The most frequent codes in the overall sample were: agency (calls for action and systemic change, motivation), professional identity (identification with specific faculties), quotations (references to pop culture, literature, and proverbs), systemic critique (criticism of the system and corruption), and humour/parody/inversion (humour used as a means of critique) (see Zvijer et al., 2025).

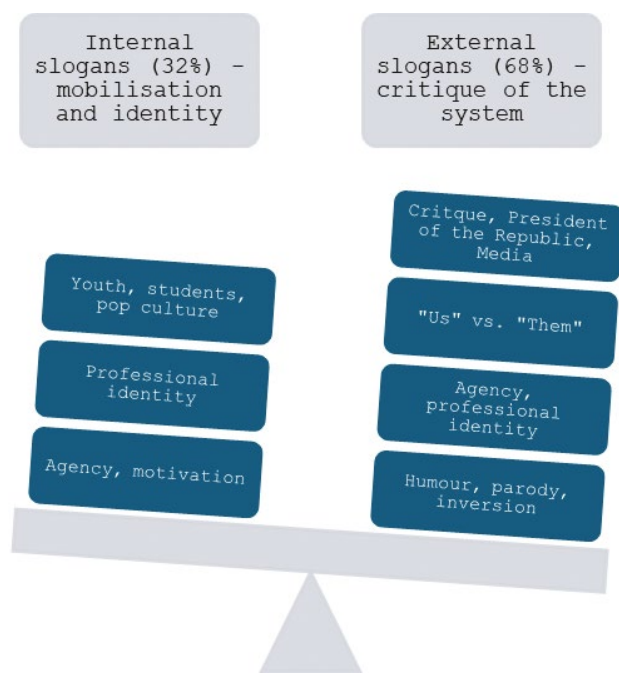
Upon examining the distribution of codes in internal versus external slogans, distinct differences in their functions and communicative orientations become apparent. The slogans designed for internal communication predominantly feature codes related to professional identity, agency, youth/student identity, and allusions to popular culture. These slogans primarily aim to mobilise and affirm identity: they encourage student proactivity, reinforce a sense of collective belonging, and bolster both generational and professional identity. In contrast, among the external slogans dominant themes include not only professional identity and agency, but also humour and parody, the “us-them” distinction, and references to current political events. These slogans actively engage with the wider social sphere and align with what Jürgen Habermas terms “critical publicity” – they address the public and institutions, often employing irony or satire to challenge authority and critique the system, alongside a focus on the media¹⁵. Notably, nearly all slogans directed at the president of the Republic are classified as external, further underscoring their outward-focused nature (see Chart 1).

In other words, while internal slogans act primarily as tools for internal mobilisation, solidarity, and identity reinforcement, external slogans, in addition to these functions, assume the role of public discourse, directed beyond the student community, with strong critical and at times subversive potential.

Conclusion

The student faculty blockades and protests of 2024/2025 demonstrated a clear level of political articulation and symbolic power through the use of slogans and banners. This study analysed the formal features

15 The national radio and television broadcaster of Serbia (RTS) emerged as a principal focal point for media scrutiny regarding the slogans utilized by students.

Chart 1. Internal vs. external slogans

of protest slogans that emerged during university blockades, focusing on their visual and communicative dimensions. Slogans were not only tools of political messaging but also vehicles for expressing collective emotions, identity, and values. The predominance of the Serbian language and Cyrillic script indicated a conscious effort to position students within a national framework, challenging the dominant narrative that portrayed them as "foreign agents".

The form of student slogans possessed a particular symbolic potential; they were not merely a form of communication but embodied a powerful means of resistance and identity construction. Through the interplay of text, image, and symbolism, the slogans conveyed key messages of the movement while reinforcing internal group cohesion. Their content reflected a dual register of protest: rational-political (critique of the system, corruption, institutional failure) and emotional-moral (calls for justice, empathy, conscience). In doing so, the slogans enacted resistance and solidarity, symbolically constructing a shared subjectivity among protesters.

Although students were the central actors, their slogans had the capacity to resonate far beyond academic institutions, influencing broader

public discourse. In this way, they redefined and enriched the terrain of political expression in contemporary Serbia. Moreover, language itself proved to be a potent medium of resistance; it did not merely communicate dissent but also challenged and disrupted dominant power structures. Thus, protest slogans emerged as sites of symbolic struggle, where meaning, power, and identity were negotiated in real time.

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