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“BALM FOR THE SOUL”: SERBIAN POLITICAL SATIRE AS A CRITICAL HUB FOR CITIZENS

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ABSTRACT:

With the global rise of the right wing and an increase of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governance, political satire has flourished in the recent years. During the last several years, political comedy has gained a foothold in the Western Balkans as well, including Serbia, with the creation and development of the Njuz.net website and the 24 Minuta weekly political satire show. This article explores Njuz.net and 24 Minuta (the latter so far not tackled by scholarship) via audience research conducted by a mixed method (mostly qualitative) survey of 475 people who follow the website and the show. The research shows that contemporary political satire in Serbia serves as a critical hub for political participation, as well as the opposition to the government in Serbia; Doona's recent 2016 volume on political comedy has been taken as a significant foundation for a theoretical background.

Keywords: political satire ▪ comedy ▪ 24 Minuta ▪ Njuz.net ▪ Serbia ▪ audience research ▪ political participation

1. INTRODUCTION

This article deals with the political satire television show *24 Minuta*, which has been running for four years now in Serbia, amassing enormous popularity in a short while, and its online predecessor, *Njuz.net*. The show sprung from collaboration of the anchor and journalist Zoran Kesić with the people behind the *Njuz.net* fake news website, resulting in a political satire combined with fake news. It now exists in a 42 minutes video format that runs once a week during a three- to four-month long season, every Saturday on the B92 television from Belgrade (note that since the fall of 2017, the B92 television has changed its name to O2). The format was initially eponymous, as it ran for 24 minutes, but due to popularity, the showrunners expanded it already after the first season. Whilst *Njuz.net* figured as the hub of research interest for only few scholars so far (Kalaba, 2014; Petrović, 2015), the phenomenon of the *24 Minuta* TV show has not been addressed in scholarship, be it from scholars within the field of media and communication, political science, or regional studies (the

Balkans, South-Eastern Europe, and the like). Yet, as will be shown, its importance from both a social and political perspective warrants a detailed analysis.

From the beginning of the 21st century, political satire and comedy have seen their day in scholarship more and more often, primarily from scholars from the field of communication and media studies. Most works, be it from a theoretical or case study oriented perspective, have nonetheless focused heavily (if not in most cases) on Jon Stewart (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baym, 2005; Feldman, 2007; Painter & Hodges, 2010; Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009) and Stephen Colbert (Amarasingam, 2011; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Colletta, 2009; Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009), though other instances of comedy, such as stand-up, satirical theatre, or comics, have also seen an increase in scholarly interest (Bingham & Green, 2016; Bucaria & Barra, 2016; Chute, 2016; Hatfield, 2005; Lee, 2016; Pinto, Marçal, & Vaz, 2015). Based on the work conducted on the topics of Stewart's Daily Show and Colbert's the Colbert Report, a strong empirical framework has emerged though, allowing scholars to conduct research into other, local instances of political satire and comedy, allowing the field to develop and flourish. As Baumgartner and Lockerbie concluded, "political humor viewership also seems to lower trust in government" (Jody C Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018, p. 1061), as well as that it "increases internal political efficacy" (Jody C Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018, p. 1062); others have concluded that political satire increases political participation amongst its viewership (Chen, Gan, & Sun, 2017; Ramsey, 2018). Additionally, research on contemporary political satire has shown that it can serve as a platform for public discontent, especially in less-than-democratic societies and within illiberal governments. Drawing upon the abovementioned, this article explores *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* via their audience, their impact upon their audience, and the importance of political satire for the fostering of active citizenship and political participation. As will be shown, both *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta* can be said to foster political participation and social engagement, seen in the qualitative analysis of the survey among audience members. Current research on political satire additionally informs us that it can be seen as more "honest" and a more trustworthy source of information, as well as that the criticism of the government within a televised satirical show can indeed become a platform for public opinion, which we have analysed within the respondents' answers.

2. FROM NJUZ.NET TO 24 MINUTA

Before the expansion from the Internet to television, *Njuz.net* was a satirical fake news website, publishing parody articles that concentrated on the farcical elements of politics, society and daily life in Serbia (and occasionally, within neighboring states). Initially, it was just a new satirical website, that in 2015 expanded into the *24 Minuta* television show, publishing satirical books along the way. It laid the groundwork for the televised version, that became even more successful, and can

be seen as the Serbian version of the Onion News Network (see: Thompson, 2013; Waisanen, 2011). The Internet is known as a fertile space for parody, as “political humor in general flourishes on the Internet” (Baumgartner, 2008, p. 735). It has been years, though, since Baumgartner wrote that “we know very little about the effects of online political humor” (Jody C. Baumgartner, 2008, p. 736) though, as in the last decade, a number of theoretical works on online political humor have been published, revealing its importance for society (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Kumar & Combe, 2015; Lance, 2013; Young, Bagozzi, Goldring, Poulsen, & Drouin, 2017). *Njuz.net* “started as a small group on Facebook, and went on to create a site that soon gathered a massive following” (Kalaba, 2014, p. 3). In essence, “*Njuz.net* presents ‘news in the mirror’ (*Njuz: Vesti u ogledalu*), in which real information about Serbia and the world is refracted through the prism of parody, irony, humor, and criticism” (Petrović, 2015, p. 290). They “produce stories formally identical to those that circulate in mainstream online and print media, filling this format with humorous, critical, and satirical content” (Petrović, 2015). After several years of work, *Njuz.net* gained popularity steadily, even reaching the point in which, after a farcical, yet real, news snippet has reached high salience in public interest, it is often commented on social networks as ‘this is not Njuz’ (Ser-Cro. nije Njuz), with a “translated” meaning of “this farcical event is in fact real”. In 2012, the authors from *Njuz.net* joined with the journalist and anchor Zoran Kesić to create what is in essence a televised version of the website, which is when *24 Minuta* was created.

“We define a political comedy show as a television programme that emphasises humorous coverage of current issues and parodies of political figures” (Cao & Brewer, 2008, p. 90), a category under which *24 Minuta* will fall. For additional precision, we are talking about the subgenre of political satire, which is defined as “comedy with serious political intent” (J. Corner, Parry, & Richardson, 2013, p. 32), where said “political intent” will become clear as a focus of this research. In any case, “satire must have a strong reference to social, political and cultural reality outside the discursive universe of the texts in itself” (Bruun, 2007, p. 188), which depicts *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net*, as “satirical forms such as *Njuz.net* presume that its consumers are familiar with the current events, the ongoing social and political situations, as well as the stereotypes of the society that they are part of” (Kalaba, 2014, p. 9). A crucial element in political satire is parody, for which, in order to understand it, we have to put it in a wider context, depicting current Serbian social and political reality.

2.1 The social and political background: government, media, censorship and freedom of the press in Serbia

In order to contextualize *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta*, it is necessary to present the social and political situation in which they developed, and which they parody. After the assassination of the philosopher-cum-politician, Prime Minister and democrat

Zoran Đinđić in 2003, the sociopolitical situation in Serbia – including the freedom of the press – slowly degraded, reaching a nadir from 2012 onwards, with the shift in government. During the reign of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić of the Serbian Progressive Party (Ser-Cro. *Srpska napredna stranka*), censorship and a stifling of the freedom of the press became reality anew (Vučić has in the meantime switched to the position of President). The Progressive Party is an offshoot of the old, warmongering, extreme-right wing Serbian Radical Party (Ser-Cro. *Srpska radikalna stranka*), and its leaders have been active in Right Wing propaganda and warmongering during the wars of the nineties (Mikuš, 2016); the current President, Aleksandar Vučić, is known for his infamous quote in which he promised to kill a hundred Muslims for every Serb killed (Clark, 2016); he is now the prime source of censorship and media control (S. Jovanović, 2018). According to the Freedom House report on the freedom of the press in Serbia in 2016, “the administration of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić and aligned media outlets escalated a drive to portray investigative and critical media organizations as foreign propagandists seeking to damage his government and destabilize the country” (Freedom House, 2016). What is more, “some of the most visible pressure on the media came from Prime Minister Vučić and his allies” (Freedom House, 2016). After all, Corner has already written that the media can promote “dominant political viewpoints” (John Corner, 2011, p. 41), which describes the media situation in Serbia with much accuracy. Television debate shows with almost legendary status, such as the *Utisak nedelje* (“impression of the week”), run by anchor and prize-winning veteran journalist, Olja Bećković, were cancelled, alongside many others (including the *Vranjske* daily). Unofficial governmental control of the media became an everyday occurrence, dubbed by Kisić as “soft censorship”, in which “a strong influence of government on the media is seen, yet without official influence, including ‘the misuse of public funds and in monopoly, in the misuse of regulatory and inspective powers, and in para-legal pressure’” (Kisić, 2015, p. 64).

There is a level of absurdity – for lack of better words – in the social and political reality in the country. This has been noted by scholars, some of whom have already pointed out that “the perception shared by many Serbian citizens that their political reality is a farce” (Petrović, 2015, p. 292), which can be said to either only fuel political satire, or at least make its authors’ work less demanding. One instance, among a plethora of others (as it is of high relevance to show the social context in which the satire has developed), is the formal ceremonious opening of an elevator in a home for the elderly by the Prime Minister’s right hand, Minister Aleksandar Vulin (Leskovac & Šperó, 2015), later to be heavily used by *24 Minuta*. The same source informs the reader that the Minister had several more “grand openings”, among others, where he “ceremoniously awarded an astonishing amount of twelve baby-alarms to parents of children with impaired hearing, and he did not miss the opportunity for a ‘ceremonious’ giveaway of packages to the children from the Centre for Children’s Paralysis ... namely, the packages contained an orange, a small chocolate bar, juice, a bag of peanuts and biscuits, all in a total value of 200 dinars”, which amounts to less than

two euros. A more serious example would be the so-called “Asomakum affair”, in which it was made publicly known that the Prime Minister’s brother was in possession of an illegal company, Asomakum, for offshore money-laundering. The brother was defended by the Prime Minister, who claimed that his personal ID was “stolen” and used to open a company via “forgery” of the ID, even though it is publicly known that personal presence is required for such an action. A claim was also made that the brother never owned the company, even though it was also publicly known that he did (Isailović, 2008), spiking a running “gag” in *24 Minuta* in which the show-runners claimed that everything was now a “forgery”. To quote Dimitrijević, “the truth does not exist independently any more, it no longer stands on its own feet, but is completely in the power of the regime” (Dimitrijević, 2016), reminiscing on the nowadays pertinent “alternative facts” trope. On a different occasion, the public was presented with what was probably a rigged call, where an allegedly 83 year old retiree called a talk show in which the Prime Minister spoke to thank him for the fact that he lowered the pensions at a republic level, which is, in addition to all, unconstitutional (Teška reč, 2015). As Petrović noticed, the “reality very often takes the shape of a parody of what is imagined as decent, normal, dignified life; politics in Serbia is seen as a parody of what politics is supposed to be” (Petrović, 2015, p. 300). We have named only a few instances of “official farce” in the lines above.

From 2012 onwards, the government has been involved in numerous scandals, the proliferation of which disallowed the public (as well as the parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition) to properly concentrate on each and every one of them. Investigative journalism became stifled by smear campaigns from tabloids that promote the government’s policies and discourses (Košut, 2016; KRIK, 2016), and a large portion of the media censored in various ways. That is why it can be said that “emptied of all sentimentalism or condescension, contemporary satirical forms that exist in Serbia today as a part of popular culture have managed to make political incorrectness, violent discourse and excessive parody a legitimate weapon in the battle for an alternative discourse” (Kalaba, 2014, p. 12). For these reasons, Kalaba has noticed that “*Njuz.net* has gained widespread popularity as well as critical acclaim for its fight for a different version of truth. Its sarcastic discourse, at the same time imbued with humorous and caustic oppositions between what is said and what is meant provides a satirical context in which a mode of subversion of dominating structures is possible” (Kalaba, 2014, p. 12). In other words, the Serbian political and social scene has become fertile grounds for political satire, as its very format allows to challenge dominant discourses and practices, unconstrained by the regulations of standard journalism, that has become even more constrained due to the increasing stifling of the freedom of the press, as well as a growing pathos of censorship. Much of the background could arguably be traced to the Yugoslav *Top Lista Nadrealista* satirical TV show, that was popular before the breakup of Yugoslavia (see: S. M. Jovanović, 2016; Orel, 2018); similar instances can be seen within the region in the Bosnian UGC-based *Raja sa biroa*, the Croatian News Bar, as well as the Serbian *Nikad*

izvini. As other successful examples, the Belgrade-based *Pljiž* can be named, as well as *Državni posao*.

24 Minuta has thus become a hub of legitimate social and political criticism, where “such criticism [is] connected to what is often called ‘democratic deficits’ in the literature on political communication and political media more generally” (Doona, 2016, p. 34). In Hariman’s words, political satire, after all, “exposes the limitations of dominant discourses” (Hariman, 2008, p. 251), the dominant discourses, in this case, being government-supported propaganda and an ever-lowering quality of traditional journalism. This is typical of contemporary political comedy, as “much of political comedy plays off power structures, by commenting, reinforcing, or questioning them – and here, it must be remembered that the political comedy producers and audience are parts of such power relations themselves” (Doona, 2016, p. 72). Theory has already come to the conclusion that political comedy can “create an alternative space for social and political critique, outside the institutions of traditional media due to the proliferation of networked devices” (Kumar & Combe, 2015, p. 211). In other words, satire’s “soft power”, to use Nye’s term (Nye Jr, 2009), is vital in challenging democratic deficit and fostering active citizenship, which will become clearer in the audience research section.

3. AUDIENCE RESEARCH

As Jensen wrote, ‘because the reception of communication is a crucial site for the struggle over the definition, and re-definition, of social reality, audience analysis raises critical political questions’ (Jensen, 1987, p. 22). This is especially relevant for the topic, having in mind that communication plays a critical role in both political and everyday life (Williams, 1977). As audience reception happens in a particular societal, political and historical environment, the understanding of said environment is essential (Jensen, 1987, p. 24), and we have given the appropriate context on which the following analysis will operate in the pages above, taking known theory on political satire that will be put into a local, Serbian context. As audience researchers have already discussed, political comedy does possess influence onto its audience’s reception of politics and political candidates (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005); ‘political entertainment programming can influence attitudes, political knowledge, and political participation’ (Hoffman & Young, 2011, p. 159).

Thus, in order to gauge the audience’s interest and opinions about both *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net*, as well as how the audience makes meaning out of political satire, we have conducted a survey (N=475) among the show’s followers. Today, there are “online spaces like social networking sites and microblogging services are offering their users a lot of interesting tools to follow and to visualize some of the processes they enable” (Patriarche, Bilandzic, Jensen, & Jurisic, 2014, p. 41), and we have used an online survey that was spread on social networking sites, among others, by the show-runners themselves, who have helped the research on these pages by disseminating

the questionnaire among their fans. Nowadays, “surveys are one of the most common research methods applied in social sciences and media studies. Their proved effectiveness to capture public opinion trends and to represent the wide distribution of social positions on any salient topic has also been used to justify their permanent application in these fields of research” (Patriarche et al., 2014, p. 46). The results can be classified as a “nonprobability sample, which depends on happenstance or convenience to determine participation” (Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2000, p. 113), though the negative sides of the nonprobability sample were alleviated by the fact that the survey was both spread by the showrunners themselves to their fans, as well as by the fact that it was conducted among people who follow the *24 Minuta* show and the *Njuz.net* online production enthusiastically. In simpler terms, in order to understand why a certain audience would follow a certain show or website, asking them directly is seen as necessary. As the questionnaire was spread by the showrunners themselves, a question of bias could be posed; nevertheless, this allowed exactly the avid followers of the show and website to participate in the research, as they were the key demographic.

The respondents have been asked 21 questions, some of which are purely quantitative (such as giving *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* ratings), some of which qualitative, in which they have been asked to give their own opinion about a plethora of questions, such as their own views on the show and the *Njuz* group, via their own views on political participation, as well as their view of the general social and political situation in Serbia, and how it relates to their perception of the show (as well as vice versa). When it comes to grading, the majority had an extremely positive view of the show, as well as of *Njuz.net*. 71.6 % gave *Njuz.net* the top grade (the grading system used was from 1 to 5, 5 being the top grade, as this grading system is used in primary and secondary school education, and was thus supposed to most closely match the viewers’/ readers’ own grading experiences; additionally, it corresponds to the Likert scale), whilst *24 Minuta* was graded with a top grade in 77.9%. Only two persons rated *Njuz.net* with a grade of 1 (0.4%), as well as only five grading it with a grade 2. *24 Minuta* was rated with the grade 1 only once (0.2%), and only 7 times (1.5%) with the grade 2. The vast majority of the audience graded both *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta* with top grades (4 or 5), altogether 95.6% for *Njuz.net*, and 94.3% for *24 Minuta*, indicating a rather strong favorable rating for both instances. Though one might expect the followers of a particular show to grade it positively in general, we decided to ask them to grade the show in any case, as there would be a potential difference in the audience’s perception of the show if the majority gave them the top grade (5), or whether they might have split the grading more equally among the grades 5, 4, and 3. The high percentage of the top grade does inform us of the audience’s extremely positive opinion about it. The rest of the questionnaire was purely qualitative, in which we were interested in their own view of the show; data such as the respondents’ sex or age, for instance, we chose not to analyze, as we were not interested in demographic research, but in the

respondents' perception of the show and its connection to political participation. It is, thus, not representative of the society, but of its audience.

The questions about the audience's personal reasons why they follow *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* gave us deeper insight. One of the interviewees responded by saying *Njuz.net* has an "original, humorous and effective way of social criticism which is much more useful than the classical exploration of diverging political standpoints and the actions of the opposition". Drawing upon the socio-political context, we would need to mention that the opposition seldom figures in a positive light within the Serbian media, as well as rarely getting professionally reported on. Another opined that *Njuz.net* provides them with the "perfect satire and criticism of contemporary events, often a better description than 'real' news and newspapers", drawing upon the diminishing professionalism within the Serbian media. Yet another wrote that "they point to the paradoxes, manipulations and trickery in public relations. They shed light on the essence of the event. They debunk exaggerations and lies in public communication. They point towards thoughtless and unhealthy actions of people". Altogether, what is seen here is the value of political satire, once traditional journalism (in light of the censorship and media control) has failed. One responder wrote how he follows *Njuz.net* because he has "not been following television for years. It is much easier to follow the satirical side and thus get up to date". Another wrote how it is "fun and informative, as I often do not know about something, because I do not follow the daily press", while yet another wrote that *Njuz.net* provides "excellent news with deep meaning". All these opinions are in agreement with the fact that professionalism within journalism in Serbia has been plummeting for a while. As was already noticed, conventional journalism in general faces a "crisis of authority" (Carlson & Peifer, 2013), allowing political satire to fill in the ever expanding gap, which might be said to be especially true in Serbia. In Petrović's words, "this fluid relationship between real and fake, reality and its parody, which is established in the process of creating, consuming, and interpreting *Njuz.net's* 'news,' is another—and probably the most interesting—aspect of what makes *Njuz.net* a unique phenomenon among alternative media in Serbia. It successfully reflects the view many Serbian citizens share about their sociopolitical reality, which may explain the site's continuing and increasing popularity and the fact that its parodic potential has not been exhausted in the four years since *Njuz.net* began" (Petrović, 2015, p. 299).

Once the national political processes have become farce, and farce has become reality, a farcical approach – easily understood by the audience, in this case – allows the viewers/readers to connect to the production, cognitively and emotionally. As was already noticed, "political comedy's use of irony, parody and self-deprecation is what makes it different from conventional news, as it invites something different from the engagement of its audience" (Doona, 2016, p. 79). It seems that it is exactly this type of difference – difference from conventional news and conventional journalism, seen often as "lies" under media control and censorship – is the key to understanding the popularity.

A rather similar – if not identical – view was given for the *24 Minuta* show. One interviewee wrote how it was “sadly, the only remaining show with a national frequency that has an honest, critical viewpoint on the current government”, while another opined how “it is funny and the criticism is excellent, I inform myself about what is happening in Serbia, as I would go crazy if I followed standard news regularly”. In essence, both *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* are seen as informative and useful. Another wrote how *24 Minuta* was “deeply on the side of reason and justice”, while another opined that “this show has become a sort of news source for me, as I no longer follow the news”. Another one wrote that “the information is sometimes better than in regular news”. In association with all the above comments, Petrović wrote that “*Njuz.net*’s serious reception (as reflected in the professional journalism society’s award, the fact that it is largely considered a news source and not entertainment, and it’s becoming a self-sustaining enterprise that provides full-time employment for six people) and its increasing popularity and visibility in the Serbian media justify a closer look at this phenomenon” (Petrović, 2015, p. 291); the same can be said about *24 Minuta*, as, in essence, it can be understood as a televised version of *Njuz.net*. All of these answers show an extremely negative view of both journalism within the country per se, as well as of the government (elaborated on the pages to come), begging the question of political participation.

4. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Much has been written about the connection between political comedy and political participation (political and cultural citizenship). In the words of Cao and Brewer, “such programmes may exert a positive impact on public knowledge about politics” (Cao & Brewer, 2008, p. 90), as “exposure to political comedy shows could increase political participation by fostering internal political efficacy” (Cao & Brewer, 2008, p. 92). Some scholars have noticed the inherent paradox within political comedy, stating that “the way that humour is used is paradoxical, since it often attempts to encourage participation but portrays politics as a cynical game” (Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007, p. 465). One of the interviewees wrote how such shows can diminish political participation, once the audience gets satisfied by reading the articles and watching the show, instead of actually engaging themselves politically. This is why we have asked several questions relating to political participation: did *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* have an impact on the audience’s own perception of the socio-political in Serbia, whether they think that political participation in Serbia is useful at any level, and whether they are members of a political party.

A full 67.4% of the respondents graded the “current social and political situation in Serbia” with the lowest grade (475 people), while the grade 2 was given by a further 28.8%, a sum total of 96.2% of the interviewees judging it with the two lowest grades. 0% gave the top grade. In addition, a full 95.4% of the respondents gave the lowest (1) and second lowest (2) grade to the work of the government of the Progressive

Party (65.3% with the grade 1, 30.1% with the grade 2), indicating a high saturation of dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, also demonstrating that *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta* are almost exclusively followed by audiences at the opposite side of the political spectrum from the current government. In other words, both *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* can be seen as critical hubs of the political opposition in Serbia. In the words of Cao and Brewer, “negative information of this sort could motivate viewers to participate in politics by triggering anxiety about the current political situation and future political outcomes” (Cao & Brewer, 2008, p. 92). This anxiety was stressed by the interviewees several times, where one of them wrote how “we live in concentration camp at this time in Serbia”. Several wrote that their political affiliation is the same as that of the showrunners: “I share political views with them, they vent everyday stress through humour”, and “I like their style, and their political viewpoints coincide with mine”. Unlike political satire in the West, the Serbia-specific case sees satire as the use of a space where (for now) there is no censorship, and opposition voices can in actual fact be heard. Due to the rarity of such spaces, it is of small surprise to see it be accepted with open arms.

One of the questions asked was whether the subject voted in the last parliamentary elections, out of which 84.3% answered positively, indicating a stronger sense of political participation and citizenship, especially having in mind that the voter turnout in the 24 April 2016 elections was only 56.7% (note that this is common for Serbia’s election turnout). The disappointment in the current political options and parties was visible in the question whether the participant was a member of a political party, where only 18.7% answered “yes”, indicating a rejection of (current) politics, yet an embrace of political culture. From the point of view of political participation, this is not unexpected, having in mind that “exposure to political comedy shows could also foster political participation by building an imagined community among viewers and making politics more enjoyable” (Cao & Brewer, 2008, p. 92). Some theorists have already noticed that parody is educational per se (Hariman, 2008, p. 264). This educational moment connects to political participation, as it both allows a critical view of the social and political within the society, as well as arguably lead to stronger establishing of political identities, which are crucial for political participation. As Doona noticed, “in this sense, education is power. Being able to critically scrutinise political speech and performance, either directly with the help of a comedian, or indirectly by a type of parodic or ironic perspective aided by comedians, citizens in general and young adult citizens in particular, can regain some of the power that is absent in ordinary citizenship” (Doona, 2016, p. 219). The answers given in the survey show that the audience takes political satire seriously, and that it holds significant value in their lives.

Another relevant question that was asked was whether the audience considers any type of social and political engagement useful or productive in Serbia. This was where a paradoxical combination of complete disappointment and resignation with hope and anticipation was revealed. One of the respondents wrote that “it is pointless.

The majority decides, and the idea that they can be influenced has shown to be ridiculous. However, it is better to fight in futility, than not at all". The answer phrased in the general format of "yes, but..." was among the more common ones: "I think it is of value to fight, but the majority needs to agree on a common cause", or "I currently think that it is of negligible value to engage yourself. But, on the other hand, if nobody gets engaged, nobody will ever succeed in anything". The negative answers were often brusque ("No, no, no, no"; "No. No. It is futile and I do not care"), while the positive ones used to go into much detail, yet frequently stressing the vainness of the endeavor: "The social and political engagement in Serbia is not productive enough, but one should not give up. It pays off to fight for your rights, because next time, there might be some results, or it would pave the way for somebody else". Disappointment is a key term for the understanding of political culture and active citizenship in Serbia (Greenberg, 2010, 2014), as there has been a steady increase in social lethargy and political apathy after a slew of regimes have changed with the socio-political situation and quality of life remaining unchanged. The lethargy among the audience was, thus, expected. However, the positive instance seen in the audience's answers – the ones in which the respondents saw hope – does need to be stressed as well.

Criticism of the government was another key point in the respondents' answers. There is "a darkness rules over Serbia, a madness of tabloidization and the control of the presenting of the most relevant information". The government is depicted by one respondent as "all sick people...including those who support them", they are "rabble", "idiots in government", and following the show is useful, as "not to miss any of the idiocies of those in power". Both the statistical data (the percentages above) and the replies are indicative of a highly negative view of the government, including mentions of the then Prime Minister Vučić in an almost exclusively negative context.

Going beyond the educational and into political identity, political parody can strengthen community bonds within such social groups (in this case, the political opposition), since "political self-identities can be more or less fragile and sensitive to social context. While some young people seem to carry a strong and confident political persona with them into the discussions in different context (also involving social media), others are less forthright and their political talk is restricted to the meetings within a specific peer group" (Ekström, 2015, p. 16). Furthermore, "political comedy audiences are reminded that beyond the satirist, there are others 'out there' who share the same frustrations" (Doona, 2016, p. 158), allowing a further strengthening of political identities of marginalized groups. In other words, "political comedy and political identity are connected ... In a sense, engagement is what comes before participation" (Doona, 2016, p. 125). In this manner, political satire "provides valuable input for reflecting on the role of the media in collective (self-)representation and the ways citizens engage with sociopolitical reality, which is significantly shaped by political discourses" (Petrović, 2015, p. 291). One of the respondents was very straightforward about her emotional reasons for following *Njuz.net*: "Since I have been following you, I am not lonely any more". Much more than being a simple

comedy show inciting laughter and enjoyment, a quality political satire goes a step further, fostering political participation and increasing the awareness of citizenship. As Corner elaborated, “a primary justification for close attention to form in media research is not, as it is in much humanities commentary on the arts, the intrinsic interest of exploring expressive creativity, ‘how pleasing things are done,’ but a recognition that form is necessary to an understanding of the media’s sociality, of its constitutive connections with individual consciousness and with social and political order” (John Corner, 2011, p. 51). Furthermore, having in mind the ubiquitousness of government propaganda, as well as journalism that promotes it, non-like-minded individuals can be prone to disappointment, dissatisfaction and discontent on a daily basis, as several of them have pointed out within the survey. This is why “as political comedy addresses audiences as both emotional and rational, these individuals felt less lonely in relation to their political engagement, as it indicated that there is an implicit audience of like-minded people ‘out there’. Such feelings are important to acknowledge as a part of engagement, and in this case, engagement in political comedy fills a social void. Hence, engagement is partly motivated by a need to belong, to the programmes themselves, to the comedians who perform in them, and to the implicit audience” (Doona, 2016, p. 209).

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, several key instances could be identified when asking why the audience followed *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta*. Among the most prominent ones, we can name the following functions of their production and reception amongst the audience:

1. *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta* are seen as valid sources of factual information. A number of respondents have identified both *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta* as spaces from which viable information can be acquired.
2. They offer emotional support. From seeing them as a “balm for the soul” to “no longer feeling alone”, interviewees have consistently displayed a strong positive emotional reaction to the show and the website.
3. They are seen as honest. As elaborated, in the farcical environment of Serbia’s politics and society, honesty is often seen as a rare virtue; *Njuz.net* and *24 Minuta* were the go-to spaces via which honesty could be found anew.
4. They criticize the government. A large majority of the interviewees, coming politically from the opposition, see the Serbia’s government in a negative light. Having in mind that criticism of the government and objective media reporting have been significantly stifled within the country, the show and the website are seen as a rare space of free criticism.
5. They utilize one of the rare spaces open to criticism of the government. While in the USA (having in mind that most research in political satire revolves around USA-based satire), criticism of the government is seen in opposition politics, the NGO sector, the media, in public spaces (especially since the election of

Donald Trump) – the situation in Serbia is somewhat different, and dissenting voices are difficult to hear due to censorship.

6. They offer a space for “at-a-distance” political participation by creating a public platform for political and social discontent in an increasingly undemocratic society.
7. By essentially campaigning against the government, they encourage the potential electorate to vote against the Progressive Party.

In the ever-increasing farcical nature of both politics and journalism in Serbia, “parody’s important role in Serbian media is ... a symptom of the present reality, in which people do not perceive themselves as social or political agents” (Petrović, 2015, p. 292). One of the respondents in the survey, as an answer to the question about personal reasons for following *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* answered brusquely and to the point: it is a “balm for the soul” (Ser-Cro. expression “*lek za dušu*” for something that is seen as highly positive), while another said it was “an escape into sanity”. This is what Fischer wrote about saying that political comedy is a “survival skill, a tool for acknowledging complexity, a means of exposing or subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies, and an art for affirming life in the face of objective troubles” (Fischer, 1986, p. 244). In other words, and on a broader scale, “the symbolic levelling of political comedy satisfies an intellectual political stance in relation to unequal power distribution, and as such is more enjoyable and more amusing” (Doona, 2016, p. 181).

It is more than just for laughs as well, as, in Critchley’s words, it is a “specific and meaningful practice”, and even beyond that, what it offers to its audiences is essentially “some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke” (Critchley, 2002, p. 4). Consequently, said agreement works to create a community of like-minded individuals that will use the satire to connect, as well as to “vent”, to use Bogavac’s words (Bogavac, 2016). In her work on political comedy, Doona asked a significant, brisk question: “Is this to be taken seriously?” (Doona, 2016, p. 67). We have to answer positively. Serbia has miles to go on its road to a functional democracy, and political comedy, with its impact of fostering unity, as well as social and political participation, can only be dubbed as constructive inputs towards such a daunting task.

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