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Speeches in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia

Discourses on the executive and the opposition



OTVORENI PARLAMENT.rs

O vama se radi.

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Discourses on the executive and the opposition

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● Research methodology

As an initiative dedicated to increasing the publicity of the work of the Parliament and informing the citizens about the work of the Assembly, the Open Parliament researched the way that MPs talk about the holders of executive power in the plenum – about the President, the Prime Minister and ministers – as well as about leaders and prominent politicians of opposition parties. The period from September to the end of 2021 was analysed, i.e. the last four months of the work of the National Assembly in the past year. The analysis covered a part of the extraordinary sittings and the entire ordinary autumn session held in this period. For that purpose, continuous monitoring of all speeches in the plenum of the National Assembly was conducted, as well as recording of each individual mention of the cited actors with an assessment of the tonality: whether the actors were spoken about in a positive, neutral or negative light. A total of 738 speeches were analysed, in which 6,465 individual mentions of the observed actors were recorded and evaluated.

Further analysis of the speeches sought to find out what kind of discourses about the most influential political actors are being created in the National Assembly. In that sense, the fact that the current legislature was formed after the elections that were boycotted by some opposition parties, and that as many as 97% of MPs belong to the ruling majority, seems to be crucial. In such circumstances, the plenary debates in the National Assembly have been largely reduced to just another channel for sending propaganda messages, often the same ones that previously appeared in the pro-government media. Informed and focused discussion of agenda items, asking questions and opening topics that are important to citizens, as well as efficient control of the executive branch are largely lacking.

● Frequency of mention of actors

Insight into the representation of actors in the speeches of MPs, reveals, above all, a lot about the division of power and the idea that MPs have about their own role. Although the basic function of the National Assembly is to oversee and control the work of the Government of the Republic, the focus of parliamentary speeches is on the President of the Republic and opposition leaders.

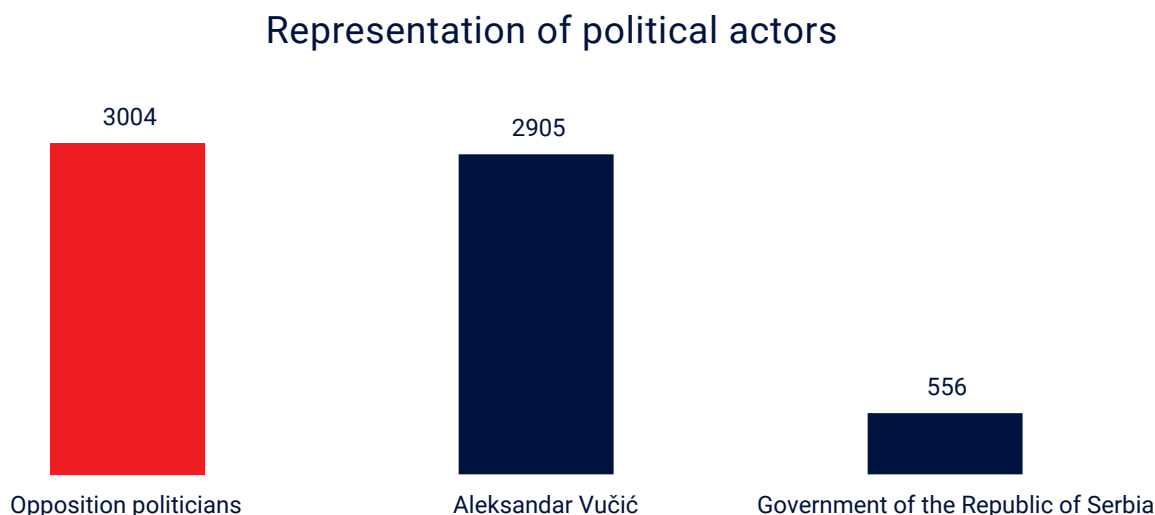


Chart 1: Representation of political actors

By far the most frequently mentioned actor with 45% (2905 times) is the President of the Republic, who is also the President of the strongest parliamentary party (the Serbian Progressive Party), Aleksandar Vučić (Chart 1).

The Prime Minister of the Republic and all her ministers were mentioned in only nine percent (556 times) of the total mention of all actors included in the research. The Prime Minister, who according to the Constitution is also the holder of the most influential political function in this country, was mentioned by the MPs only 74 times. In addition to the President of the Republic, as many as four opposition politicians and one minister were mentioned more often in the Assembly than Ana Brnabić (Chart 2).

Government of the Republic of Serbia

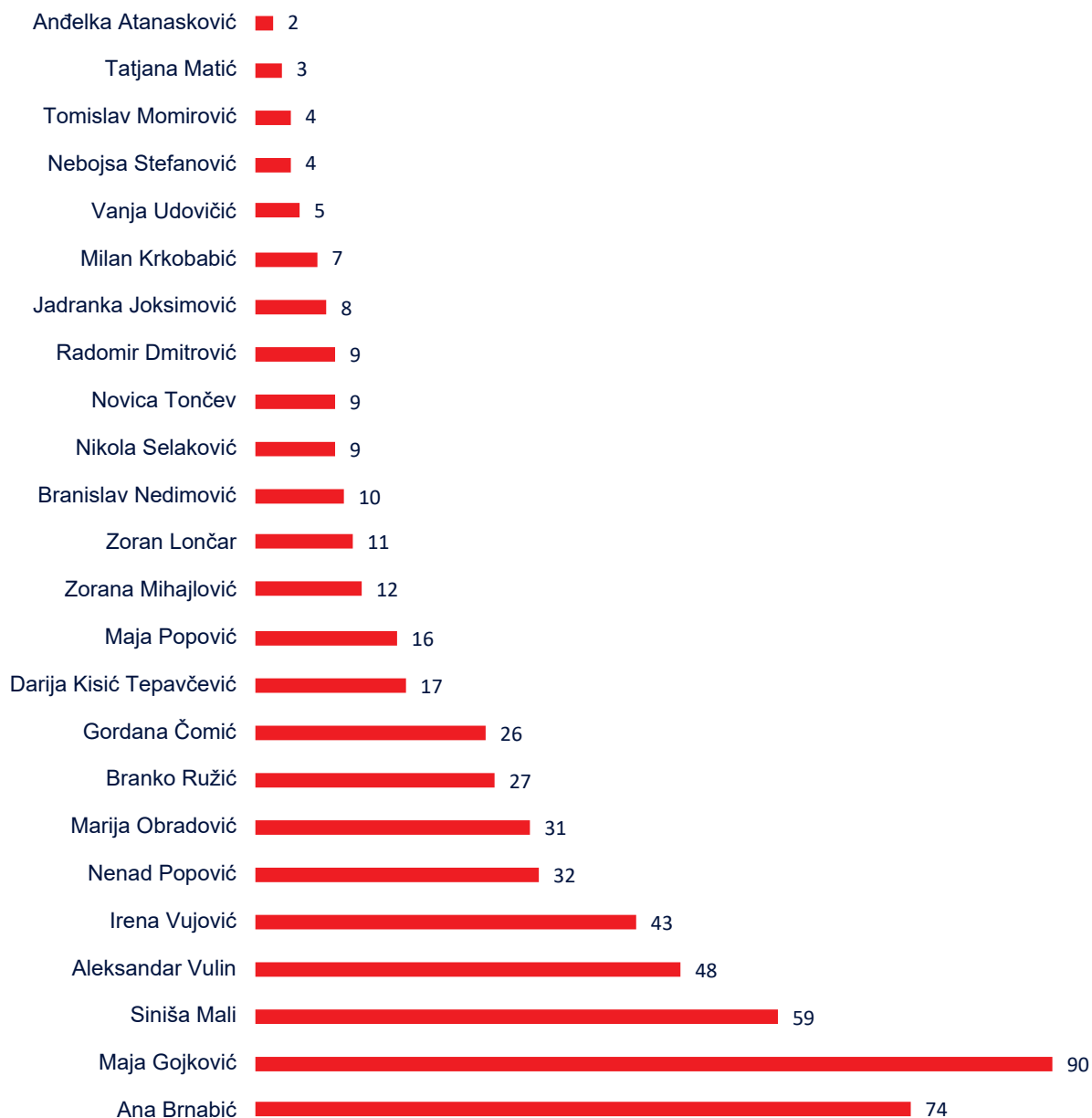


Chart 2: Representation of members of the Government of Serbia

The number of mentions indicates that the current legislature was focused on the opposition during the last four months of 2021. Thus, 46 percent of the total representation of all actors goes to seven opposition politicians, who were mentioned as many as 3,004 times.

Opposition politicians

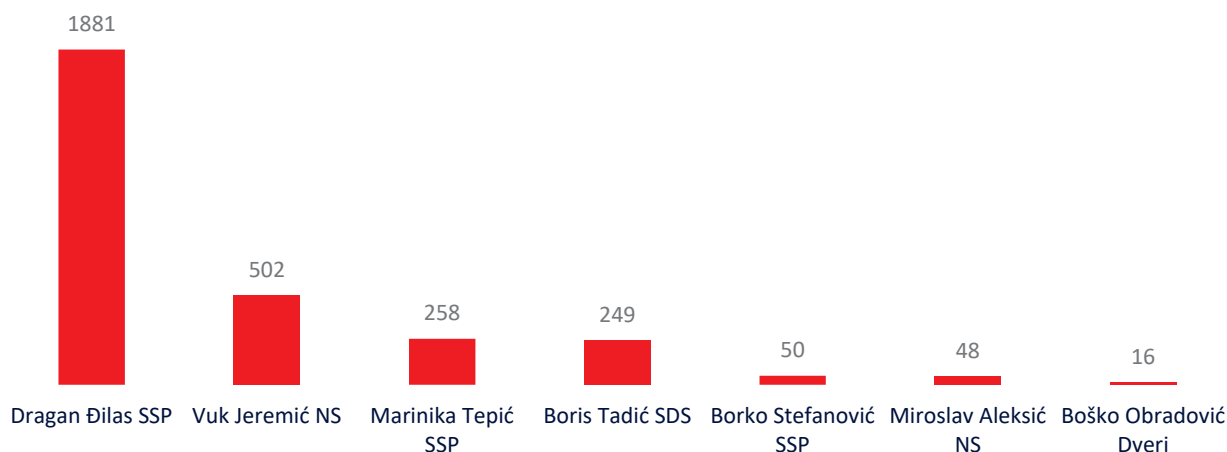


Chart 3: Representation of opposition politicians

As can be seen in Chart 3, when it comes to opposition politicians, the president of the Party of Freedom and Justice, Dragan Đilas, was most often mentioned, as many as 1,881 times. Hence, Đilas is in second place in terms of individual mentions in the National Assembly, after the President of the Republic.

● Discourse on the President of the Republic

The tonality of the mention of the cited actors reveals the full extent to which the plenary debate in the National Assembly was abused and staged for the purpose of party interests.

Aleksandar Vučić - tonality of mentioning

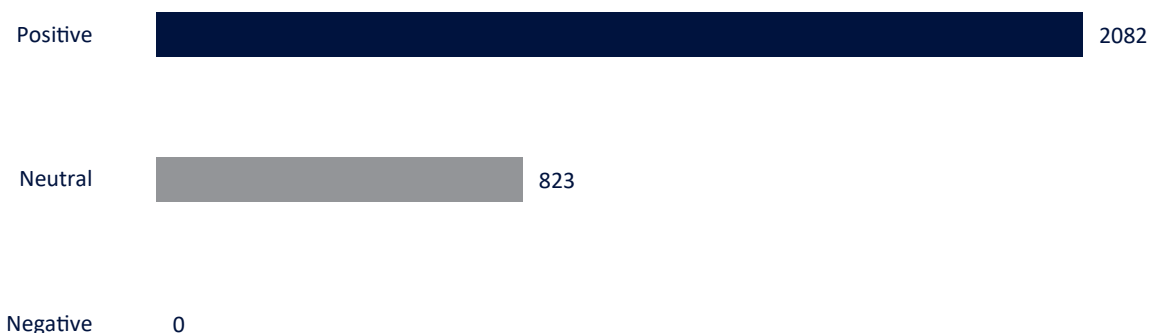


Chart 4: Tonality of mentioning the President of the Republic

The President of the Republic is most often mentioned in a positive tonality, in 72 percent (as many as 2,082) of his total mentions, while the remaining 28 percent are neutral mentions. In the observed period, no mention of President Vučić in a negative tonality was recorded (Chart 4).

While the neutral tonality is most often associated with the mention of the parliamentary group whose name includes the name of the President, as well as the valuatively indistinct mentions of Aleksandar Vučić as President of the Republic, positive mentions serve to carefully build a cult of personality. Thus, in the plenum of the National Assembly, Vučić is responsible for every success of the ruling majority, which is usually presented in the media beforehand. In that context, the constitutional powers of the President and the Government have become completely irrelevant to the MPs. Along with the merits, the MPs of the ruling majority carefully perpetuate other narratives present in the media about President Vučić, such as the one about constant threats and attacks on him and his family members, or about personal good relations he built with certain foreign statesmen and the like. In that sense, the plenary debate, while neglecting the agenda and basic functions of the

Assembly, is often reduced to a stage serving for several hours of additional repetition of messages about the President and from the President, which were previously communicated to voters at a press conference or during guest appearance.

● Discourses on the Government of the Republic of Serbia

In addition to the general neglect, i.e. little attention paid to the discussion of the efforts of the Prime Minister and individual ministers, the research indicates that the Government was mostly talked about in a neutral tonality. Positive tonality was recognised in 28 percent of mentions, and only one percent of negative mentions was recorded (Chart 5)..

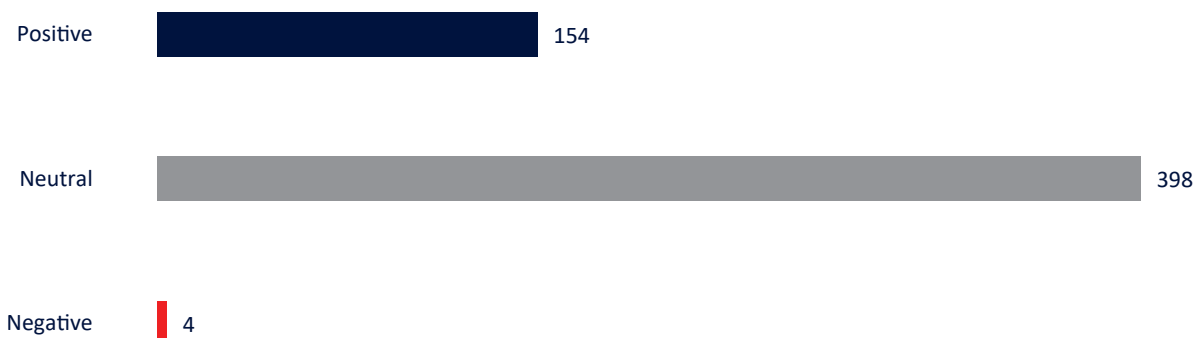


Chart 5: Tonality of mentioning of the Government of the Republic of Serbia

The four negative mentions of the ministers refer to three speeches given by the MPs who do not belong to the ruling majority. In the first, the Minister in charge of education, Branko Ružić, was criticised for ordering the school year to begin with the intonation of the national anthem of the Republic of Serbia. The Minister of Culture Maja Gojković, was praised for her work, but also animadverted for supporting, as a “high official of the SNS”, the decision of the Government of Serbia to allocate insufficient funds for culture. The Minister for European Integration, Jadranka Joksimović, was reprimanded for treating the MPs and the Assembly, together with the representatives of the “Brussels civil sector and especially the EU representatives”, in a “humiliating way”. At the same time, support was provided to the Speaker of the National Assembly Ivica Dačić, who, according to an independent MP, opposed such an attitude at the session of the National Convention on the EU held at the end of December.

● Discourses on opposition representatives

In addition to representation, the way in which the representatives of the opposition were discussed in the Assembly fully confirms the conclusion that plenary debates are abused for the purpose of circumscribed party interests, i.e. placing propaganda messages to voters.

Opposition representatives - tonality of mentioning



Chart 6: Tonality of mentioning of the opposition representatives

Negative tonality makes up 94 percent (2826 times) of the total recorded mentions of the opposition actors, while the remaining six percent (178 times) can be assessed as neutral (Chart 6). However, it is important to note that “criticism” of the opposition representatives often cannot be considered a speech that is in line with the codes and ethical standards that bind MPs. They are reduced to insults and belittling of the observed seven actors, but also of other opposition politicians and public figures who express any criticism at the expense of the ruling majority. By far the most common target of criticism, but also of attacks inappropriate for the Assembly (or any public sphere), which are continuously repeated at every session, is Dragan Đilas. During the observed period, the leader of the Party of Freedom and Justice was mentioned as many as 1,785 times in a negative tone, i.e. in 95% of the cases of his total mentions.

There is a widespread practice in which negative campaigns, which were first started by the President of the Republic in the pro-government media, spill over into plenary sittings, with complete disregard for the agenda and topics that were supposed to be discussed. The case of Zdravko Ponoš is illustrative. On October 31st, 2021, he was recognised in the media for the first time as a potential joint candidate of the opposition in the upcoming presidential elections. The next two days were followed by the reactions of the current President of the Republic, who, in his statements to the media, increasingly attacked his possible opponent.

At the same time, Zdravko Ponoš became the subject of a coordinated attack by several MPs at the sitting of the National Assembly held on November 2nd. Thus, at the National Assembly, in the week in which the Bill on the Protector of Citizens was – or at least should have been – debated, the MPs dealt with the opposition’s candidate, jointly repeating the claims made by the President of the Republic. At that sitting, as well as at the one held the next day, November 3rd, 2021, Zdravko Ponoš was mentioned 72 times in a negative tonality. In the same days, Ponoš was on the front pages of pro-government daily newspapers, which is another indicator of mutual harmonisation and coordination between media appearances of the President of the Republic, plenary speeches of MPs, and reporting by pro-government daily newspapers and television.

Similar mechanisms have been observed in the earlier period. Thus, in March 2021, during the parliamentary sittings, the MPs spoke intensively about the “Mauritius” affair, in which Dragan Đilas was the main target. Here, too, the initial information came from the President of the Republic¹ just like it was the case with Ponoš in November.

● Conclusion

The Open Parliament’s research on discourses on political actors, which are created and maintained through plenary speeches in the National Assembly, indicates the essential dysfunction of the 12th legislature. As a matter of fact, while other indicators, such as the use of urgent procedure in the adoption of laws, can be easily adjusted so that, at least on paper, the functioning of the Parliament seems more or less normal, it is much more difficult to simulate normalcy when it comes to plenary debate.

Monitoring and analysis of plenary debates first reveal a distinct illogicality, because the focus of the MPs is put on the President of the Republic, and not on the work of the Government, although oversight of the Government is the basis of the control function of the Parliament. Therefore, if the institutions functioned in accordance with the Constitution and laws, the mention of the President of the Republic in the Parliament should be sporadic, because the oversight over the work of the President, who is also directly elected by the citizens, does not fall within the competence of the Parliament. Nevertheless, the fact that the President of the Republic is also the President of the largest political party leads to the circumstance that his presence in the Parliament is so great that his name features even in the name of the largest parliamentary group. The fact that the president of the state, Aleksandar Vučić, is the most influential political figure has led to a significant distortion of the Serbian political system, in which the function of the Prime Minister and the Government as such is reduced to servicing decisions made by one person. The current Parliament has contributed to the relocation and centralisation of power, often normalising practices that should not occur, and marginalising the Assembly itself. At the same time, the plenum served to continuously build a cult of personality. The control function of the Parliament has been reduced to a pure form, just as the role of the Government is in practice limited by the dominant position of the President of the Republic, who occupies on a daily basis a space that significantly exceeds his powers.

Such gross and long-term neglect of the roles and competencies of the basic institutions of the political system – the President of the Republic, the Government and the National Assembly, has further eased another important anomaly that becomes evident when discourses in plenary debates are investigated. The Assembly has largely become a channel for sending party propaganda messages, often in a way that undermines the dignity of this institution. The huge representation shows the extent to which the focus of MPs in the observed period was on discrediting opposition representatives, and if necessary, other critical voices who dare to publicly voice objections to the work of institutions or state officials. The clear synchronicity in targeting these personalities, where pro-government media, other state officials and plenary debates become additional channels for repeating the messages of the President of the Republic, indicates systematicness. Institutional capacities are being systematically misused for party purposes, leading to the collapse of those same institutions. The Assembly is losing its reputation and the trust of the citizens, as indicated in the research performed by the CRTA². The focused debate, which would lead to the adoption of better legal solutions, was thus inexistent in the 12th legislature and gave way to the current media campaigns of the ruling majority.

1 Open Parliament, “Analysis of Narratives on Socio-Political Actors in the National Assembly”, July 2021, https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Analiza-narativa-o-drustveno-politickim-akterima-u-Narodnoj-skupstini-Srbije_jul-2021.godine.pdf

2 Research: “Attitudes of Serbian citizens on participation in democratic processes in 2020”, March 2021, <https://crt.rs/istrazivanje-stavo-vi-gradjana-srbije-o-ucescu-u-demokratskim-procesima-2020-godine/>