

Protests, puns and placards: humor and wordplay in Serbia's 2024-2025 student uprising

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Student-led protests in Serbia were sparked by the collapse of a railway station canopy on 1 November 2024, a tragedy claiming 16 lives, thought to have been caused by negligence and widespread corruption. Students demanded accountability and justice for the victims and after being attacked during a silent tribute, what started as a peaceful protest was soon followed by their blockades of university buildings, eventually growing into the largest student movement in the modern history of the Balkans. The leaderless non-violent uprising without a specific ideological framework has united not only students – who were until recently popularly perceived as largely apolitical, self-centered and social media-engrossed members of Generation Z – but also people from different walks of life. Throughout the months-long and still ongoing protests students have established themselves as a significant social group, building their identity, *inter alia*, through an extraordinary amount of creativity and humor displayed on countless placards during street marches. Drawing on various linguistic and paralinguistic means, the protesters' placards exhibit a rich array of wordplay and related phenomena (as defined by Winter-Froemel, 2016).

In this chapter we analyze over 2,000 placards photographed at protests in various cities, towns and villages as well as during the student marches along the roads of Serbia, collected in the period between November 2024 and March 2025, in order to explore:

1. the main characteristics of humor and wordplay and the functions they may serve in these non-violent protests;
2. the linguistic mechanisms through which wordplay and humor are realized in the protesters' placards to fulfil these functions.

The analysis has shown that humor and wordplay in the protesters' placards are highly context-dependent, requiring not only a deep understanding of the broader political landscape but also, due to its often dialogic nature, familiarity with a series of micro-events occurring within a relatively short period. Also, similar to many other non-violent struggles (cf. Sørensen, 2016; Takovski, 2020, 't Hart 2007), humor and wordplay may serve as a tool for (1) ridiculing and subverting political authority, (2) reducing people's fear, (3) constructing collective identity, and (4) fostering community and solidarity (both horizontal and vertical). Through its subversiveness they draw a sharp dividing line between those engaging in wordplay and those who are the targets or opponents of the protests.

Wordplay is found to be realized through traditional mechanisms such as paronymy, homonymy, and polysemy while also featuring instances of bi- and multilingual wordplay, creative use of Cyrillic-Latin digraphia, ludic lexical innovations, non-canonical proverb variations, and rich intertextual and interdiscursive references. Many examples rely on multiple mechanisms, e.g.

(1)



Srbija reboot, SnS kaputt! ['Serbia reboot, SNS kaputt!'] (where SNS stands for 'Serbian Progressive Party') involves the combination of Serbian (*Srbija*), English (*reboot*) and German (*kaputt*). Additionally, selective capitalization (*SnS* instead of *SNS*) evokes an allusion to Nazi Germany's SS military organization;

(2)



Финиш хум creatively adapts the English phrase *Finish him* by transliterating it into Cyrillic (*Финиш хум*) and highlighting the sequence *Хум* (*Niš*), the name of the city where the protest took place; or

(3)



Прохуљао с вихором [in Latin script: *Prohuljao s vihorom*, '(He is) gone with the wind'] relies for its effect on an intertextual reference to the well-known novel and film *Prohujalo s vihorom* ('*Gone With the Wind*'), where *prohujalo* ('(it is) gone') is blended with *hulja* ('scoundrel'), a word frequently used to refer to President Aleksandar Vučić after a political analyst revealed in a talk show that *hulja* ('scoundrel') was the president's high school nickname.

References

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