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Legitimation Through Paranoia: How Assassination Narratives Shape Contemporary Political History in Vučić's Serbia

The accident on the road to Mokrin, on February 8, 2025, was the eighth time that an assassination attempt on President Vučić was carried out, attempted or organized. That "event" on the road to Mokrin was not accidental, it is impossible for it to be accidental. The left rear wheel of the armored vehicle exploded. That tire is practically indestructible, and yet it exploded. My assumption is that the entire tire, after production, and after being imported to Serbia, "went astray" somewhere, that it was processed by specialists from foreign intelligence services, upon learning that it was intended for the president's armored vehicle, that they installed, in a circular manner, a microexplosive and a microtransmitter, which are impossible to detect, and the new tire was returned to the distributor. Yesterday, the microexplosive was activated by a remote system.[1]

Nebojša Bakarec,
member of the Presidency of the Serbian Progressive Party, February 2025

1. Introduction

The politics of paranoia has long played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of states, particularly those governed by autocratic or semi-authoritarian regimes. Political leaders, whether ruling through brute force or carefully calibrated democratic facades, have historically sought to frame their leadership as indispensable to national survival. This is often achieved through the systematic construction of internal and external threats – real, exaggerated, or wholly fabricated, nowadays commonly referred to as

[1] Bakarec, Nebojša. *Atentat na predsednika Vučića*, *Politika*, February 2025, https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

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securitization.[2] Throughout history, the rhetoric of existential danger has provided rulers with justification for expanding executive power, quelling dissent, and restructuring political institutions to ensure their continued dominance.

Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić offers a striking case study in the use of manufactured crises, particularly alleged assassination attempts, to cultivate a siege mentality among the populace. Since 2016, Vučić and his allies have repeatedly claimed that shadowy forces – ranging from foreign agents and domestic oligarchs to organized crime syndicates and opposition activists – have conspired to take his life. These claims, amplified by pro-government media outlets, have surfaced with notable regularity during moments of political turbulence, often when Vučić's administration faces scandals, mass protests, or declining public trust.

While such tactics are not unique to Serbia, their persistence and frequency demand a closer examination. Why does Vučić continue to employ these narratives? How do they fit into broader historical traditions of paranoia-driven governance? And what lessons can be drawn from Serbia's experience when considering the ways in which leaders across history have leveraged political paranoia to fortify their rule? To answer these questions, this study situates Vučić's strategy within the framework of Hofstadter's "paranoid style in politics", exploring how similar discursive strategies have been deployed by leaders throughout history.

1.1. The "Paranoid Style" in Political History

Richard Hofstadter's seminal work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*,[3] offers a compelling analytical lens through which to understand Vučić's repeated claims of assassination attempts; writing in the mid-twentieth century, Hofstadter identified a recurring pattern in American political culture: a deep-seated, conspiratorial worldview in which political figures and movements justified their actions by portraying themselves as the last bulwark against malevolent, all-powerful enemies. Although he was primarily concerned with American political movements – ranging from the anti-Masonic crusades of the 1820s to McCarthyism's obsession with communist infiltration

[2] Much has been written about securitization, mostly from the view of securitization theory in IR, but in other disciplines as well. See: A.J.K. Shepherd, "EU Counterterrorism, Collective Securitization, and the Internal-External Security Nexus," in: *Collective Securitization and Crisification of EU Policy Change*, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 117–133; T. Balzacq, "A Theory of Securitization: Origins, Core Assumptions, and Variants," in: *Securitization Theory*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 15–44; T. Balzacq, "Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve," 2011; T. Balzacq, "The 'Essence' of Securitization: Theory, Ideal Type, and a Sociological Science of Security," *International Relations* 2015, 29(1), pp. 103–113.

[3] R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. New York: Vintage, 2008 (originally published 1964). As he wrote: "The clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others" (Hofstadter 1964/2008, p. 4).

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– his analysis transcends national boundaries and speaks to a broader phenomenon that has manifested across political regimes and historical epochs.

The paranoid style is a deliberate political tool. Leaders throughout history have wielded paranoia as an instrument of governance,[4] using it to foster social cohesion, justify repressive measures, and create a climate of unquestioning loyalty. In this framework, the enemy is never merely an opponent in the political arena; rather, they are agents of chaos, working in secret to dismantle the very fabric of the nation.[5] Hofstadter observed that paranoia-driven leaders typically depict themselves as being under siege, facing insurmountable odds yet heroically persevering against the forces of darkness. Such rhetoric fosters a politics of emergency, in which the leader's survival becomes synonymous with the survival of the state itself.

Historically, this strategy has been particularly potent in illiberal and authoritarian regimes, where media control enables a monopolization of narrative construction. In Stalin's Soviet Union, paranoia was institutionalized through the purges of the 1930s, in which figures such as Sergei Kirov's assassination provided the pretext for mass executions and imprisonment of perceived political threats.[6] More recently, leaders like Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have cultivated a perpetual state of crisis, using real or imagined threats – such as Western subversion or coup attempts – to expand executive power and dismantle opposition forces.[7]

While Serbia's contemporary political system differs significantly from the authoritarian states of the past, Vučić's reliance on assassination narratives follows the same essential logic. The purported threats against his life serve to silence critics, divert public attention from governance failures, and create a cult of personality centered on his survival. Understanding this within the broader historical tradition of paranoia-driven governance allows for a deeper appreciation of how such strategies function – and how they have endured across vastly different political contexts.

[4] James Glass compellingly writes about the "paranoid factor": Glass, James M. "Notes on the paranoid factor in political philosophy: Fear, anxiety, and domination." *Political psychology* (1988): 209-228.

[5] Clutterbuck's somewhat dated, yet rather useful edited volume on political violence goes in detail about political opponents being presented as agents of chaos: Clutterbuck, Richard, ed. *The future of political violence: Destabilization, disorder and terrorism*. Springer, 1986. Simlarly, Manfred Steger goes into detail about how political elites use narratives of destabilization to portray opponents as threats to national identity, and, shall we stress – *order: Steger, Manfred B. The rise of the global imaginary: Political ideologies from the French revolution to the global war on terror. OUP Oxford, 2008.*

[6] Grover Furr gives an interesting view of how Stalin orchestrated Kirov's death, eventhough Furr's statement of "all historians" being "fundamentally wrong" about Stalin and his repressive tactics does give pause in a somewhat apologist direction: Furr, Grover. "Yezhov vs. Stalin: The Causes of the Mass Repressions of 1937-1938 in the USSR." *Journal of Labor and Society* 20.3 (2017): 325-347.

[7] Nina Kruscheva goes as far as to (rightly) accuse Putin's Russia of having an "identity of perpetual crisis": Khrushcheva, Nina. "Russia's Identity of Perpetual Crisis." *Globalisation of Nationalism* (2016): 1.

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1.2. Serbia as a Case Study

The deployment of paranoia as a governance strategy in Serbia cannot be understood without contextualizing the country's political evolution since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Unlike its East European neighbors that transitioned into consolidated democracies or entrenched autocracies, Serbia has remained in a gray zone, characterized by formal democratic institutions that operate within an increasingly illiberal political framework. Scholars such as Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have classified Serbia as a competitive authoritarisn regime,[8] in which elections are held regularly but opposition parties face systemic disadvantages,[9] media freedom is curtailed,[10] and the ruling party enjoys disproportionate control over state institutions.

Vučić's rise to power must be viewed within this broader trend of democratic erosion. As a former Minister of Information under Slobodan Milošević, somewhat foreshadowing Yugoslavia's collapse,[11] Vučić was deeply involved in the state propaganda apparatus that sought to justify Serbia's nationalist wars of the 1990s and to introduce legislation to significantly suppress the freedom of the press.[12] Although he later rebranded himself as a pro-European reformer, his tenure as Prime Minister (2014-2017) and President (2017-present) has been marked by increasing centralization of power, media suppression, and the marginalization of political opposition.[13] A crucial component of Vučić's rule has been his administration's tight grip on Serbia's media landscape. Pro-government tabloids such as *Informer*, *Alo!*, and the quality-related *Pink* have served as extensions of state propaganda, relentlessly portraying Vučić as a leader under siege. Opposition protests are depicted as foreign-backed coups, investigative journalists exposing corruption are labeled traitors, and political rivals are framed as partici-

[8] And Serbia is far from the only one: Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. "Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism." *Journal of democracy* 13.2 (2002): 51-65.

[9] See, for instance: Hasanović, Jasmin, Valida Repovac Nikšić, and Emina Adilović. "Agonist Reading of Social Movements in Illiberal Democracies: The Case of the Social Movement for Truth and Justice." *Participatory Democratic Innovations in Southeast Europe*. Routledge, 2024. 152-170.

[10] Kmezić dubbed it a "crisis of press freedom" in Serbia: Kmezic, Marko. "Captured media: Limitations and structural hindrances to media freedom in Serbia." *Review of Central and East European Law* 43.4 (2018): 457-482. Teofilović *et al.* expressed concerns about Serbia's media freedom: Teofilović, Ivana, et al. "Freedom of expression and media freedom in Serbia in the EU integration process." *Beograd: Građanske inicijative & Fondacija za otvoreno društvo [In Serbian]* (2018).

[11] See Nielsen's overview in: Nielsen, Christian Axboe. "Serbian Historiography after 1991." *Contemporary European History* 29, no. 1 (2020): 90-103. https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731900033X.

[12] A detailed overview of Vučić's impact on the freedom of the press in the Milošević era is given in: Srđan, M. Jovanović. "Confronting Recent History: Media in Serbia During Aleksandar Vučić's Ministry of Information in the Milošević Era (1998-1999)." *Hiperboreea* 6.1 (2019): 61-74.

[13] See, for instance: Kulić, Milica. "Populist communication in the post-truth age: A comparative analysis of treatment of journalists by Donald Trump and Aleksandar Vučić." *Journal of Regional Security* 15.1 (2020): 75-108., Fridman, Orli, and Srdjan Hercigonja. "Protiv Nenormalnog: An analysis of the# protivdiktature. Protests in the context of memory politics of the 1990s in Serbia." *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 4.1 (2017): 12-25.

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pants in shadowy conspiracies aimed at destabilizing the state.[14] The repeated claims of assassination attempts fit neatly into this narrative, reinforcing the notion that Vučić's enemies are more than political adversaries and are presented as existential threats to Serbia itself. These allegations have surfaced with uncanny precision at moments when Vučić faces public discontent. The Jajinci affair of 2016, in which weapons were conveniently discovered near his parents' home, coincided with rising dissatisfaction over economic stagnation. The RTS protest incident of 2019, where Vučić claimed an opposition-led "lynch mob" had attempted to harm him, emerged in the wake of mass anti-government demonstrations. More recently, the Kavač Clan conspiracy (2022), the Šolak assassination plot (2024), and the "exploding tire" incident (2025) have all followed similar patterns.[15]

The aim of this study is to situate Vučić's assassination claims within a broader historical pattern of paranoia-driven governance. By tracing how similar narratives have been deployed from McCarthy's Red Scare to Stalin's purges and Erdoğan's post-coup crackdown, the article seeks to illuminate the mechanisms by which political leaders manufacture crises to strengthen their rule. Furthermore, the study will examine how Vučić's assassination claims are framed within Serbian media, taking a glance at the rhetorics used to construct a perpetual state of crisis. In doing so, it will contribute to broader scholarly discussions on the role of paranoia in contemporary illiberal democracies, offering a comparative analysis that places Serbia within a wider historical and geopolitical context. This research ultimately raises fundamental questions about the endurance of political paranoia in modern governance. If past regimes have successfully used paranoia to justify repression, consolidate power, and manufacture consent, how might similar strategies continue to shape Serbia's political future – and what lessons can be drawn from history in countering them?

2. Theoretical Framework – The Paranoid Style as a Political Strategy

Political paranoia, as conceptualized by Richard Hofstadter, transcends individual pathology and emerges as a deliberate strategy of governance, particularly in regimes that seek to fortify executive authority while maintaining the semblance of democratic legitimacy. Hofstadter's seminal work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, identified paranoia as a recurrent feature in political discourse, wherein leaders frame themselves

[14] More detailed explanations given in: Jovanović, Srđan Mladenov. ""You're Simply the Best": Communicating Power and Victimhood in Support of President Aleksandar Vučić in the Serbian Dailies Alo! and Informer." *Journal of Media Research-Revista de Studii Media* 11.31 (2018): 22-42., Jovanović, Srđan Mladenov. "Headlines as fake news: Discursive deception in Serbia's daily Informer (2012-2018)." *Central and Eastern European Review* 12.1 (2018): 1-22.

[15] Though not scholarly in nature, a slightly more detailed expounding on the assorted "assassination attempts" on Vučić is given by authors from the Nova.rs portal, at: Nova.rs, *Svi atentati na Vučića: mnogo propagandne buke, nula osumnjičenih i optuženih, 15 August 2025,* https://n1info.rs/vesti/svi-atentati-na-aleksandra-vucica-mnogo-propagandne-buke-nula-osumnjicenih-i-optuzenih/ https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

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as embattled figures, besieged by insidious enemies working in the shadows. Although Hofstadter's analysis was rooted in American history – ranging from anti-Masonic hysteria in the early republic to McCarthy's anti-communist witch hunts – his insights apply universally, illuminating how rulers across vastly different political systems have wielded paranoia to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and create a climate of existential crisis.

Aleksandar Vučić's repeated claims of assassination attempts, despite the conspicuous absence of credible threats, represent a modern iteration of this phenomenon. His rhetoric aligns closely with historical precedents in which leaders have invoked assassination plots, conspiracies, and coup attempts to justify repressive measures. By analyzing the function of paranoia in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states, we shall now situate Vučić's strategy within a broader historical tradition that spans from the Roman Republic to 20th-century totalitarian regimes.

2.1. Hofstadter's "Paranoid Style" and Political Legitimacy

Hofstadter's concept of the paranoid style is predicated on the idea that political paranoia is a calculated means of state control. While paranoia can certainly manifest as genuine fear within certain leaders, its systematic deployment as a governance strategy suggests a level of deliberation and utility. Leaders who invoke conspiratorial narratives typically do so to achieve three primary objectives:

First, paranoia serves as a mobilization tool, fostering a sense of national siege mentality that strengthens loyalty among supporters. When leaders claim to be under attack by unseen forces – whether foreign adversaries, domestic opposition, or criminal syndicates – they reinforce a binary worldview in which citizens must choose between allegiance to the leader or alignment with his supposed enemies. As Robins *et al.* wrote about political paranoia, "it is also the most political in the broad sense of centering on power relationships. Paranoids need their enemies, after all, and what richer source of enemies can be found in the world of politics?".[16] This logic was explicitly weaponized during McCarthyism, when American politicians equated dissent with treason, compelling the public to rally behind the state as the last bastion of national security.[17]

Second, paranoia functions as a preemptive strike against dissent, enabling governments to neutralize opposition forces before they gain traction. By depicting rivals as agents of foreign conspiracies or violent extremists, leaders delegitimize political challengers before they can pose a legitimate electoral threat.[18] This was a hallmark of Stalin-

[16] Robins, Robert S., et al. *Political paranoia: The psychopolitics of hatred*. Yale University Press, 1997., p. 17.

[17] Townsend's insights might be relevant: Townsend, Rebecca M. "McCarthyism's Rhetorical Norms." (1997). See also a recent article by Shenkman and Engelman on how similar mentalities persist: Shenkman, Carey, and Ralph Engelman. "Don't Let Trump-or Biden-Distract from the Real Victims of the Espionage Act." *Harbinger* 49 (2024): 13.

[18] Robins, Robert S., et al. *Political paranoia: The psychopolitics of hatred*. Yale University Press, 1997., p. 247.

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ist political purges, where even the most tenuous accusations of counter-revolutionary plotting resulted in mass arrests and executions. While Vučić's Serbia does not engage in repression on the scale of the Stalinist purges, his administration's systematic smearing of opposition leaders as coup-plotters and criminals follows a comparable logic of preemptive delegitimization.

Third, the invocation of external threats provides justification for extraordinary executive measures. In times of national crisis, public tolerance for authoritarian governance increases, allowing leaders to erode democratic norms under the pretense of national security. This was a defining feature of Cold War authoritarianism, where both communist and anti-communist regimes expanded surveillance, curtailed civil liberties, and justified crackdowns on opposition by citing threats of espionage or assassination attempts.[19] Vučić's Serbia, while formally democratic, mirrors this strategy in its use of assassination claims to justify increased state surveillance, media control, and expanded police powers.

Paranoia is, in essence, self-perpetuating. Leaders who invoke crisis narratives cannot easily relinquish them without undermining their own legitimacy. Once a state constructs an identity based on permanent external threat, any relaxation of authoritarian measures risks exposing the illusory nature of the danger. This explains why leaders like Erdoğan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, and Orbán in Hungary continuously recycle conspiratorial rhetoric – doing so maintains the state of emergency necessary for authoritarian stability. Vučić, by positioning himself as Serbia's indispensable leader in an era of existential threats, follows this well-established trajectory.

2.2. The Role of Assassination Narratives in Political Crises

Historically, assassination fears have played a pivotal role in consolidating political power, particularly in moments of regime transition, instability, or political crisis. Leaders have frequently presented themselves as targets of assassination plots, using such claims to eliminate rivals, justify purges, or introduce emergency governance measures. The function of assassination fears as a political instrument is evident in multiple historical case studies.

The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE represents one of the most significant political murders in world history. While the conspirators sought to preserve the Republic, their actions had the opposite effect, enabling Octavian (Augustus) to exploit the crisis and consolidate power under an imperial system. In the wake of Caesar's death, his supporters (most notably Mark Antony) used the narrative of a "martyred leader"

[19] Cooley gives a good overview of how authoritarian regimes leveraged global insecurity to counter democratic norms, demonstrating how national crises justified extreme executive measures: Cooley, Alexander. "Authoritarianism goes global: Countering democratic norms." *Journal of Democracy* 26.3 (2015): 49-63. Similarly, Gleason's insight into how Cold War-era political discourse celebrated authoritarian tactics as necessary responses to security threats, leading to the erosion of democratic principles might also be the place to look: Gleason, Abbott. *Totalitarianism: the inner history of the Cold War*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

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to justify purges and political retribution against rivals.[20] The transformation of Caesar from a political leader to a symbol of existential struggle laid the foundation for the Roman Empire, demonstrating how assassination narratives could be weaponized to reshape political order.[21]

Napoleon Bonaparte, as but another example, was a master of using political paranoia to justify his authority. Following the 1804 assassination attempt orchestrated by royalist conspirators, Napoleon seized upon the event to present himself as the sole figure capable of restoring order to France. Shortly thereafter, he abolished the Republic and declared himself Emperor, arguing that the threats against his life proved the necessity of a strong, centralized regime. His rhetoric echoed the themes of modern paranoia-driven politics: he cast himself as the target of vast conspiracies, alleging that his enemies were traitors aligned with foreign interests.[22]

Perhaps the most infamous instance of assassination paranoia as a tool of state terror occurred in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. The assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934, which many historians suspect was orchestrated by Stalin himself, provided the pretext for mass purges that culminated in the Great Terror. Stalin exploited the perceived assassination threat to justify the elimination of political rivals, framing them as saboteurs conspiring with foreign enemies. The logic of Stalinist paranoia created a political environment in which accusations alone were sufficient to warrant imprisonment or execution, ensuring that no opposition could gain traction. Stalin's use of assassination paranoia serves as an extreme case study of how regimes can construct conspiratorial narratives to maintain total control.[23] While Vučić's Serbia does not op-

[20] Ribner, in his 1957 volume, examined how political rhetoric surrounding Caesar's assassination influenced both contemporary and later interpretations of the event, reinforcing the image of a martyred leader: Ribner, Irving. "Political Issues in" Julius Caesar"." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 56.1 (1957): 10-22.

[21] Stevenson gives a detailed overview, investigating how Caesar's assassination played a crucial role in transforming the Roman Republic, noting that the event was later exploited by Augustus to establish his rule Stevenson, Tom. *Julius Caesar and the transformation of the Roman Republic*. Routledge, 2014.

[22] In her doctoral dissertation, Tarah Lorraine Luke gives a good overview of how Napoleon was portrayed in political discourse, noting how he cultivated an image of a leader besieged by enemies and conspiracies to justify his rule, including the following paranoia: Luke, Tarah Lorraine. "'Our Bonaparte?': Republicanism, Religion, and Paranoia in New England and the Mid-Atlantic, 1789-1830." (2016). Brown discusses how Napoleon leveraged the 1804 assassination attempt and other perceived threats to consolidate power, arguing that the end of the French Revolution marked the beginning of an era of political repression and paranoia: Brown, Howard G. *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, justice, and repression from the Terror to Napoleon*. University of Virginia Press, 2006. Englund provided a political biography of Napoleon, detailing how he used the 1804 assassination attempt to portray himself as the only figure capable of restoring stability in France, leading to the proclamation of the Empire: Englund, Steven. *Napoleon: A political life*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

[23] Sources are also plentiful about this as well. Conquest, in his seminal work *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, details how Stalin leveraged Kirov's assassination to initiate a widespread purge of political rivals, reinforcing a climate of paranoia and repression, showing that the author is more than just an amazing surname: Conquest, Robert. *The great terror: A reassessment*. Oxford University Press,

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erate under the same conditions of repression, his regime's systematic portrayal of political opponents as coup-plotters, foreign-backed agents, and potential assassins follows a similar script – one designed to ensure the public perceives political alternatives as fundamentally illegitimate and dangerous.

The paranoid style of politics is thus *a strategic tool deployed throughout history.* Whether in the Roman Republic, Napoleonic France, Stalinist Russia, or contemporary hybrid regimes, assassination fears have consistently served to strengthen executive power, eliminate political threats, and foster a climate of national emergency. Vučić's repeated claims of assassination attempts fit neatly within this historical pattern, demonstrating that paranoia remains an indispensable feature of political survival in illiberal and semi-authoritarian states. Understanding Vučić's strategic use of paranoia within this broader historical framework allows for a clearer analysis of Serbia's political trajectory, shedding light on how crisis narratives continue to shape governance and democratic backsliding in the modern era.

3. Assassination Attempts in Serbian Politics

Throughout history, as we have seen, assassination narratives have played a crucial role in the consolidation of power, particularly in regimes that rely on manufactured crises to justify repressive governance. Political leaders have frequently invoked assassination plots, conspiracies, and coup attempts (sometimes fabricated, sometimes exaggerated) to strengthen executive authority, discredit opposition forces, and cultivate a sense of national emergency. The Serbian case under Aleksandar Vučić follows this pattern with remarkable consistency, as he has repeatedly positioned himself as the target of assassination attempts at politically convenient moments. These alleged plots, despite their lack of concrete evidence, have had a profound impact on Serbia's political landscape. They have allowed Vučić to portray himself as a leader under siege, justify crackdowns on dissent, and distract from governance failures or political controversies. Over time, these narratives have evolved, shifting from claims of foreign-backed assassination conspiracies to those involving domestic opponents, criminal organizations, and business elites. While these episodes may seem like isolated incidents, they form part of a deliberate and calculated political strategy. The construction of an ongoing siege mentality has enabled Vučić to tighten his control over state institutions, media, and political opposition, ensuring that he remains the dominant figure in Serbia's hybrid regime. The following article section examines five major assassination claims from 2016 to 2025, analyzing how each was

2008. Hiroyaki Kuromiya – in a rather relevant article – analyzed Stalin's justification for the Great Purge, showing how the trials and executions of Kamenev, Zinoviev, and other political figures were framed as responses to an internal assassination conspiracy: Kuromiya, Hiroaki. "Accounting for the Great Terror." *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* H. 1 (2005): 86-101. Similarly, Svetlana Lokhova provided an analysis of NKVD operations following Kirov's assassination, demonstrating how the Soviet secret police used the event as justification for purging perceived threats: Lokhova, Svetlana. "Stalin, the NKVD and the investigation of the Kremlin Case: Prelude to the Great Terror." *Interrogation in War and Conflict*. Routledge, 2014. 36-58.

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framed, its political consequences, and its historical parallels to previous instances where leaders used assassination fears as a governance tool.

3.1. The Jajinci Affair (2016) – Constructing the External Enemy

The earliest instance of Vučić's invocation of an assassination attempt occurred in October 2016, when Serbian authorities announced that a cache of weapons had been discovered near the home of Vučić's parents in Jajinci, a quiet suburb of Belgrade. Among the items found were a grenade launcher, a sniper rifle, and various rounds of ammunition; an arsenal that, if used, could have inflicted considerable destruction.[24] Pro-government media immediately framed the discovery as an attempted assassination plot, alleging that foreign agents, domestic political rivals, or criminal networks were behind the supposed attack. No arrests were made, no suspects were identified, and no tangible links to an assassination attempt were established. Yet, the political narrative took on a life of its own, with Vučić himself declaring that Serbia's enemies sought to undermine his leadership and destabilize the country. The government-friendly tabloid *Alo!* wrote how the perpetrators have been found, boasting the headline "This is the man who was preparing an assassination of President Vučić!". According to this highly untrustworthy source, a certain Siniša M. was arrested, together with an alleged "co-conspirator", Jovan Jošilo (the latter of which has allegedly been immediately released).[25] It would be difficult to imagine that actual conspirators plotting the murder of a President would not see any legal reprimands or punitive measures unless the assassination attempt never took place, yet that is what (did not) happen. Very soon after the alleged assassination attempts, Vučić used the chance to (not) speak about it in a televised talk show, now claiming in complete contradiction that "there was no evidence about the assassination", yet that "the situation is far more serious than what we expected". He quickly turned to other topics, claiming that "spies will not be running Serbia", that he was building hundreds of kilometers of roads, and that "golden years are coming" to Serbia.[26]

The timing of the Jajinci Affair was critical. It unfolded during a period of heightened political discontent, as Vučić's government faced growing criticism over economic stagnation and corruption allegations. The media frenzy surrounding the alleged as-

[24] Ćebić, Radoslav. *Atentati iz tabloida,* Vreme, 4. 12. 2019., https://vreme.com/vreme/atentati-iz-tabloida/ https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

[25] V.P. *Ovo je čovek koji je spremao atentat na Vučića!,* Alo!, 2016, https://www.alo.rs/vesti/hronika/uhapsen-atentator-na-vucica/80220/vest https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

[26] A massive amount of information is given here, wherein Vučić starts talking about the alleged "assassination", and then promptly veers off to a staggering amount of other topics, in the calmest of manners, as if his life never had been threatened: Milosavljević, Milica. Vučić: Napredak u istrazi o slučaju Jajinci, stvari ozbiljnije nego što se mislilo, *Politika, 07. 11. 2016.*, https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/2518128/vucic-napredak-u-istrazi-o-slucaju-jajinci-stvari-ozbiljnije-nego-sto-se-mislilo.html https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

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sassination attempt successfully shifted public discourse away from governance issues, reinforcing the idea that Vučić was Serbia's indispensable leader, targeted by those who wished to destroy the nation; his address to the nation within the RTS talk show was turned into a political campaign for himself.

This strategy of constructing an external enemy (spies, foreign forces) to justify security measures has been employed repeatedly throughout history. One of the most infamous examples is the Reichstag fire of 1933, in which Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party blamed communists for setting the German parliament ablaze, using the event as a pretext to suspend civil liberties and eliminate political opposition.[27] Similarly, Joseph Stalin's purges were fueled by allegations of foreign infiltration and sabotage, providing him with justification for the mass executions of perceived enemies. In modern times, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly invoked assassination plots and terrorist threats – including the 1999 apartment bombings that served as a catalyst for the Second Chechen War – to expand executive power and crack down on dissent.[28] While Serbia does not operate under a fully authoritarian regime, Vučić's use of assassination narratives mirrors these historical examples, positioning himself as a leader under attack while expanding his control over political and media institutions.

3.2. RTS Protest Incident (2019) – The Internal Enemy Narrative

By 2019, opposition protests in Serbia had grown in size and intensity, driven by widespread dissatisfaction with Vučić's increasing stranglehold on a functioning democracy. On March 16, 2019, a group of opposition activists stormed the headquarters of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), demanding greater media freedom and an end to pro-government propaganda. Vučić seized upon the event, claiming that the protesters had attempted to lynch him and that the country was under threat from violent extremists and foreign-backed agitators. Pro-government tabloids echoed this rhetoric, painting the protesters as a radical mob hell-bent on overthrowing the government.

[27] B C Hett discusses how the Reichstag Fire Decree was used by Hitler's government to consolidate power, remove political opposition, and justify repressive measures against supposed enemies of the state: Hett, Benjamin Carter. ""This Story Is about Something Fundamental": Nazi Criminals, History, Memory, and the Reichstag Fire." *Central European History* 48.2 (2015): 199-224. Marcuse also wrote how the Reichstag Fire was used to solidify Nazi control through fear-mongering and justification of extreme measures: Marcuse, Herbert. "Nazi Plans for Dominating Germany and Europe: The Nazi Master Plan." *Secret reports on Nazi Germany: the Frankfurt School contribution to the war effort* (2013): 475-521.

[28] A good overview is given in Remington's chapter that discusses how the 1999 apartment bombings and the Second Chechen War created an opportunity for Putin to centralize power and expand executive authority: Remington, Thomas F. "Putin, parliament and presidential exploitation of the terrorist threat." *The War on Terror and the Growth of Executive Power?*. Routledge, 2010. 137-155. One would further not go astray when taking a look on Headly's exposition on the 1999 bombings as a possible false flag attack, arguing that Putin used the "war on terror" to justify repression and expand military control in Russia: Headley, Jim. "War On Terror Or Pretext For Power?: Putin, Chechnya, And The'Terrorist International." *Australasian Journal of Human Security, The* 1.2 (2005): 13-35.

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The most vitriolic among these was the radical tabloid *Informer,* that wrote how there was a "horror scenario" being perpetrated by the opposition, with an unnamed source claiming that "there is information that states that somebody from the masses would shoot towards the President" and that the President was about to "be lynched".[29] The declarative statements, the exaggerated vitriol, the fact that nobody was uncovered to have been behind yet another alleged plot, collectively told that yet again, there was no assassination attempt. Radoslav Ćebić, writing for the *Vreme* weekly, humorously wrote that this was "yet another failed assassination".[30]

The RTS incident bears similarities to Sergei Kirov's assassination in 1934, which Stalin used as a pretext to launch the Great Purge. Although Kirov's murder remains a subject of historical debate (many suspect Stalin himself orchestrated it) its consequences were clear: it provided the Soviet leadership with an excuse to eliminate thousands of political opponents. Similarly, the RTS protest served as a manufactured crisis that allowed Vučić to tighten his control over media outlets and opposition activities, framing dissent as a threat to national stability.

3.3. Kavač Clan Conspiracy (2022) – Criminal Networks as Political Tools

In January 2022, Serbian authorities announced that the Kavač Clan, a notorious Montenegrin criminal syndicate with heavy ties to Serbia's capitol, had been plotting to assassinate Vučić. This dramatic revelation dominated state-controlled media for weeks, reinforcing Vučić's image as a fearless anti-crime leader. Strong headlines followed: "VUČIĆ REVEALS: the Kavač clan is preparing an assassination attempt on me with help of foreign forces!".[31] Said foreign forces remained unnamed, as the *invisible Enemy* is seen as more sinister, more powerful. Yet, the case lacked concrete evidence (again). No major arrests followed, and legal proceedings failed to establish a credible assassination plot. The narrative, however, served its purpose, allowing Vučić to justify intensified crackdowns on organized crime while simultaneously targeting political opponents under the guise of national security as well as portray himself as a leader engaged in a life-or-death struggle against both political enemies and criminal elements. Notably, Benito Mussolini used similar tactics in Fascist Italy, portraying criminal organizations as threats

[29] Informer, OTKRIVAMO STRAŠAN SCENARIO ĐILASOVACA! Posle sastanka sa Palmerom spremaju linč Vučića ispred RTS!, 05. 11. 2019. Informer., https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/469815/otkrivamo-strasan-scenario-dilasovaca-posle-sastanaka-sa-palmerom-spremaju-linc-vucica-ispred-rts https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

[30] Ćebić, Radoslav. *Atentati iz tabloida,* Vreme, 4. 12. 2019., https://vreme.com/vreme/atentati-iz-tabloida/ https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

[31] Republika. *VUČIĆ OTKRIVA! Kavački klan sprema atentat na mene uz pomožć stranih službi.,* Republika, 06. 04. 2024. https://www.republika.rs/vesti/politika/532056/aleksandar-vucic-atentat-zvicer https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/660512/pogledi/atentat-na-predsednika-vucica (accessed August 12, 2025).

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to national stability in order to justify mass surveillance and repression.[32] Vučić's use of the Kavač Clan conspiracy aligns with this tradition, merging organized crime with political opposition in the public imagination.

3.4. The Stefan Nemanja statue reveal

Yet another alleged attempt was made public by the government in October 2021, at the reveal of the brobdignagian statue to former medieval Serbian ruler, Stefan Nemanja. Aleksandar Vulin and Ana Brnabić (both high ranking memebers of government) spoke declaratively about a "plan" to assassinate Vučić. According to Vulin, "it was planned for a long time and in detail. Parallel structures were formed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and campaigns were conducted in the tycoon media, which were broadcast by the media in the region, in order to dehumanize Vucic and make him and his family a criminal clan."[33] This time, Vulin tentatively named one Radoje Zvicer of the Kavač clan, saying that "while Radoje Zvicer is free, there is a possibility of an assassination of Vučić happening". One again, the alleged potential perpetrator was not arrested, and the claim was never corroborated; the whole instance fizzled out silently.

3.5. The Exploding Tire Incident (2025)

In February 2025, Vučić's armored vehicle suffered a tire explosion, which state-controlled media immediately characterized as a high-tech assassination attempt. The quote by Nebojša Bakarec from the very beginning of this article speakes volumes: the author claims that the President was victim of an unsuccessful high-tech attach, embellishing the whole incident, and even claiming that there were eight assassination attempts. Our scouring of Serbia's recent history could not reveal more than five, though. The fear of technologically advanced assassination methods has been a recurring theme in Cold War politics, with both the United States and the Soviet Union fueling paranoia about undetectable poisons, micro-drones, and silent killers.[34]

[32] Manuela Williams analyzed how Italian intelligence services under Mussolini expanded surveillance and domestic repression, claiming it was necessary to counter criminal organizations and internal threats: Williams, Manuela. "Mussolini's Secret War in the Mediterranean and the Middle East: Italian Intelligence and the British Response." *Intelligence and National Security* 22.6 (2007): 881-904.

[33] Nova.rs, "Svi atentati na Aleksandra Vučića: Mnogo propagandne buke, nula osumnjičenih i optuženih", Nova, 25 Aug 2024.

[34] R. H Smith provides insight into classified assassination projects, including covert poisonings and non-traceable execution methods at: Smith, Russell Jack. "The unknown CIA: My three decades with the agency." *(No Title)* (1989). Similarly, Daugherty describes the paranoia surrounding silent assassination tactics during the Cold War, including the development of micro-weapons for covert eliminations: Daugherty, William J. *Executive secrets: covert action and the presidency*. University Press of Kentucky, 2006.

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4. Discussion

The alleged assassination attempts on Aleksandar Vučić, spanning from 2016 to 2025, reveal a striking pattern that transcends individual incidents, weaving a consistent narrative rooted in political strategy rather than genuine threats. A defining feature across all these events is the conspicuous lack of evidence. In each case – the Jajinci Affair, the RTS protest, the Kavač Clan conspiracy, the Stefan Nemanja statue reveal, and the exploding tire incident – no arrests were made, no charges were filed, and no credible proof emerged to substantiate the claims. This absence strongly suggests that these narratives were either fabricated outright or exaggerated beyond recognition, casting doubt on their authenticity and pointing instead to their utility as political tools.

Central to this pattern is the role of media (tabloid) amplification, orchestrated by pro-government outlets like *Alo!*, *Informer*, and *Pink*. These platforms consistently sensationalized each supposed attempt with dramatic headlines and unsubstantiated assertions, from alleging foreign-backed conspiracies to claiming imminent violence by opposition mobs.[35] This media frenzy shaped public perception, transforming vague or baseless incidents into national crises that demanded attention and loyalty. The hyperbolic coverage, often devoid of follow-through or factual grounding, served to manipulate, ensuring that Vučić's image as a beleaguered yet steadfast leader remained front and center in the public imagination.

The timing of these incidents further emphasizes their strategic intent. Each emerged during periods of significant political vulnerability for Vučić's administration. In 2016, economic stagnation and corruption scandals threatened his credibility, only for the Jajinci Affair to redirect focus to external threats. The 2019 RTS protest coincided with escalating opposition to his authoritarian drift, while the 2021-2022 Kavač Clan and Stefan Nemanja claims surfaced amid renewed corruption allegations and regional tensions. Even the 2025 tire explosion followed ongoing economic woes. This consistent alignment with moments of criticism suggests a deliberate effort to shift discourse away from governance failures, recasting Vučić as a victim and rallying support around his leadership. A recurring narrative thread is the construction of enemies – foreign agents, domestic rivals, or criminal networks – used to foster a siege mentality. Whether it was "spies" in 2016, "extremist" protesters in 2019, or the shadowy Kavač Clan in 2021 and 2022, these threats painted Serbia as under attack, with Vučić as its sole defender. This framing heightened nationalistic fervor and positioned dissent as disloyalty, reinforcing his authority. The result was a justification for power consolidation, as each incident paved the way for tightened security measures, greater media control, and suppression of political opposition, all under the guise of protecting the nation.

[35] The *Informer* is by all criteria the most prolific and vitriolic. See a detailed analysis here: Jovanović, Srđan Mladenov. ""You're Simply the Best": Communicating Power and Victimhood in Support of President Aleksandar Vučić in the Serbian Dailies Alo! and Informer." *Journal of Media Research-Revista de Studii Media* 11.31 (2018): 22-42., Jovanović, Srđan Mladenov. "Headlines as fake news: Discursive deception in Serbia's daily Informer (2012-2018)." *Central and Eastern European Review* 12.1 (2018): 1-22.

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This pattern unfolds within Serbia's broader sociopolitical context, where Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily entrenched authoritarian tendencies. The party has centralized power, undermined judicial independence, and dominated the media landscape, with the assassination narratives aligning seamlessly with this trajectory by branding dissent as treasonous.[36] Meanwhile, Serbia grapples with persistent economic and social challenges (stagnant wages, high unemployment, cronyism, and endemic corruption) that fuel public discontent. These incidents deflect blame onto external or internal scapegoats, shielding the government from accountability. Vučić's rhetoric, steeped in nationalism and populism, amplifies this dynamic, casting him as a protector against omnipresent threats, real or imagined, and cementing his grip on power through a carefully crafted image of resilience amid perpetual crisis.

5. The Function of Paranoia in Vučić's Governance

One of the most immediate and effective uses of assassination narratives is their ability to redirect public attention away from domestic problems.[37] Serbia, like many post-communist states in Eastern Europe, faces significant economic challenges, including high unemployment rates, inflation, and widespread corruption. Additionally, public dissatisfaction has grown over declining living standards, weak institutions, and the erosion of democratic norms under Vučić's rule.

Whenever public scrutiny begins to focus on these governance failures, allegations of new assassination attempts emerge, capturing media attention and shifting the national conversation away from tangible policy issues. This pattern has been particularly evident in recent years. In October 2016, just as Vučić faced mounting criticism over unfulfilled economic promises, the Jajinci affair dominated headlines, portraying him as the target of a sophisticated assassination plot. Similarly, in 2022, when allegations surfaced linking government officials to Serbian organized crime networks, the Kavač Clan conspiracy emerged, allowing Vučić to recast himself as a victim of powerful criminal elements rather than a leader entangled in corruption. This strategic diversion of attention ensures that Vučić's administration remains largely immune to sustained public scrutiny, as opposition forces struggle to compete with the highly emotive narrative of national security and personal survival. The discourse around assassination plots also serves as a unifying force, rallying Vučić's supporters around him in times of political uncertainty. By cultivating a siege mentality, he reinforces the perception that

[36] Teofilović *et al* detail the media suppression under SNS and the use of state-controlled media to push pro-Vučić propaganda, including assassination scare tactics in Teofilović, Ivana, et al. "Freedom of expression and media freedom in Serbia in the EU integration process." *Beograd: Građanske inicijative & Fondacija za otvoreno društvo [In Serbian]* (2018). Magdalena Rekść calls his control of the media "absolute" in Rekść, Magdalena. "Aleksandar Vučić's Stabilocracy." Przegląd Humanistyczny 479.4 (2022): 102-120.

[37] A detailed overview of redirecting public attention is found in: Dimaggio, Anthony R. *Mass media, mass propaganda: examining American news in the" War on Terror"*. Lexington Books, 2008.

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Serbia is locked in a battle against internal and external enemies, further legitimizing his centralized control over state institutions.

Beyond its function as a distraction, the narrative of assassination attempts also plays a critical role in strengthening Vučić's personalist rule. Leaders who rely on authoritarian or hybrid governance models often attempt to frame themselves as irreplaceable figures, whose removal would result in national catastrophe. By repeatedly casting himself as a leader under attack, Vučić enhances his mythos of indispensability, ensuring that his survival is seen as synonymous with the survival of Serbia itself.[38]

This personalist approach is not unique to Vučić. Historical parallels can be found in figures like Napoleon Bonaparte, who frequently exaggerated or fabricated assassination threats to justify his centralization of power and dismantling of democratic institutions. Likewise, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has portrayed himself as the target of Western-backed coup plots, reinforcing his status as Turkey's only viable leader. In Serbia, Vučić employs a similar narrative of existential struggle, where he alone stands against powerful enemies, be they foreign intelligence agencies, criminal networks, or political rivals conspiring against him.

The success of Vučić's paranoia-driven governance model is *heavily dependent on media complicity*, particularly the role of pro-government tabloids and television networks in amplifying and legitimizing assassination claims. In hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions still formally exist but are systematically undermined, control over public discourse is essential for maintaining power.[39] In Serbia, government-aligned media outlets such as *Informer*, *Alo!*, and *Pink* function as de facto propaganda machines, ensuring that assassination narratives remain at the forefront of national discussion. Each time a new assassination attempt is alleged, these outlets dedicate front-

[38] And, while achieving all of the above, "the so-called stabilitocracy, supported by the West, has allowed Vučić to combine authoritarian tools of governance with a declarative commitment to Serbia's EU integration, consequently resulting in democratic backsliding", Vučković, Vladimir, and Branislav Radeljić. "You are either with us, or against us: the small state of Serbia between domestic ambition and external pressures." *Cogent Social Sciences* 10.1 (2024): 2389479., p. 6.

[39] Robinson and Milne highlight that hybrid regimes, such as those observed in Russia, use elements of populism to stabilize their power by manipulating public discourse and minimizing democratic engagement. This strategy reinforces their control, allowing for a crafted narrative that conveys legitimacy while simultaneously stifling genuine public debate and dissent: Robinson, Neil, et al. "Populism and political development in hybrid regimes: russia and the development of official populism". International Political Science Review, vol. 38, no. 4, 2017, p. 412-425. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512117697705. Moreover, the media landscape in hybrid regimes often operates under the framework of an authoritarian public sphere, where information shared is heavily regulated and often propagandistic. The authors note that while there may be nominal spaces for debate, the reality is that public discourse is largely manipulated to reflect state interests. This dynamic reveals how control over communication channels becomes not just a tool for governance but a fundamental aspect of maintaining the regime's power structure: Middleton, Carl, et al. "The emergence of a hybrid public sphere in myanmar: implications for democratisation". Trans Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, p. 45-64. https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.2

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page headlines, exclusive reports, and prime-time coverage to dramatizing the claims, presenting them as immediate threats to the nation's stability. These media outlets follow a predictable pattern in their coverage of alleged assassination plots. First, they publish sensationalist headlines announcing the latest attempt on Vučić's life, often accompanied by inflammatory rhetoric about Western interference or opposition conspiracies. Second, they vilify political opponents, linking them to the supposed assassination plot without concrete evidence. Third, they ensure that the narrative remains in circulation for weeks, preventing other political issues from gaining traction. The sheer volume and repetition of these claims create a self-reinforcing cycle, where even false or unproven allegations acquire a degree of perceived legitimacy simply through repeated exposure. This phenomenon, known in media studies as the "illusory truth effect," suggests that the more frequently people encounter a particular claim, the more likely they are to accept it as factual, even in the absence of evidence.[40]

Public opinion research in Serbia indicates that a significant segment of the population believes Vučić is genuinely under constant threat, a perception largely shaped by state-aligned media narratives. Surveys have shown that government supporters are particularly susceptible to these claims, viewing assassination attempts as evidence of Vučić's courage and indispensability. Meanwhile, opposition voters tend to dismiss these narratives as fabrications, though their voices are often drowned out by the overwhelming reach of state-aligned media.

This dynamic ensures that Vučić's paranoid style of governance remains sustainable, as a large portion of the electorate continues to perceive him as a leader in constant danger, worthy of extraordinary powers to defend the nation.

5. Conclusion

The persistent invocation of assassination plots and existential threats under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić aligns Serbia with a historical tradition of paranoia-based governance, wherein political leaders fabricate, exaggerate, or exploit crises to consolidate their rule, marginalize opposition, and justify repressive measures. This strategy is not unique to Serbia; rather, it represents a broader political pattern seen

[40] The phenomenon known as the "illusory truth effect" highlights a cognitive bias where increased exposure to a particular claim leads to a higher likelihood of accepting it as true, even when evidence is lacking. This empirical observation aligns with the notion that familiarity significantly influences individuals' truth judgments. Research suggests that the illusory truth effect operates through mechanisms of processing fluency; when people repeatedly encounter the same information, they often experience a sense of familiarity that misleads them into perceiving that information as more credible or factual. Wang et al. investigate the neural mechanisms underlying the illusory truth effect and provide evidence supporting the fluency hypothesis. Their research explores how the perirhinal cortex is implicated in the cognitive processes that facilitate this effect, demonstrating that increased familiarity with a statement reliably correlates with its perceived truth. This finding underscores how familiarity can transform misleading information into perceived truth merely through repetition: Wang, Wei-Chun, et al. "On known unknowns: fluency and the neural mechanisms of illusory truth". Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, vol. 28, no. 5, 2016, p. 739-746. https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_00923

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across historical and contemporary regimes, ranging from McCarthy-era America to Stalin's Soviet Union and Erdoğan's Turkey. What distinguishes Vučić's use of paranoia is its highly strategic deployment within a hybrid political system. Unlike full-fledged dictatorships, hybrid regimes require a constant balancing act, where leaders must manufacture legitimacy while simultaneously undermining democratic institutions. In this context, assassination narratives serve as a powerful political instrument, allowing Vučić to position himself as an indispensable leader whose survival is synonymous with Serbia's stability.

The construction of assassination myths as a governance tool has deep historical roots. From the Roman Republic to 20th-century authoritarian states, leaders have frequently invoked conspiracies against their lives to eliminate rivals, tighten their grip on power, and justify extraordinary security measures. Vučić's Serbia is no different. Throughout this study, we have examined how his assassination claims have followed a distinct historical trajectory, where each alleged plot coincided with moments of political turbulence, economic hardship, or growing opposition mobilization. This pattern mirrors the tactics employed by some of history's most notorious leaders, revealing a striking continuity between historical paranoia-based governance models and contemporary Serbian politics.

The study of paranoia as a political strategy remains a crucial area for future research, particularly in the context of hybrid regimes, democratic backsliding, and media manipulation. While this study has focused on Serbia under Vučić, there is a broader comparative dimension that warrants further exploration.

One promising avenue for research is the comparative analysis of other contemporary leaders who have relied on paranoia to sustain their rule. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's repeated claims of coup plots and foreign conspiracies provide a striking parallel to Vučić's use of assassination narratives. Similarly, Vladimir Putin's allegations of Western-backed "color revolutions" in Russia follow a similar logic, wherein external threats are invoked to justify crackdowns on civil liberties. A comparative framework could reveal commonalities and variations in how leaders across different regimes use paranoia to manipulate public discourse and secure political survival.

Another critical area of investigation is the role of media literacy in countering paranoia-driven narratives. In authoritarian or hybrid regimes, state-controlled media plays a crucial role in reinforcing fear-based governance strategies. Understanding how citizens consume, interpret, and resist such narratives can provide insights into potential interventions that mitigate the impact of propaganda. Studies on media education initiatives, independent journalism, and digital disinformation campaigns could shed light on the mechanisms that sustain paranoia in public discourse and explore ways to strengthen democratic resilience.

Additionally, further research is needed on opposition resistance strategies in the face of paranoia-driven governance. In many cases, opposition parties and civil society organizations struggle to counteract fear-based narratives, as they are systematically portrayed as threats to national stability. Investigating effective methods of counter-

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-messaging, coalition-building, and grassroots mobilization could offer valuable insights for political actors seeking to challenge entrenched authoritarian narratives.

Beyond Serbia, future studies should also consider the long-term impact of paranoia-driven governance on democratic institutions. While hybrid regimes can sustain a delicate balance between democratic and authoritarian tendencies for extended periods, history suggests that prolonged reliance on paranoia can eventually lead to full-fledged autocratization. Comparative historical studies of regimes that transitioned from hybrid systems to outright dictatorship (such as the evolution of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro) could provide important lessons on the tipping points that determine whether a system remains semi-democratic or collapses into autocracy.

As Serbia navigates its political future, the use of assassination plots as a governance tool will likely remain a recurring feature of Vučić's strategy. While historical precedents suggest that such tactics can sustain a leader's grip on power for a significant period, they also reveal the inherent fragility of paranoia-driven governance. Ultimately, the success or failure of Vučić's approach will depend on the resilience of Serbia's democratic institutions, the response of opposition forces, and the ability of independent media and civil society to challenge fear-based narratives.

Abstract: This paper explores the role of political paranoia in governance strategies, using Serbia under President Aleksandar Vučić as a case study. Following the concept od Richard Hofstadter – *paranoid style in politics* – the article examines how alleged assassination attempts on Vučić – despite a lack of evidence – have been deployed as a tool to justify increased state control, discredit opposition forces, and consolidate power. By analyzing media reports, political speeches, and historical precedents, this study situates Vučić's tactics within a broader historical trend of leaders who manipulate crisis narratives to maintain authority. The paper also traces how similar strategies were employed in various historical contexts, including the McCarthy era in the United States, the Soviet purges, and conspiracy-laden political cultures in post-communist Eastern Europe. It argues that Vučić's use of assassination narratives reflects a deliberate political strategy designed to reinforce a siege mentality among his supporters and present himself as Serbia's indispensable leader.
Keywords: paranoid style; political conspiracy; assassination narratives; authoritarian governance; Serbia

Streszczenie: W artykule tym zbadano rolę paranoi politycznej w strategiach rządzenia, wykorzystując Serbię pod rządami prezydenta Aleksandara Vučicia jako studium przypadku. Opierając się na paranoicznym stylu Richarda Hofstadtera w polityce, artykuł bada, w jaki sposób domniemane próby zamachu na Vučicia – pomimo braku dowodów – zostały wykorzystane jako narzędzie do uzasadnienia zwiększonej kontroli państwa, zdyskredytowania sił opozycyjnych i konsolidacji władzy. Analizując doniesienia medialne, przemówienia polityczne i precedensy historyczne, badanie to sytuuje taktykę Vučicia w szerszym historycznym trendzie przywódców, którzy manipulują narracjami kryzysowymi w celu utrzymania autorytetu. W artykule prześledzono również, w jaki sposób podobne strategie były stoso-

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wane w różnych kontekstach historycznych, w tym w erze McCarthy'ego w Stanach Zjednoczonych, czystkach w Związku Radzieckim i obciążonych spiskami kulturach politycznych w postkomunistycznej Europie Wschodniej. Twierdzi, że wykorzystanie przez Vučicia narracji o zabójstwach odzwierciedla celową strategię polityczną mającą na celu wzmocnienie mentalności oblężonej twierdzy wśród jego zwolenników i przedstawienie siebie jako niezastąpionego przywódcy Serbii.
Słowa kluczowe: styl paranoiczny; spisek polityczny; narracje o zabójstwach; autorytarne rządy; Serbia

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