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The Rhetoric of State Instability

Abstract

We can define *state instability* as a situation in which a system's previously established norms and rules no longer function properly. Under the circumstances of changed institutional functioning, the main actors of the given environment resort to new strategies to preserve their authority and maintain their positions. In this paper, we aim to present rhetorical strategies as a response of political actors to the environment of state instability. We will use a qualitative content analysis method to present the three political crises in the United States, Serbia, and Croatia. The paper aims to compare international rhetorical strategies as an attempt by political actors to avoid state instability.

Key words: Rhetorical strategies, state instability, political crisis, the USA, Serbia, Croatia.

Introduction

We can talk about state instability in different ways. We can define it as economic, medical, social, or political instability (Aisen and Veiga, 2013; Roubini, 2011; Epstein, 1995). We can also approach the topic differently, depending on the methodology we use and the field from which our research originates. We will attempt to create an interdisciplinary framework with two perspectives shifts: (i) social epistemology and (ii) social psychology.

(i) What constitutes a socio-epistemic influence on issues of state instability is the epistemic framing of the problems and phenomena with which we are concerned. This approach is characterized by the perspective of epistemic networks, a general picture of the dynamic and real-time process of acquiring beliefs and knowledge (Rosenstock, Bruner and O'Connor, 2017; Leydesdorff, 1991; Sullivan et al., 2020). Epistemic networks represent the interaction between epistemic actors and, in our case, the interaction between policymakers and the rest of the citizenry. Some epistemic phenomena,

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such as politically relevant events and crises, are frequently clustered in an epistemic network. Policymakers and citizens respond differently to such events because of the different roles and risks they embark on. When a crisis occurs, ordinary epistemic agents ask questions while political actors (epistemic experts) answer them. The degree of state instability that will follow depends on the content and quality of those answers and the nature of the crisis. Thus, political actors try to disguise the seriousness of the situation by making mesmerizing statements for the media. That brings us to the social-psychological framework of our research.

(ii) In contrast to social epistemology and epistemic networks, which provide a formal framework for the flow of information and the dynamics through which simple information interacts between political actors and citizens, social psychology is a more meaningful and concrete framework (Ibáñez, 1991). In social psychology, we focus on the details of the presented information, its content, and its meaning, regardless of how these statements are disseminated within the network (Billig, 2015). Moreover, the focus here is not on eliciting true beliefs but on the psychology of how political actors receive statements.

Considering (i) and (ii), the structure of our work will "mimic" an interdisciplinary diversity. In the theoretical framework, we will explain the stronghold of our interest in state instability and single out political crises as fertile ground for our research. We will also define rhetoric in the context of political crises and highlight rhetorical strategies as a relevant tool for the socio-epistemological and social psychological approach to a state's political instability. After the theoretical background, we will move on to the methodology to clarify what qualitative content analysis is. The methodological part will describe three specific political crises in the United States, Serbia, and Croatia and highlight three key political actors. Observing political crises in an international context gives us a broader view of state instability through the intersection of similarities and differences between different countries in their responses to prevent a chaotic environment and unrest. We will select data from various statements from the media that political actors have used to answer questions about the political crisis. We have selected media of local and international milieu to exclude biased reporting and tabloid flash.

After the methodological section, we will present the results of our research through the prism of four rhetorical strategies that we have singled out. Within each of these rhetorical strategies, we will meticulously analyze the utterances of central political actors and show how their rhetoric attempts to maintain positions of authority and avoid responsibility for the outbreak of a particular political crisis. Finally, in the discussion, we will provide guidelines for further research and point out the limitations of our research and how this approach can gain sufficient breadth and focus on achieving a certain level of reliability and replicability.

Theoretical background

In the introductory part, we mentioned different types of state instability and several ways how it can be divided. We will now explain why political instability is the object of our interest and clarify what a political crisis should elucidate for the coherence of a system. We will then provide a brief historical overview of rhetoric in general and rhetoric in the political context of instability. Following this general and historical framework, we will present rhetorical strategies as an effective research tool for better understanding of political crises and list various sub-strategies. We will select the four most representative rhetorical strategies and define them in detail.

State instability and political crises

There is no single definition of "state". We can engage in dubious historical reflections from Plato through Machiavelli to Weber and Gramsci. However, a literature review highlights a general and contemporary definition of the modern state:

A state is a centralized political organization that imposes and enforces rules over a population within a territory (Cudworth, Hall and McGovern, 2022: 1).

Consistent with this definition, we can further define political instability and political crises. Unlike the definition of a phenomenon, which allows for reformulations and new readings to keep up with contemporary meanings, the dynamic monitoring of a phenomenon still requires some historical grasp. Therefore, we will present political crisis and instability following Huntington's (1965) understanding of its historical development since 18th-century France. In this way, we can represent political instability as a conflict of different political factions in the state or a faction conflict with a particular state institution. Although we have a general premise by which we can understand *the causes* of political instability, we should note that political crises arise for various *reasons* in the eyes of citizens. These reasons are usually random events that challenge previously established norms and rules. It is no longer profitable for policymakers to stick to these dysfunctional principles. They must develop something new that will help them maintain their political authority and position in the state apparatus. What any political actor has at their disposal is what they knows best: language and the power of persuasion. By using language to control the outcome of crises, political actors maintain their positions of power by regaining citizens' trust. For this reason, it is necessary to present what rhetorical tricks they resort to when backed into a corner of political instability.

History of rhetoric and rhetorical strategies

Rhetoric, simply put, is the art of persuasion. It has existed since there was a need for it. It came into being when the senates, forums, courts, and juries were created. Aris-

totle wrote the first work on rhetoric and defined it as *the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion* (Garver, 2009: 4). It is no coincidence that Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric* because the fourth century BC was the scene of democratic disputes between influential oligarchs in Athens. Aristotle considers rhetoric to be an effective tool for constructing arguments for any given situation and, in this sense, divides it into three categories: *Logos*, *Pathos*, and *Ethos* (Gross and Walzer, 2000). Rhetoric has evolved intensely throughout the history of the human need for power and authority, resulting in the development of various strategies that are much more advanced than those singled out by Aristotle.

If we start from common sense ground, it becomes clear that we can defend ourselves in two ways when we reach a linguistic impasse. (i) we can genuinely defend ourselves by emphasizing our "strengths"-internal rhetorical strategies, or (ii) we can try to bludgeon the attacker by hammering away at their "weaknesses"-external rhetorical strategies. In the context of internal rhetorical strategies, we can emphasize our normative responsibility or justify the rationality of the promises we have previously made. In contrast, in the context of external rhetorical strategies, we debunk the attacker by questioning their motives for participating in the debate or questioning their expertise to engage in the discussion in general and disqualify them as a speaker[1].

It is necessary to draw attention to the fact that there is an endless horizon of subdivisions and subclasses of rhetorical strategies in qualitative research. In addition to those mentioned above, we will highlight nine other rhetorical strategies in the work of William Benoit (1982), which we will use later. Benoit singles out: emphasizing investigation, shifting blame, refocusing attention, indicting John Dean, emphasizing confidentiality, emphasizing mandate, emphasizing cooperation, emphasizing executive privilege, and quoting White house tapes (Benoit, 1982: 192-199). In the next chapter, we will put rhetorical strategies into practice and outline a possible methodology for their application.

Methodology

Our research focuses on rhetorical strategies in the public utterances of political actors. Political crises provide a unique opportunity to examine the roles that political actors occupy in the changing circumstances of state instability. We focused on three key actors and events in three social contexts. We selected actors based on their role in state institutions and their epistemic ability to influence the outcome of the political crisis. We used qualitative content analysis to examine the collected data (Krip-

[1] You can see more about the internal-external division of rhetorical strategies in Brown (2012), Erkama and Vaara (2010), Riaz (2016) and Radenović and Nurkić (2021).

pendorff, 2004). There is a great deal of research in social psychology related to the epistemic authority-content analysis-rhetorical strategy guideline, and we will follow this methodological thread throughout the rest of the article (Kruglanski et al., 2005, 2009).

Table 1. Key political actors, their institutional roles, social contexts, and crisis events in which they were involved

Political actors	Institutional role	Social context	Crisis events
Richard Nixon	37th president of the United States, serving from 1969 to 1974	Social context I: Watergate investigations	Event 1, Event 2, Event 3
Ivo Sanader	Prime Minister of Croatia from 2003 to 2009	Social context II: MOL-INA Corruption affair	Event 4, Event 5
Aleksandar Vučić	Prime Minister of Serbia in two terms, from 2014 to 2016 and from 2016 until 2017, president of Serbia since 2017	Social context III: Savamala demolitions	Event 6, Event 7, Event 8

Social context and key events of political crises

In order to define a set of relevant propositions for qualitative content analysis, we will first describe the social contexts in the U.S., Croatia, and Serbia that accompany political instability. We will then describe the crisis events within these contexts as clusters of public statements made by key political actors at press conferences.

Social context I: Watergate is the name of one of the biggest political scandals in American history. The affair led to the resignation of Republican U.S. President Richard Nixon after his involvement in a cover-up attempt was revealed.

In a narrow sense, the "Watergate Affair" refers to the wiretapping and burglary of the Democratic Party National Committee headquarters at the Watergate hotel-residence complex in Washington. In a broader sense, Watergate is a general term for a complex network of political scandals in the United States between 1972 and 1974. These included politically motivated burglaries, bribery, extortion, wiretapping, conspiracy, obstruction of justice, destruction of evidence, tax fraud, illegal use of government agencies such as the FBI and CIA, illegal campaign contributions, and the use of taxpayer funds for private purposes. Above all, Watergate is synonymous with abuse of power.

The precursor to the affair is the actions Nixon took between 1969 and 1971, allegedly for national security reasons. To prevent information leaks, Nixon authorized the wiretapping of government officials and journalists without a warrant. In 1971, he authorized a security operation that included break-ins and the opening of a post

office. That same year, Nixon set up a particular investigative unit whose agents broke into the office of psychiatrist Daniel Ellsberg, the man who had given the Pentagon Papers, documents about secret U.S. operations in Vietnam, to the New York Times and who was on trial for espionage. The most prominent part of this story occurred on June 17, 1972, at 2:30 a.m. when the police arrested five men at the Democratic National Committee headquarters as they were adjusting electronic equipment they had installed a month earlier.

— **Event 1**: Nixon took a drastic action, ostensibly for national security reasons to prevent information leaks, and authorized the wiretapping of government officials and journalists without a warrant.
Time frame: between 1969 and 1971
— **Event 2:** A special investigative unit's agents broke into the office of psychiatrist Daniel Ellsberg, the man who gave the Pentagon Papers, documents about secret U.S. operations in Vietnam, to the New York Times and who was on trial for espionage.
Time frame: September 3, 1971
— **Event 3:** Wiretap and burglary of Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel complex in Washington when the police arrested five men at Democratic National Committee headquarters as they were adjusting electronic equipment they had installed a month earlier.
Time frame: June 17, 1972

Social context II: On December 9, 2010, Sanader was apprehended while crossing a border into Slovenia, shortly before the Croatian Parliament voted to lift his immunity from prosecution by the Croatian Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime (USKOK). The next day, Croatian police issued an arrest warrant and applied to Interpol for his arrest on corruption charges. On December 10, 2010, he was officially arrested near Salzburg, Austria. Croatian authorities froze his assets and bank accounts and formally requested his extradition on December 13.

Austrian authorities, including a parliamentary committee, looking into the more recent Hypo Alpe-Adria-Bank International scandal, questioned Sanader while he was in custody, while USKOK expanded its investigation of Sanader to include alleged bribery by Hypo Bank in the 1990s.

Sanader was accused of receiving nearly $695,000 for arranging a loan from Austria's Hypo Bank in 1995, raising allegations of war profiteering, and receiving 10 million euros in bribes from the CEO of Hungarian oil company MOL, Zsolt Hernádi, to secure MOL a dominant position in Croatian oil company INA.

— **Event 4:** During the Homeland War, the government had difficulty finding banks to borrow from at a time of high inflation. When he negotiated with Hypo Bank to purchase embassy buildings, instead of acting in Croatia's interest, Ivo Sanader

chose to gain pecuniary advantages and agreed that Hypo Bank would pay him 5 percent of the agreed loan, 7 million shillings. On January 4, 1995, Hypo Bank paid him 7 million shillings, thus achieving an illegal pecuniary advantage of 3.6 million kunas.

Time frame: from 1994 to 1995

— **Event 5:** Ivo Sanader, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, was accused of accepting bribes from the former head of the Hungarian MOL, Zsolt Hernadi. Sanader and Hernadi agreed that, for a bribe of ten million euros, they would secure the conclusion of unfounded contract amendments related to the Croatian oil company Ina in order to give the Hungarian company MOL a dominant influence over the domestic oil company. They also agreed to sign an agreement on separating the gas business from the domestic oil company, which Croatia would fully take over. Using his position and authority, Sanader ensured that the Croatian government concluded these agreements and made a payment of ten million euros to Hernadi in return. The payment was arranged by concluding fictitious contracts for consulting and other services to a company. In this way, five million euros were paid to the company in 2009, which should have been paid to Sanader over a more extended period. No payment was made for the second half of the bribe.

Time frame: the year of 2009

Social context III: On the election night 2016, between April 24 and 25, a group of unknown persons demolished private buildings on Hercegovacka Street in Belgrade's Savamala district, where the "Belgrade Waterfront" has been built. Despite several promises, the perpetrators and those who ordered the demolition, detention, and shackling of people in the vicinity have not been identified. While the votes were counted after the parliamentary elections, Hercegovačka Street was occupied by "phantoms". They demolished everything in front of them with excavators while the guard of the "Iskra" company was tied up. The guard - a critical witness - ~~has~~ died in the meantime, and neither he nor random passers-by, who were also unlawfully deprived of their freedom, received help from the authorities, which the former citizen protector revealed in the call transcript, received by the police officer on duty. That night, she refused to forward the call to the Savski Venac Police Station. However, Siniša Mali, the mayor of Belgrade at the time, not only did not resign from his function but later moved to a better post and became the Minister of Finance.

— **Event 6:** A group of unknown people demolished private buildings on Hercegovacka Street in Belgrade's Savamala district and restrained people nearby. They demolished everything with excavators while the company's security guard "Iskra" was tied up. The guard and random passers-by did not receive any help from the authorities, which the former citizen protector revealed in the call transcript re-

ceived by the police officer on duty. That night, she refused to transfer the call to the Savski Venac police station.
Time frame: April 24 and 25, 2016.

— **Event 7:** Aleksandar Vučić, the President of the Republic of Serbia, spoke for the first time about the people wearing phantom masks in Savamala at a press conference seven days later, confirming that he did not know precisely what happened but that the relevant authorities and the prosecutor's office were looking into it to establish the truth about what happened. Although it was already evident that the night demolition was not in accordance with the law, Aleksandar Vučić insisted that the demolished buildings were illegal.
Time frame: May 1, 2016
— **Event 8:** At the press conference after the Savamala scandal, the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, presented information about possible perpetrators of the demolition in Savamala. On this occasion, he announced that they were people from the city government of Belgrade and called them idiots. He also mentioned that an investigation has been launched and that those responsible will soon face the consequences.
Timeframe: May 10, 2016

Data sampling procedure

We have collected public statements regarding social contexts and crisis events that led to political instability from electronic media sources. We have singled out statements made by political actors on various occasions at press conferences and in press interviews.

In the case of Richard Nixon, we have used 16 statements already singled out in the work of William Benoit (1982) and found in the excerpt from *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon 1973*. In the case of the other two political actors, we have collected electronic media sources using the *Istinomer Proveri me!, FAKE NEWS tracker*, news.google browser, and the FactCheck.org website. Some of the regional media we been using for our analysis are: "RTS", "Blic", "Politika", "N1", "Danas", "Telegraf", "Alo", "DNEVNIK.hr", "Aljazeera", "Index.hr" and "Dalmatinski portal". Some of the foreign media whose news we have used to analyze mentioned political crises in Croatia and Serbia are: "The Guardian", "Bild", "BZ Berner Zeitung", "Der Spiegel" and "Deutsche Welle".

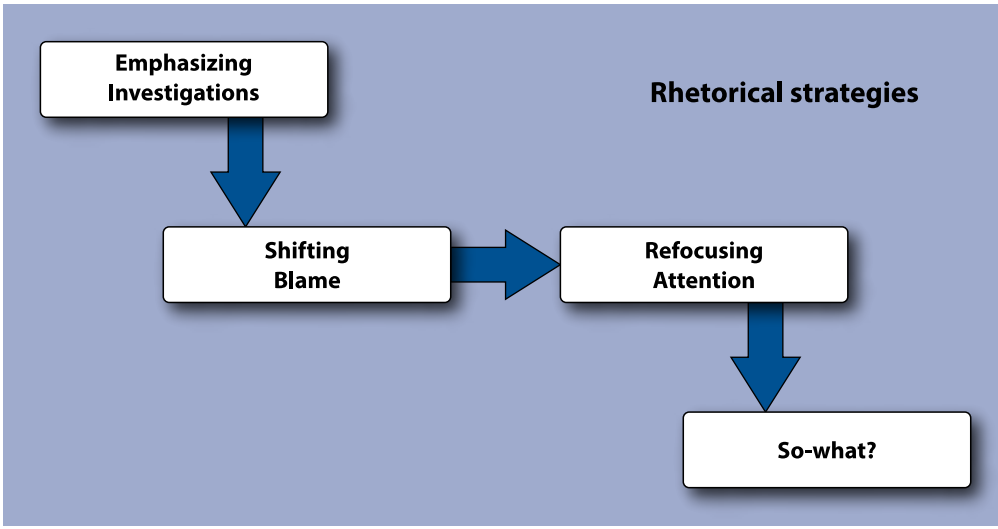
In addition to the above 16 Nixon statements, we have collected 32 media articles about the Vučić-Savamala affair and 23 media articles about the Sanader- INA MOL scandal. We have selected 64 direct statements from the collected articles, which we reduced to 41 relevant statements due to the repetition of content and peripheral information. The study could be more comprehensive and conducted with a larger sample.

However, we believe that the data collected provide a sufficient basis for a comparative analysis on the scale of this paper.

Results

In the theoretical part of the paper and the chapter on rhetorical strategies, we have enumerated many possible directions in which a qualitative content analysis could go. However, to get a clearer picture and the possibility of a comparative analysis of three situations of political instability, we have chosen four rhetorical strategies: emphasizing investigations, shifting blame, refocusing attention, and so-what? strategy.

Figure 1. Selected rhetorical strategies



The first three strategies are explicitly part of Benoit's (1982) conceptual framework, and we have used them to better relate Nixon to Sanader and Vučić. We added our fourth rhetorical strategy to better interpret Benoit's analysis of Nixon's utterances and strengthen the connection to contemporary political contexts.

In Table 2., we list representative statements by political actors paired with their respective rhetorical strategies. However, for the practical reason of saving space, we do not want Table 2. to become too extensive; we will list Nixon and Sanader in parallel for two of the strategies while listing Nixon and Vučić for the other two. In the subsections specifically describing each of the aforementioned strategies, we will representatively map Sanader's and Vučić's statements where they do not match Table 2., giving us a full representative coverage of the data collected.

Table 2. Rhetorical strategies and their representative examples

Rhetorical strategies	Representative examples
Strategy 1: Emphasizing investigations	"I immediately ordered an investigation by appropriate Government authorities, and repeatedly asked those conducting the investigation whether there was any reason to believe that members of my Administration were in any way involved. I received repeated assurances that there were not." (Benoit, 1982: 193) "Under all laws and obligations that require the Government of the Republic of Croatia to discuss the operations of leading companies, we discussed. We probably did not send the report to which you allude to the Parliament. Nevertheless, we discussed the operations of INA almost quarterly, not annually, because the company was privatized with a share of 25 plus 1, and the practical application of this law, which took place towards the end of the previous government, fell to us." ("Sanader: Tko pod drugim jamu kopa sam u nju upada", 2010)
Strategy 2: Shifting blame	"The easiest course would be for me to blame those to whom I delegated the responsibility to run the campaign. But that would be a cowardly thing to do. I will not place the blame on people—people whose zeal exceed their judgment and who may have done wrong in a cause they deeply believed to be right. In any organization, the man at the top must bear the responsibility. That responsibility, therefore, belongs here, in this office. I accept it." (Benoit, 1982: 194) "I want to inform you that behind what happened in Savamala, there is no doubt, which is very embarrassing, I am sure that they did not know what the details would be, I am sure that their intention was not criminal or even wrong, but they did something terrible, something that must not be repeated, and behind this are the highest functions of the city government in Belgrade, and they will bear both criminal and misdemeanor and any other type of responsibility." ("Da li verujete Vučiću ili sopstvenim očima i ušima", 2021)
Strategy 3: Refocusing attention	"When I first learned that the Watergate affair might in fact be far more serious than I had been led to believe, it has claimed far too much of my time and my attention. ... I must now turn my full attention ... to the larger duties of this office. I owe it to this great office that I hold, and I owe it to you – to my country." (Benoit, 1982: 196) "There was no tacit agreement that the INA debt owed to the state in terms of excise taxes would be tolerated. However, there was a decision that it was better not to pay the excise taxes than to fail, i.e., we did not want to force the collection of the debt and jeopardize jobs and business during the crisis." ("Sanader: Tko pod drugim jamu kopa sam u nju upada", 2010)
Strategy 4: So what?	"We did not urge: Come on, pay the excise tax and go bankrupt; the government could not act solely as owner in this case. If we had acted solely as owners, we would have had to put the key in Ina's lock, but we had to take care of social policy, as a responsible government." ("Sanader: Nije postojao dogovor da Ina ne treba platiti trošarine", 2010) "Let me say right off the bat that somebody in the government who was going to do that is a complete idiot. It was going to collapse in broad daylight. It was disgusting, illegally built, and there was no legal basis to stand there. He should have come with the city's construction equipment, and they could have called me." ("Vučić o rušenju Savamale: Onaj ko je to radio noću je KOMPLETAN IDIOT", 2016)

Strategy 1: Emphasizing investigations

In this rhetorical strategy, we can see a maneuver to demonstrate innocence. By telling the public that an investigation has been instigated, political actors say that they are innocent and that it would be illogical for anyone to claim otherwise. It would be entirely illogical for someone accused to initiate an investigation against themselves and insist on it. This rhetorical strategy was introduced by Benoit (1982) in the Nixon-Watergate case, and we have shown in Table 2. that it also applies to Sanader's statement about the INA scandal. In the following quote, we will show that it also applies to the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić:

I will make a political decision when prosecutors announce their decisions. I will not put pressure on prosecutors, as some others have done in times past, and I will not put pressure on judges, because I have never called a judge for anything in the world. Period. The end of this case. („U narednih sedam do deset dana istina o rušenju u Savamali", 2016)

By emphasizing the fact that the investigation has been initiated and stressing that he, as the President of the Republic of Serbia, will not put pressure on the prosecution and judicial authorities, Vučić creates the impression of impartiality of the proceedings, which should lead to the truth of the case. Therefore, Vučić is using the strategy of emphasizing the investigation to effectively respond to the public and control the outcomes of the political crisis he has fallen into.

Strategy 2: Shifting blame

It is characteristic of this rhetorical strategy that political actors subtly and casually accuse another actor of the occurrence of the political crisis they are responsible for. In this way, through public statements in which the strategy of blame-shifting is used, political actors show their innocence and deny the responsibility they attribute to another political actor from the same institution. This strategy was also introduced by Benoit (1982) for the way Nixon shifted blame to his advisor and political associate, John Dean. In Table 2. we have showed that Aleksandar Vučić shifted the blame for the demolition of the Savamala settlement to individuals in the city administration. In the following explanation, we will show how the former Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, Ivo Sanader, used the same rhetorical strategy:

In my government, the first vice president was Jadranka Kosor, and she was involved in all the crucial issues, as well as other important people in the government. We discussed everything, including INA, several times in the Praesidium and with the coalition partners. No minister raised his hand without knowing it. I admit that someone was more or less instructed, but everyone knew. Even Kosor participated in some of the meetings. I introduced a change in the functioning of the government's narrow cabinet,

which until the arrival of my government, functioned in such a way that there were only presidents and vice presidents. I asked that all ministers participate. I thought it would be good for Jadranka Kosor to get involved ("Sanader: Tko pod drugim jamu kopa sam u nju upada", 2010).

By shifting the blame to Jadranka Kosor, the minister in his government at the time, Ivo Sanader tries to portray himself as innocent and shift responsibility to his coalition partner. Sanader points out that Kosor knew about the events and the INA situation and grasps conditional argument: if I am guilty, why did not Kosor say anything, and why hasn't she also taken responsibility? This rhetorical strategy has practical consequences for shaping public opinion and defusing the political crisis.

Strategy 3: Refocusing attention

In the third rhetorical strategy we have chosen via Benoit (1982), political actors attempt to downplay the severity of the crisis and rule out the possibility that crisis events will cause political and governmental instability. Their use of this rhetorical strategy has a precise meaning: other things are much more essential than this crisis, and it is necessary to focus on the "Trojan horse of important events" rather than on the aspects of instability. In Table 2. we show how Nixon and Sanader use the strategy of attention shifting, while the following quote shows how the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, resorts to the same strategy in his public statements:

Who cares about salaries and investments when you focus on what false analysts and Maldives Bozovic will say. All this speaks for you and others if you do not show interest in the essential news. You all know that I am right, and this is an essential truth. („Vučić o Savamali: Biće reči i o političkoj odgovornosti", 2016)

Vučić uses the strategy of refocusing attention to downplay the events in Savamala and reinforce the impression that the higher salaries and investments he fought for during his tenure are essential. More dramatically, this strategy framed all general questions about the Savamala affair as destructive and malicious. With this gap between focused and less critical issues, Vučić successfully applies a refocusing strategy to reject responsibility for political instability.

Strategy 4: So what?

Our fourth rhetorical strategy is introduced as a stopgap measure for the previous three to enhance the impact of linguistic maneuvers used by political actors in public statements. The previous rhetorical strategies are much more moderate and usually aim to confirm the innocence of a political actor and possibly defuse political tensions by blaming other actors or downplaying the severity of the crisis event. The "so-what?" rhetorical strategy is a far more extreme linguistic maneuver because it does not deny responsibility. It is usually conditional: even if I am responsible, so what? Political

actors eventually resort to this rhetorical strategy when the facts are backed into a corner of political instability. Our central political actors' utterances will show how the "so-what?" rhetorical strategy played out in their public appearances at the affair's end:

When I first learned that the Watergate affair might in fact be far more serious than I had been led to believe, it has claimed far too much of my time and my attention. ... I must now turn my full attention ... to the larger duties of this office. I owe it to this great office that I hold, and I owe it to you—to my country (Benoit, 1982: 195).

The evolution of rhetorical strategies in the case of the Nixon Watergate affair ranged from emphasizing the investigation, shifting blame, and downplaying a series of crisis events that led to political instability to "so-what?" strategies. Nixon employed the last of his rhetorical strategies when he realized that it was no longer institutionally viable to deny the affair and his involvement in it. "So-what?" rhetorical strategy enabled him to emphasize his values and maintain authority despite the latter horn of conditionality: even if I had done it, so what? Investigations have been launched, and the situation is serious, but my mandate remains, and I want to devote my energy and time to run the country. That is where Nixon punctuated his public statements on the Watergate affair.

It is totally unacceptable for me to be accused of an alleged damage that was done to Croatia and was not done to Croatia. Because if there was an alleged commission, this commission was not paid by the Republic of Croatia, but by Austria, which means that if there was a damage, it was inflicted on Austria. The commission was not paid by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Croatian Government, but allegedly by an Austrian bank, which means that the damage was done there. ("SANADEROVA OBRANA 'Ako sam i oštetio Austriju, Hrvatsku nisam'", 2011)

As for the statements about his extradition to the Croatian judicial authorities, Ivo Sanader, to some extent, admits his involvement in the affair as an argument for compliance with Austrian legislation. After numerous attempts to emphasize that the judicial investigation existed and was initiated by him and rhetorical strategies aimed at shifting the blame onto Jadranka Kosor and downplaying the INA affair, Ivo Sanader finally resorted to a "so-what?" strategy. However, Sanader's use of the "so-what?" rhetorical strategy boils down to a claim that the damage was not done to Croatia but Austria and that he should therefore have the opportunity to defend himself before the corespondent country's judiciary. So maybe I was involved in the INA affair, so what? No harm was done to Croatia.

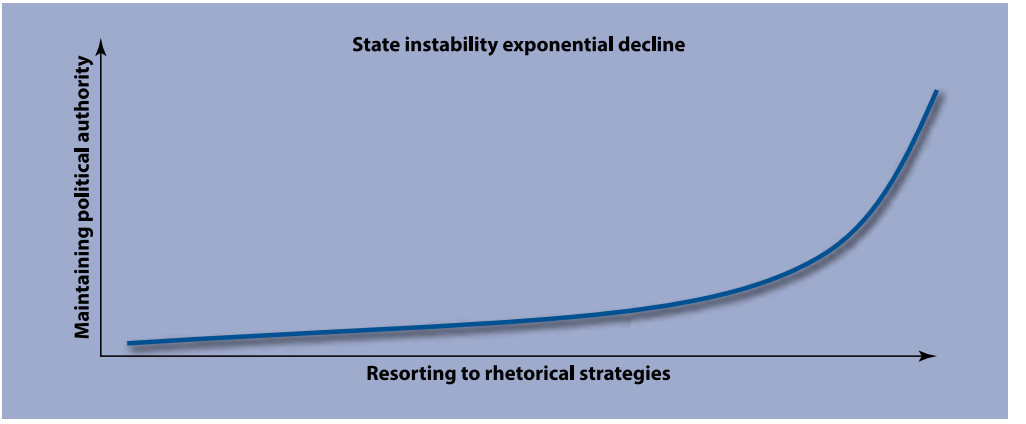
Of course, a BIRN journalist remarked a day or two after the incident, I think well, slyly, I said that it was clear to me that someone from the city was behind the action, and I would not blame them at all if they did it in broad daylight, on the contrary („Prvi dan sam rekao istinu o Savamali", 2017)

The fourth rhetorical strategy we have chosen is used much more explicitly in Aleksandar Vučić's public statements. After repeating the investigation he initiated, shifting the blame to the municipal authorities and downplaying the crisis event to the financial stability his skills and authority contributed, Vučić had to resort to the rhetorical strategy of "so-what?". After being backed into a corner of political instability by the facts, Vučić admits that the affair happened and that he knows who was involved. The drastic nature of the President of the Republic of Serbia's use of the fourth rhetorical strategy is shown by the claim that he would have participated in the demolition of the Savamala settlement if only he had been invited. Moreover, he would do it in public in the middle of the day. After that, Vučić stopped commenting publicly on the Savamala affair, and to this day, the perpetrators have not been brought to justice.

Discussion

In this paper, we have tried to compare three cases: the Watergate affair of Richard Nixon, the INA-MOL affair of Ivo Sanader, and the Savamala affair of Aleksandar Vučić. We have identified four interrelated rhetorical strategies: emphasizing investigation, shifting blame, refocusing attention, and the "so-what?" strategy. We elaborated the first three strategies following Benoit's (1982) analysis of the Watergate affair, while we singled out the fourth independently of the first three strategies. We used Benoit's rhetorical strategies for fixating the international frame of comparison of how political actors attempt to maintain their authority and institutional position under conditions of state instability. A fourth rhetorical strategy was introduced to demonstrate the atemporality of the rhetorical forms used by political actors in communicating with the public.

Figure 2. State instability graph



We have tried to show similarities between the public statements of Nixon, Sanader, and Vučić. The limitation of our research lies in the relatively small sample. For the research to have sufficient breadth and the character of a longitudinal study, a more comprehensive range of sampled data is needed, and a more significant number of political actors who exhibit the same use of rhetorical strategies as Nixon, Vučić, and Sanader. The difference in the cases we discuss is that Nixon and Sanader were impeached, while Vučić retained his institutional role and political authority. Due to the scope of the work, investigating the reasons for this difference would be a new and more comprehensive study.

Guidelines for further research could include selecting additional rhetorical strategies to specify the nature of political actors' public communication. In addition, further research could include excursions into issues closely related to trust and authority through monitoring the public support that political actors enjoy during political crises and state instability.

We have shown that rhetorical strategies are a very effective instrument that political actors resort to when they are backed into a corner of political instability. We have also shown that rhetorical strategies in the public debates of central political figures have an international and atemporal dimension. We hope that our research will serve as the basis for further, more comprehensive, more prosperous, and longer-term studies.

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Retorika državne nestabilnosti
Sažetak

Stanje nestabilnosti možemo definirati kao situaciju u kojoj prethodno uspostavljene norme i pravila sustava više ne funkcioniraju kako treba. U okolnostima promijenjenog institucionalnog funkcioniranja, glavni akteri datog okruženja pribjegavaju novim strategijama kako bi sačuvali svoj autoritet i zadržali svoje pozicije. U ovom radu nastojimo predstaviti retoričke strategije kao odgovor političkih aktera na okruženje državne nestabilnosti. Kvalitativnom metodom analize sadržaja predstavit ćemo tri političke krize u Sjedinjenim Državama, Srbiji i Hrvatskoj. Ovaj rad ima za cilj usporedbu međunarodnih retoričkih strategija kao pokušaja političkih aktera da izbjegnu nestabilnost države.

Ključne riječi: Retoričke strategije, nestabilnost države, politička kriza, SAD, Srbija, Hrvatska.