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AFFECTIVE AUTHORITARIANISM AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS: *DEMOKRACIJA*'S JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVES AS ACTS OF "MAKING PEOPLE FEEL" IN AUTHORITARIAN WAYS

Barbara Gornik

In 2020, the world faced a global state of emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Slovenia, the situation coincided with the formation of Janez Janša's government in March. Janša's rise to power—and the rapid introduction of Covid-19 measures that significantly restricted public and civic space—prompted widespread resistance, most visibly through grassroots initiatives such as the anti-government bicycle demonstrations, also known as the Friday Protests. During this period, private media outlets closely affiliated with Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), including Demokracija *magazine and Nova24TV, played an active role in shaping the political discourse, also in relation to the protests. This paper examines the affective dimensions of journalistic narratives about the anti-government protests as published in* Demokracija *magazine between 1 March 2020 and 28 February 2021. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of 41 articles, the study explores journalistic narratives as acts of "making people feel." It engages with the concept of* affective authoritarianism*, understood as a political process that simultaneously mobilizes and generates specific affective intensities, emotions, and atmospheres that render individuals more receptive to authoritarian values, attitudes, and practices. This perspective contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by highlighting the affective conditions that intensify authoritarianism within formally democratic states.*

KEYWORDS affective authoritarianism; journalistic narratives; anti-government protests; affective change; authoritarian predisposition; Slovenia

Introduction

In 2020, the world encountered a state of emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Slovenia, the situation coincided with the formation of Janez Janša's government in March. While the government adopted several necessary and legitimate measures to address the crisis and protect public health, some actions signalled a retreat from democratic principles, civil liberties and human rights. Janša's rise to power—and the subsequent enactment of Covid-19 measures aiming at unprecedented narrowing of public and civic space—sparked resistance with grassroots initiatives such as anti-government

bicycle protests, also called the Friday Protests. Protesters voiced their resistance to expanded police powers, excessive restrictions on freedom of movement, Janša's political attacks on journalists and media freedom and corruption among public officials. These protests took place every Friday, continuing for 105 consecutive weeks until the change of government following the regular parliamentary elections in April 2022.

The government's response to the protests raised concerns about repression of activists and a broader disregard for political pluralism.[1] The authoritarian tendencies of Janez Janša's government were also reflected in the media sphere. Private media outlets such as *Demokracija* and *Nova24TV*—closely affiliated with Janša's Slovenska demokratska stranka (Slovenian Democratic Party, SDS) through the company Nova obzorja[2] (New Horizons)—were actively employed to (de)legitimise political issues, also in relation to anti-government protests. These outlets utilised strategic framing techniques against the protest movement, including practices of naming and shaming, as well as the degradation and demonisation of activists. Within this context, emotions functioned as a *political technology* (Wilson 2023), i.e. "supply-side engineering" of the political system—deployed to advance partisan objectives.

In this paper, I examine the affective dimensions of narratives on anti-government bicycle protests in the *Demokracija* magazine, which serves as a platform for conservative viewpoints, regularly critiquing left-wing political parties, national broadcasting service and liberal policies. Drawing on ethnographic qualitative content analysis of selected 41 articles discussing the anti-government protest, published between 1 March 2020 and 28 February 2021, I explore journalistic narratives as "social acts *making people feel*" (O'Brien 2022). Rather than adopting the framework of affective pragmatics—which studies emotional expressions as mechanisms for directing others' behaviour (Scarantino 2017, 2019), I explore emotionally charged narratives as a strategic resource for inducing *affective change* in audiences.

My analysis begins from the premise that authoritarianism is, above all, something that is *felt* by people in social relations that concern autonomy, authority, obedience and nonconformity. Through this analysis, I engage with the concept of *affective authoritarianism*, which I define as a political process that both harnesses and generates specific affective intensities, emotions and atmospheres that collectively render individuals more susceptible to authoritarian values, attitudes and practices—values that are accepted, internalised and sustained through their social beliefs and everyday lived experiences. Accordingly, I conceptualise affective authoritarianism as a modality through which specific affect and emotions that are integral to the consolidation and endurance of authoritarian formations (e.g. dislike, anger, unease, disgust) are constituted through sociopolitical practices, embodied subjects and material-discursive objects (Ahmed 2004). Authoritarianism in this aspect is not grounded in coercion but in relation to its capacity to move *free* people (Dean 2002).

Based on the above, the article examines how *Demokracija*'s journalistic narratives employ affect as a form of political technology (Wilson 2023)—harnessing and cultivating specific affective responses among readers with the aim of producing emotions that endorse authoritarian dispositions (Stenner 2005). Affective authoritarianism is conceptualised both as politics and as sensation—what may be understood as a "circular operation of power, pulsing through the body and mind as a way of feeling" (Luger 2024, 14). This perspective contributes to ongoing debates by shifting the analytical focus from authoritarian behaviour, values, norms and practices to the affective conditions that sustain and amplify

the persistence and resonance of authoritarian formations, especially in the context of democratic states—the so-called hybrid regimes, which, combining authoritarian and democratic norms, practices and institutions, occupy a "grey zone" along the democracy—autocracy continuum (Frantz 2018). Affective authoritarianism therefore offers insight into (not-so-)new forms of anti-democratic politics that exhibit various authoritarian traits and, as Brown, Gordon, and Pensky (2018, 2) note, still lack a proper name; these politics and modes of operation draw upon conventional democratic political forms while simultaneously eroding them.

Conceptualising Affective Authoritarianism

Recent developments in social theory offer alternative approaches to understanding authoritarianism as a substantialist form. Key among these are the postmodern turn with its constructivist theoretical stances that highlight indeterminacy, contingency and fluidity of social phenomena (Susen 2015) and the affective turn, which rests on a premise that even seemingly most emotionless rational decisions, judgements and considerations have a felt sense (Jasper 2018; Mercer 2014; Wetherell 2012). As this section shows, both theoretical shifts are essential for conceptualising affective authoritarianism.

Beyond Substantialist Approach to Authoritarianism

Many discussions understand authoritarianism at the level of its substantialist existence, i.e. in relation to specific existing social structures, actors or values. For example, in political science, authoritarianism is explained as a form of governance in which the executive power takes a political position through undemocratic means, or without free and fair elections (e.g. Brownlee 2007; Frantz 2018), characterised by the concentration of political power and the immunity of political elites, media control, limitations on political pluralism and political participation, repression, etc. (Frantz 2018, 6).

Similarly, sociological and political psychological accounts theorise authoritarianism at the level of existing socio-political attitudes and values—shaped by socialisation and environmental influences (Altemeyer 1996)—and specific psychological profiles and personality traits (Altemeyer 2007; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). These include a tendency to obedience to authority, moral absolutism and conformity, intolerance towards political opponents, unconventional social behaviours, punitiveness and aggression against outgroups (Stenner 2005, 3). *Authoritarian predisposition*, as argued by Stenner, therefore implies the coherence within individuals' attitudes and behaviours reflecting rejection of diversity, insistence upon sameness and group authority, glorifying, encouraging and rewarding uniformity and disparaging, suppressing and punishing difference (Stenner 2005, 14–16).

Many of these approaches explore authoritarianism through substantialist lens in relation to the *existing* practices, values, attitudes and behaviours that explain *what authoritarianism is* and *how it manifests*, taking people, beliefs and behaviours as categories of analysis. Such an approach neglects their ontological conditions of existence. In other words, it examines *what* in essentialist way, rather than accepting the contingency of authoritarianism and focus on the *how* it emerges and *why*. Expanding on Brubaker's call to reframe nationalism (1996), the same can be argued for authoritarianism, namely

that thinking beyond the realist and substantialist way about authoritarians is not to dispute the reality of authoritarian rule, but rather to reconceptualise that reality and treat authoritarianism as contingent event. We should not ask "what is authoritarianism is" but rather: how it is institutionalised within states, how does it work as classificatory scheme, practical category and cognitive frame? (Brubaker 1996, 13–16).

Importantly, this does not mean we ignore the vast array of specific substantive manifestations of authoritarianism in forms of actors, values, behaviours, but rather to explore how these emerge. Borrowing from Foucault (1972, 28), this means to grasp authoritarianism in the exact specificity of its occurrence and conditions of existence. This then inescapably involves also examination of practices, politics, knowledge, logics and rationalities that constitute the grounds of authoritarianism in a broad sense and make the intelligibility of authoritarianism possible. Important step in going beyond substantialist approach to authoritarianism is also Foucault's premise that social practices always incorporate power relations, which are constitutive of the subject; this is indispensable for bringing the question of subject and politics into ontological investigation of authoritarianism (Oksala 2010). If authoritarian predisposition includes behaviours such as tendency to obedience to authority, moral absolutism and intolerance towards political opponents, we must then ask how authoritarian subject is created.

Authoritarian disposition—expressed through individual personality, values, or behaviour—cannot be ordered by a simple rule. In liberal and democratic contexts, authoritarian leaders cannot directly dictate what citizens should think or value. Instead, citizens navigate a landscape of possibilities, within which various behaviours and responses are available. Authoritarian subjectivity is thus shaped through the governance of conduct—that is, through "action upon the actions" of others (Foucault 1982), or the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 2007). In this sense, authoritarianism can be analysed through the lens of governmentality, which refers to techniques of power exercised over "autonomous" and "free" individuals. This form of power aims to influence how individuals govern themselves (Foucault 1988), rather than enforcing direct subordination. As Dean (2025, 31) puts it alluding to Foucault, "the free subject of authoritarian governmentality is a freely obedient one who serves an order within its definite hierarchy."

Affect, Body and Politics

As the previous section demonstrated, the body—as both a target of power and a site of concern within technologies of the self (Protevi 2015)—occupies a central position in constructivist approaches. The emphasis on the body is particularly significant for the focus of this article, as it creates space to engage with the concept of affect. Namely, in social and political contexts, the body becomes the site where affect takes shape and materialises (Jasper 1998; Protevi 2009; Ringmar 2018).

The distinction between affect and emotion is useful not only because emotions (e.g. resentment, anger, pride) do not embrace the range and variety of affective states, but also because attending to affect (as more impulsive, indeterminate and unformed feelings) paves the way to recognising that all human action is affective (Jasper 2018; Wetherell 2012). While emotion is more conscious, rooted in language and meaning, directed towards objects that give it meaning, focus and intentionality, affect concerns the more embodied, unformed and less conscious dimension of human feeling (Hoggett and Thompson 2012; Papacharissi 2016). Affect is the intensity with which we experience

emotion. But rather than asking what is affect and emotion, it is important to ask, what do affect and emotions do— in view of their relational and performative aspects—in terms of collective identity and social relations.

It is precisely because emotions cannot be decoupled from reason and action—they are "acts of consciousness" (Scheer 2012)—they cannot be seen as outside or separate from power relations. As such they are important to the intelligibility of bodies, and thereby also to the very phenomenon of the "art of governing" (D'Aoust 2014). Emotions, as social practice (Scheer 2012), thus offer conceptual and practical space through which authoritarian rationalities can be enacted with the technologies of government "imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects" (Rose in D'Aoust 2014, 270). In other words, emotions such as dislike, hostility and aversion, are not simply a by-product or consequence of authoritarian subjectification processes, buy rather operate "through the material production of specific modes of experience" (D'Aoust 2014, 271) and being.

Despite the wealth of works dealing with authoritarianism, there are handful systematically centring on the role of emotions in the ontology of authoritarian behaviour. Where this relation is explored, researchers focus largely on relations between emotions, personality and right-wing authoritarian attitudes while fewer focus on processes. Belonging to the latter, Pun and Qiu (2020, 3) propose a concept of 'emotional authoritarianism', which they define as "a political 'moving' process that aims at not only producing objects of feeling but also subjects of loyalty and commitment to a common political goal." In another study, Hou (2020) examines the emotional labour of grassroots petition officials in China and their strategies to neutralise public dissent and maintain social stability by disarming and reshaping citizens' intense emotions, which illustrates the affective dimension of authoritarian domination. Furthermore, Luger (2024) looks at affect that emerges as a productive lens through which he explores the complexities, range of emotions, identities and world-makings of authoritarian space and points out that authoritarian operation of power which induces discipline, submissiveness, adherence to structure, aggression and fear—can pulse with, and catalyse, joy.

Furthering these perspectives, I propose that affective authoritarianism can itself be understood as emotional practice—as a "things" people do in order to have emotions, or "doing emotions" in their relational and performative aspect (Scheer 2012) in terms of collective identity and social relations. More precisely, with affective authoritarianism, I direct attention to how authoritarian subjectivity is made through affective practices that use emotions to act upon people's *feelings* about autonomy, authority, obedience and nonconformity—an emotional experience of authoritarian political subjectivity.

Such understanding starts from the premise that authoritarianism—as a form or governance, personality trait or set of social-political attitudes—is not a self-emergent phenomenon, but emerges through practices and is preconditioned by the existence of specific emotions that are felt in relation to political pluralism, diversity, authority, freedom etc. Affective authoritarianism therefore directs attention to how authoritarianism is made by how we feel about different people, situations and contexts. Viewing authoritarianism as a process also requires acknowledging that the spaces in which authoritarian feelings emerge inevitably elicit varied responses across different social groups, thereby underscoring the need to consider the *politics* of affective authoritarianism, i.e. is the politics of producing affect and emotions in individuals to endorse, accept and exhibit authoritarian values, attitudes and practices.

Media function as one of the governmental technologies (Nolan 2003) that can contribute to the formation of authoritarian political identities by shaping the (self-)regulation of individual and collective behaviour. They offer frameworks for (self-)structuring subjectivity and conduct (Stauff 2014). Central to this dynamic is the relationship between the affective quality of journalistic texts and their audiences. Given the inherently communicative nature of narratives in relation to the audience, journalists often aim to activate affect and emotion through their storytelling (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, 2019). In this sense, journalistic narratives can be understood as social acts oriented towards "making people *feel*" (O'Brien 2022). Like communicators in other social contexts, journalists craft narratives to remind, argue, legitimise, persuade, engage—or even mislead—their audiences. This perspective frames journalistic work as intentional, goal-oriented and strategic in nature. As Riessman (2007) succinctly puts it, "narratives do political work." When journalists seek to elicit complex emotional responses—such as calming, amusing, irritating, angering, or frightening their audiences—they are engaging in the production of affective change.

Emotionality of narratives needs to be understood in its performative aspect—the act of communicating, produces consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of an audience (Austin 1962). In other words, *what do narratives do* is by generating an object of emotions they (re)create feelings as an effect of these narratives. Journalistic narratives manifest how emotions are relational and performative in view that they (are) circulate(d) to create individual and collective bodies (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020); emotions thereby exhibit how they are "bound up with the creating, securing or challenging of social hierarchy" (Ahmed 2004, 4). Inevitably then, narratives are involved in processes of constituting affective communities in politics (Berezin 2001), and in this way deeply involved in governing bodies or "conduct of conduct" (D'Aoust 2014; Kunz, Maisenbacher, and Paudel 2020). The political reasoning and behaviour of individuals do not rest on dispassionate objective calculation and evaluation of facts, but rather on affect and emotions; as Westen (2008) suggests, "the political brain is an emotional brain." Emotions of individuals in this view are turned into object of politics through journalistic narratives and become tempting as a site of intervention in the politics (Shah 2022) and identity construction.

Methodology: Sampling, Coding and Analytical Approach

The sample for the analysis of journalistic narratives on anti-government protests consisted of articles published in *Demokracija* between 1 March 2020 and 28 February 2021. This period was marked by significant socio-political developments, including the declaration of a state of emergency and the official recognition of the COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia on 12 March 2020. One day later, Janez Janša's government assumed office, initiating a nationwide lockdown and introducing a range of measures to contain the spread of the virus. Concurrently, mass mobilisations unfolded across Slovenia. These included three consecutive protests conducted from balconies in April 2020, followed by 45 Friday protests throughout the country.

To capture the affective dimensions of *Demokracija*'s response to these events, 51 printed editions of the magazine published during the specified period were examined. From these, all 41 articles that explicitly addressed the anti-government protests were included in the analysis. The articles were transcribed and coded using NVivo. The

central research question guiding this process was: How do *Demokracija*'s journalistic narratives utilise emotions as a political technology to harness and cultivate specific affective responses among readers, thereby contributing to the formation of authoritarian subjectivities?

An inductive approach was taken, employing initial coding without a pre-established list of codes. Recognising the inherent difficulty in identifying and naming emotions in written discourse (Clément and Sangar 2018)—particularly in the absence of situational and contextual cues—the analysis treated emotion as embedded within social acts. These social acts served as the primary sites through which affect was made legible, situating emotions within the broader discursive and political context of the narratives. The coding process was informed by the theoretical premise that individuals access emotions in accordance with socially constructed norms—referred to as "feeling rules" (Gustafsson and Hall 2021, 974).

A two-step simultaneous coding strategy was employed, allowing for the application of multiple codes to the same textual passage. In the first step, a combination of *process coding* and *in vivo coding* was used. *Process coding* was employed to identify social acts—that is, what journalists were doing with their narratives, rather than merely what they were saying or describing. These acts included rhetorical strategies such as blaming, praising, smearing, despising and glorifying. Social acts were then grouped under four boarder categories, namely (1) naming and shaming, (2) social degradation; (3) demonisation; and (4) self-victimisation (see Table 1). In addition, in vivo coding prioritised the journalists' own language, capturing the specific terms and phrases used to describe the protests and activists. This method foregrounded the emotional vernacular of *Demokracija*, revealing a distinctive "emotional regime" (Reddy 2001) embedded in its reporting. The combination of process and in vivo coding delivered rich context for identifying affectivity of *Demokracija* narratives, allowing me to grasp their genuine emotional atmospheres.

TABLE 1
Social acts in *Demokracija* narratives on anti-government protests

Category	Description of category	Process coding (social acts)
Social degradation	Diminishing and lowering someone's status or dignity, often through humiliating treatment	Sneer, Sarcasm; Contempt; Insult
Naming and shaming	Publicly criticising individuals, organisations, or entities for perceived wrongdoing or unethical behaviour	Discredit, Moralisation, Moral Condemnation, Blaming, Reproach, Scheming, Delegitimation, Polarisation
Demonisation	Portraying an individual, group, or idea as fundamentally evil, immoral, or dangerous, through exaggerated or distorted narrative	Warning of Potential Danger, Denigration, Fanning, Stereotyping, Demonisation, Deception
(Self)victimisation	Portraying someone as victims, sometimes accurately, but often selectively or strategically	(Self)victimisation, Developing Conspiracy

The second step of coding employed *emotion coding*, where affect and emotion were inferred through the lens of previously identified social acts and in vivo codes, which provided both situational and verbal cues. Again, simultaneous coding was applied, as many narrative passages proved multidimensional—expressing both overt and underlying meanings and encompassing multiple, interrelated affect and emotions.

In this stage, affect was understood as an embodied, often non-verbal intensity or sensation—such as unease, anxiety, tension, heaviness, closeness, urge, or frustration. The difficulty in identifying affect and emotion stemmed not only from their elusive and often indefinable nature but also from their interdependency. For example, a passage coded as a sneer may directly convey emotions such as disgust, contempt, anger and irritation, while simultaneously implying feelings of superiority or entitlement. These complementary emotions, though not always explicitly articulated, often functioned to intensify the passionate tone of the narrative, rendering affect and emotion more legible.

This analytical approach enabled a reflection on the *potential affective influence* of journalistic narratives and their capacity to elicit emotional change in readers in the context of identified social acts. Importantly, it must be acknowledged that media do not dictate what audiences should think, feel, or do (Happer and Philo 2013; Philo 2008); audiences are heterogeneous and their interpretations variable; thus, readers of *Demokracija* may have reacted with outrage, indifference, or even amusement to the coverage of anti-government protests.

An additional epistemological consideration is that this research did not measure actual audience responses and is therefore methodologically incapable of determining the concrete emotional effects experienced by readers. Rather, this study reflects on *potential* affective dynamics by interpreting social acts as affective and situational cues embedded in the narratives and additionally using an auto-ethnographic perspective. Here, auto-ethnography was used as a "technique of social investigation conducted through the self," where the "self" became a "methodological resource" for making sense of particular social phenomena (Reeves 2018). This reflexive stance allowed for a deeper engagement with the emotional textures of the text and the political work they perform.

Affect and Emotions within the Narratives on Anti-Government Protests

Social Degradation: Despise, Contempt, Disdain, Disgust

Demokracija's narratives on anti-government protests often aimed at discrediting and demeaning the protesters by the means of sneering, contempt, sarcasm and insult. Protesters were often depicted as worthless and disgraceful individuals, with the coverage frequently conveying intense hostility that escalated into feelings of disgust and disdain. These emotions were expressed through overtly disrespectful or scornfully abusive remarks, as well as dismissive attitudes towards the protesters. Narratives used harsh language and derogatory terms to label the protests and their participants.

Protesters were described with terms such as "ideologically crippled and now confuse good with evil" (D271), while the protests themselves were dismissed as a "retarded leftist anachronism without precedent" (D244). In this regard, journalists did little to substantiate the characterisation of the protests and protesters as disgraceful, unworthy, or despicable, apart from declaring them as such. Sometimes, disgust was amplified through the use of vulgar language, exemplified by statements like: "If partisan justice

and communist media look like shit and smell like shit, then it's probably shit—not chocolate." Such rhetoric underscored the publication's hostility and served to further demean both the protests and their participants. The range of phrases coined to describe the protests and protesters vividly illustrates the contempt and disdain embedded the narratives:

> "tired artists," "professional troublemakers," "40-year-old mama's boys," "bunch of Yugonostalgics," "retarded hate bicycle strikes," "egoists," "ordinary wimps," "privileged idlers," "slackers," "self-proclaimed artists," "invisible enemy," "red jihad," "polit-bicyclists," "political underground," "caviar socialists," "fed up artists," "professional hooligans," "privileged elite," "confused generation of leftist spoiled men," "state financial support dependents," "Friday bicycle masquerades," "casual bicyclists and third-rate artists," "violent leftists protestors," "representatives of the deep state," "retarded leftist anachronists," "Slovenian Bolsheviks," "bullies," "indoctrinated individuals," "governed by communism," "brainwashed," "potential terrorists," "spoiled, ungrateful children," "socialists fed up with capitalist wealth." "Leftist activists," "radical leftists," "anonymous radicals."

Sarcasm was frequently employed in *Demokracija*'s narratives to amplify disdain for protesters and portray them as irrational and disconnected from reality. Sarcasm, often expressed through sneering tones, was accompanied by mockery that highlighted a sense of enjoyment in belittling the protesters, making their actions appear foolish or ridiculous:

> More and more often, we hear that our beloved Slovenia is haunted by authoritarian rulers. This is truly awful. But it is also true that I have not personally met any, and I slightly doubt that we Slovenians are so lucky that anything like this could ever settle in our country. (D223)

> Make no mistake. Protest frontman Jaša Jenull, rapper Zlatko, Rajko Kenda, and anyone else have the right to protest. Against anything. Even against nose cones or McDonald's fries. (D208)

The use of sarcasm, combined with hyperbolic language, intensified aversion, mockery and disapproval of the protesters' views. This approach frequently complemented more direct expressions of dismissiveness, insults and scornful attitudes, reinforcing a tone of contempt, disdain and even disgust towards the protests and their participants.

Naming and Shaming: Indignation, Irritation, Anger, Resentment

Naming and shaming was the cornerstone of *Demokracija*'s narratives on anti-government protests. This was typically executed through intense criticism of the protests and the public exposure of allegedly undesirable behaviours among protesters. In many instances, the narratives included strong moral condemnations of activists, often emphasising their unethical actions. These narratives were infused with despise but intertwining also with other hostile sentiments such as irritation, anger, resentment and indignation, often in connection to violating moral order, ethics or fairness.

Activists were accused of attempting to overthrow a "benevolent government." Allegations of violence for instance were common, highlighting that protestors "openly call for the assassination of Prime Minister Janez Janša" (D244), "like anarchy and lawlessness" (D259) and "red and black terror" (D259). Feeling of indignation over activists was implied in allegations of their lack of credibility, immoral values and contradictions in

their political views and demands. The situation with protest was portrayed as twisted, given that "left-wing extremists, of various kinds, invoke democracy, human rights and freedom of expression" while "promoting violence and suppressing anyone who doesn't share their views" (D127).

Indignation in connection to anger and irritation was further expressed by emphasising the hypocrisy of activists, who were labelled as members of "progressive elites and groups demanding special rights for themselves" (D208), seeking to maintain financial benefits or protecting privileged position in society while "enjoying their caviar socialism, without really having any reasonable grounds for protesting" (D199). In this context, publicly known individuals (e.g. celebrities, functionaries) among the protesters were discredited and their past actions or aspects of their personal lives morally condemned:

> Among the protesters was the notorious Svetlana Makarovič, who / … / is considered a privileged pensioner, as she receives as much as three times the average Slovenian pension, and also lives in a prestigious home for the elderly at the expense of taxpayers. (D199)

Irritation with protestors was expressed by continual portrayal of activists as having no valid reason to protest, with the narrative suggesting that they were "very well paid, but increasingly less cultured" (D224), "A small percentage of dissatisfied citizens, who block the streets of the largest Slovenian city every Friday, honestly get on everyone's nerves" (D216). Their right to protest was represented as unfounded, exploited and misused, as

> no one is persecuting them, no one is imprisoned, no one is judging them, nothing bad has happened to them, and nothing bad threatens them. No one has occupied us, there is no war, and the coalition government is led by the party that won the democratic elections. (D235)

Instead, they were portrayed as superfluous and annoying for they are "selfishly occupying the roads and streets and obstructing traffic and people going about their business" (D216).

In naming and shaming, negativity and affective dissonance was moreover conveyed through blaming protestors of betrayal of Slovenian nation, being disloyal to the state and labelling them as someone who "do not like nor want Slovenia" (D259), "protest against their own nation, against life, against freedom and democracy, against homeland, again our Slovenian army and against sovereign state of Slovenia" (D244). Anti-government protests were diminished for not having patriotic and democratic values, respect for homeland and state sovereignty, cultured behaviour, good manners, respect and solidarity with fellow citizens and willingness and unity to the fight the virus collectively. This was normally accompanied with other emotions like antipathy, irritation, hostility, disapproval and aversion.

Demonisation: Vulnerability, Insecurity, Anxiety, Unease

Demonic characterisations of activists were sustained with designations of protestors as fundamentally violent, irrational, dangerous, primitive, criminal, uncivilised and inferior to the civilised values, through exaggerated or distorted narratives. *Demokracija*'s narratives stigmatised protestors as evil fighters with violent and destructive objectives and purveyors of chaos, "polluting" the order. In this way, protestors were stereotyped, homogenised and essentialised within one and the same, universal quality.

Apprehension, gloom and fatalism were expressed in narratives that portrayed activists as an internal enemy trying to "bend the rules of democracy, which is really hurting Slovenian democracy" (D255). The future of Slovenian society was depicted dark and uncertain given the potential danger stemming from "increasingly serious threats from street revolutionaries" (D 127) and "insurgent events that showed an escalation of hostile rhetoric" (D193), with "the extreme leftists, who are eagerly pushing us back 100 years in history and to Africa" (D244), suggesting inevitable negative outcome as the protests which will escalate until they "bring the fighting from the streets to your homes" (D193).

Additionally, recontextualisation of protests and protesters was characteristically employed in demonising narratives to convey alarm or urgency. Activists were repeatedly associated, compared, or equated with (political or red) jihad, Nazism and Hitler's Germany, socialism and Yugoslavian communism, bolshevism, fascism, terrorism, Antifa, extreme left, dictatorship, the conflicts within break-up of Yugoslavia and Yugoslav wars. Negative connotations associated with totalitarian regimes were permeated with feelings of threat and uncertainty as well as vulnerability of the society, anxiety and unease about what lies ahead.

Self-Victimisation: Injustice, Resentment, Distrust, Entitlement

Self-victimisation of Prime Minister Janez Janša and his government was often employed in narratives on anti-government protests. The production of victimhood was employed in relation to a variety of reasons, but mainly to claim that the government of Janša is being under unfair attack by the left. Conspiracy was typically evoked in relation to the unfair and imbalanced public media coverage that give Janša and his government insufficient media attention or employ biased reporting on political issues, including protests and protestors, embodying general distrust in social and political situation.

Activists and public media were depicted as political allies, who share common political views and interests and resort to their power to manipulatively and strategically mediate left-wing political agenda and biased criticism of Janša to the public. "Majority of the media, including RTV Slovenia" (D127) was seen actively participating together with protestors in creation of "atmosphere of dissatisfaction" since it is necessary "to prepare the 'terrain' well, which means to prepare public opinion in such a way that the planned uprisings will have a large participation and also an effect" (D127).

The overall self-victimisation narratives were conveying feeling of injustice in context of portraying Janša and the right-wing political option in general as having unequal opportunities to exercise political influence in the public sphere since "the incitement of traditionally 'rebellious' artists against any kind of right or the centre-right government is nothing new" (D224). Narratives highlighted the long history of the campaign against Janša—continuing from 1989 when the "Yugoslav National Army put our four patriots [including Janša] in jail and tried them in a contrived political trial" (D235)—and pointed to targeted and persistent effort to obstruct him, weaken his reputation and prevent him coming to power.

> The right of any figure from the left to lead the government is a first-class right. In contrast, Janez Janša's right to do the same is not just a second-class right—it is a prohibition that is, in my opinion, written in some secret official gazette, if not in a secret constitution itself. (D183)

Activists were associated with the "schemed" Slovenian political sphere that alluded to discrimination between privileged "old communist forces" and underdog position of Janez Janša and his supporters. Overthrow of the legitimate and democratically elected government of Janša was interpreted as the goal of "the old forces" (D271) aiming at "for a renewed violent rise to power" (D271). Many references were made to the existence of paralel system, hidden, entrenched group of influential individuals, a "deep state and its mafia leader Milan Kučan" (former president of the Republic of Slovenia) (D271) that governs Slovenian society form behind the scenes to control and protect their political interests and economic benefits and diminish the strength of the Janša's government. Resentment, coupled with distrust and despise was underlying these narratives, implicitly communicating the sense of frustration with lost entitlement.

Discussion

If the previous section showed how *Demokracija* narratives employed affective framing marked by a distinct "emotional regime" (Reddy 2001, 129), this section explores how these narratives created feelings that circulated within bodies and generated effects through transmission and contagion—in other words, how readers potentially "move, stick and slide" with these emotions (Ahmed 2004) in processes of media consumption. Aligning with the article's research question, this section in its second part also discusses how these affective narratives on anti-government protests create emotional grounds conducive to the flourishing of authoritarian outlooks and attitudes, such as obedience to authority, moral absolutism and conformity and aggression, intolerance and punitiveness towards the out-groups.

Demokracija Narratives Making People Feel

The social acts identified in *Demokracija* can be understood as affective interventions aimed at shaping readers' dispositions and structuring political behaviour. These acts sought not merely to inform but to elicit specific emotional reactions that align readers with authoritarian interpretations of social order.

For instance, social degradation operated as a tool for diminishing the social standing of anti-government protesters. These narratives functioned not by directly humiliating the activists themselves, but by instructing readers on how they should feel about them. Protesters were framed as socially inferior and morally deviant, deserving of public contempt and scorn. The goal was to cultivate emotional detachment and alienation, effectively casting protesters as outsiders undeserving of empathy or solidarity. In this way, social degradation suspended the possibility of emotional identification with the protesters, undermining the compassion that might otherwise bridge political divides (Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020).

Naming and shaming, similarly, did not aim to evoke shame within protesters directly (see Rowbottom 2013). Instead, it served as a form of public moral judgment, signalling that the protesters were engaged in morally reprehensible actions. The intent was to provoke a social reaction of condemnation among readers, reinforcing communal norms and encouraging compliance through negative emotional feedback. These narratives reminded audiences of the moral boundaries that must not be crossed (Seidman 2016), using public censure to stigmatise activists' behaviours. The resulting emotional effects

—indignation, irritation, anger—fuelled affective polarisation, cultivating the tendency to distrust and dislike those aligned with opposing political views (Druckman et al. 2022). This framing precluded neutral or mediating positions, consolidating antagonistic binaries and preventing affective alignment with the protesters.

The emotional charge of demonisation narratives extended further, evoking anxiety and anticipatory fear—feelings rooted in a perceived, yet not immediate, danger. These affective states worked towards creating moral panic, portraying protesters as impure elements threatening the cultural identity and future of Slovenian society. Readers may have felt vulnerable, powerless, or exposed to danger. At the same time, persistent exposure to such narratives may have led to desensitisation, especially when the depicted threat failed to match the protesters' actual actions or capacities (Zou 2020; O'Brien 2022, 252).

Importantly, these narratives did not only aim at generating negative affect such as anger or distrust. They also produced positive self-regard among in-group members, reinforcing feelings of superiority, righteousness and moral decency. The degradation of others elevated "us," the loyal citizenry, by contrast—shaping a moral dichotomy between the virtuous self and the corrupt other.

Finally, self-victimisation narratives aimed to generate feelings of injustice, resentment and loyalty. These stories communicated both a sense of loss (of status, influence, or national control) and a feeling of entitlement to justice, recognition and political power. By portraying Janez Janša as a virtuous and democratic leader besieged by malicious forces, the narratives fostered feelings of sympathy, national pride and group belonging. They positioned Janša's government not as authoritarian but as victimised—an embattled protector of national values. This cultivated an emotional bond of loyalty and solidarity among supporters. At the same time, implicit portrayals of governmental powerlessness in the face of elusive "hidden forces" introduced emotions of frustration and helplessness, heightening supporters' desire for strong, decisive leadership.

Affective Authoritarianism of Demokracija Narratives

Studies show that moral absolutism often stems from a sense of perceived superiority and that the demand for conformity and the enforcement of homogeneity are grounded in a belief in one's own moral righteousness (Skitka 2010). Aggressive behaviour typically arises from underlying hostility (Bushman and Anderson 2002), while the practice of intolerance is rooted in anger, fear, hatred and aversion (Smith and Mackie 2008). Calls for punitive actions towards out-groups are frequently driven by feelings of righteous anger, indignation, contempt and disgust (Dubreuil 2010). On the other hand, obedience to authority is often underpinned by feelings of respect, trust, or reverence, reflecting internalised hierarchies and normative commitments (Tyler 2011). Together, these emotional and affective states underpin exclusionary attitudes, social compliance and mechanisms of control, shaping authoritarian subjectivities.

In this context, *Demokracija* served as a site where many of these intense feelings were expressed and amplified, particularly in relation to anti-government protests. *Demokracija* can be viewed as an example of "ecstatic authoritarianism," to paraphrase Skey (2006), saturated with extreme feelings, whether they involve celebrating the nation and Prime Minister Janez Janša or criticising and attacking his political opponents or other out-groups (such as migrants, gender and racial minorities). Viewed through the lens of affective authoritarianism, one can see that the affective registers in Demokracija's narratives

create an emotional atmosphere conducive to an authoritarian disposition (Stenner 2005). It achieves this through the consistent foregrounding of affective registers that reinforce authoritarian sentiments.

For example, *moral absolutism, conformity and insistence upon sameness* was cultivated through shared disdain, contempt and disgust directed at anti-government protestors. These narratives operated within emotional registers that undermine the capacity to endorse political pluralism and recognise activists as legitimate political actors. They also diminish support for the diversity of people, beliefs and behaviours. The circulation of an aggressive and hateful atmosphere in general erodes the space for democratic dialogue. What is more, disdain, contempt and disgust constitute anti-government protestors' values and actions as fundamentally immoral. These emotions attached to anti-government activists in this way also discourage from voicing dissension and encourage conformity thereby regulating social behaviour and exert control of people, potentially feeling fear of being punished for any disobedient actions or words.

Aggression, intolerance and punitiveness towards out-groups were actively encouraged through the hostile affective tone that permeated *Demokracija*'s narratives on anti-government protests. This hostility was further reinforced by moral condemnation, expressed through tactics such as social degradation, naming and shaming and the demonisation of activists (Rowbottom 2013). Simultaneously, these narratives served to demarcate and reinforce moral boundaries that individuals were expected to comply with (Seidman 2016). Emotions such as anxiety, alertness, suspicion and blame towards activists, generated within these same discursive frames, contributed to the dehumanisation of political opponents, ultimately creating an affective environment conducive to social and political exclusion of out-groups. As Brown, Gordon, and Pensky (2018, 3) note, affective states such as anger, resentment, denunciation and a sense of frustration over lost entitlement—all prominently featured in *Demokracija*'s discourse—tend to foreclose opportunities for meaningful insight and understanding, leaving the political space vulnerable to authoritarian tendencies.

Furthermore, *Demokracija*'s coverage of anti-government protests actively promoted Janez Janša as a virtuous leader, a protector of the nation and the embodiment of national ideals. This portrayal helped cultivate an emotional bond between Janša and the readership, reinforcing *loyalty, obedience to authority and respect for hierarchical order*. The narratives encouraged emotional identification with a singular, unified national identity, fostering a sense of belonging and patriotic duty. By invoking loyalty and commitment, these narratives shaped public perceptions to align with government ideologies, while simultaneously eliminating potential sources of resistance and facilitating the creation of a more governable populace. The continuous emphasis on emotions tied to the nation's past helped foster a renewed national mood and identity, which, as Tokdogan (2020, p. 403) suggests, is instrumental in retaining political control. This carefully cultivated sense of collective identity was employed to unite readers under a shared narrative, making them more amenable to obedience in the name of the perceived common good of the nation. Moreover, expressions of out-group hostility also functioned to solidify and mobilise in-group cohesion and solidarity (McDermott 2011).

In this way, *Demokracija*'s narratives contributed to the construction of an affective landscape that both discouraged political non-compliance and resistance and simultaneously produced submissive, obedient and docile political subjects. The affective states elicited by these narratives can thus be interpreted as mechanisms for reinforcing an authoritarian moral order, serving as strategies to legitimise and uphold a social

organisation that restricts political expression under the guise of maintaining order and security. Ultimately, affective authoritarianism functioned by orienting readers towards emotional dispositions that supported social conformity, privileging homogeneity over pluralism and diminishing tolerance for diversity in people, beliefs and behaviours.

Conclusion

This article examined *Demokracija*'s journalistic narratives as manifestations of affective authoritarianism—a process through which specific emotional responses are cultivated to endorse authoritarian dispositions among readers (Stenner 2005). Drawing a provocative parallel to Herman Edward and Chomsky's (2006) concept of "manufacturing consent" within the political economy of media, it is suggested here that *Demokracija* represents an inverse model: a platform oriented towards manufacturing dissent—not against power, but against democratic contestation, pluralism and civil resistance.

The analysis revealed that *Demokracija*'s narratives consistently fostered a binary moral framework, constructing a divisive "us" versus "them" dynamic. This polarisation was achieved through the demonisation of anti-government protestors and the idealisation of the ruling government, particularly Janez Janša's leadership. The journalistic discourse rejected complexity and nuance, systematically omitting any serious engagement with the protestors' policy preferences, grievances, or demands. This strategic avoidance functioned to shield readers from dissenting viewpoints (Bard 2017, 5), fundamentally diverging from normative journalistic principles such as objectivity, balance, fairness and truth-seeking. In this respect, *Demokracija* abandoned its democratic media role as a watchdog, opting instead for an authoritarian communicative style. This was evident in the use of stereotyping, simplification and extreme moral judgment, all of which align with characteristics associated with authoritarian psychology: cognitive rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity and a high need for closure and structure (Altemeyer 1996).

Employing a governmentality lens, this article further showed how affective authoritarianism operates as a political technology—mobilising, modulating and institutionalising affect to encourage the internalisation of authoritarian values and behaviours. These emotions are not merely reactions but mechanisms of social control, embedded in everyday media practices and potentially internalised in readers' social beliefs and conduct. The analysis identified four dominant emotional repertoires anchored in social acts: (1) Social degradation, which evoked emotions such as disdain, contempt and disgust, delegitimising protestors as morally inferior; (2) Naming and shaming, producing indignation, irritation and anger, reinforcing moral superiority and policing normative boundaries; (3) Demonisation, invoking insecurity, fear and anxiety, constructing protestors as existential threats to the nation and its values and (4) Self-victimisation, generating resentment, injustice and entitlement, aimed at building solidarity and loyalty to the ruling government.

Together, these affective mechanisms cultivated emotional states that align with and precondition individuals' authoritarian subjectivity—including obedience to authority, moral absolutism, conformity, aggression towards out-groups and intolerance for dissent. In this way, *Demokracija*'s affective narrative strategies functioned as a political tool, disciplining emotional life in ways that protect hierarchical power and suppress democratic pluralism. The media's role here was not simply to inform or persuade but attempting to emotionally engineer authoritarians, shaping readers not only in what they think—but also in what and how they feel.

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NOTES

1. For example, the most prominent anti-government protesters, allegedly the organisers of the protests, received financial fines week after week (Petrovčič 2020); Jaša Jenull, one of the protagonists of Friday protesters, received fines totalling more than 50,000 euros (N1 Info 2022). In December 2020, Slovenian rapper Zlatan Čordić—Zlatko was erased from the register of self-employed individuals in culture after criticising Janša's government, thereby losing status and state-funded social welfare contributions (Matoz 2020). The Prime Minister's actions against civil society organisations were also concerning, particularly the reduction or withholding of financial resources and the imposition of other administrative obstacles.
2. *Demokracija* was first published as a special supplement of Gorenjski glas in 1989. It was the newsletter of the Slovenian Democratic Union, and the founders claimed that it would represent a broad coalition of right-wing parties. The publication of *Demokracija* was soon taken over first by the student organisation and then by the Magellan company, in which Janez Janša also participated. In the spring of 1990, *Demokracija* was actively involved in the election campaign, but after the victory of the right-wing political option in the 1991 elections, it ceased publication. *Demokracija* began to be published again in 1996, namely by the company Veda, which was led by Jože Zagožen, a member of the SDS. In 1998, the publication of *Demokracija* was taken over by the company Nova obzorja, co-founded by SDS.

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