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Communication in Heroic Decasyllable in Contemporary Serbian Language*

The “heroic decasyllable” (“epski deseterac”) has been a distinctive element of the Serbian traditional oral epics for centuries and is generally associated among South Slavic peoples with singing to the accompaniment of a traditional stringed instrument called *gusle*.¹ Apart from its traditional usage, the heroic decasyllable has gained by today a new ground thanks to the Information and Communications Technology, widely spread usage of internet platforms and social networks for interpersonal communication and communication among social groups. Our aim is to present and discuss the complexity of contemporary phenomena related to the communication in heroic decasyllable among the modern populations of Serbia and Montenegro, and to analyze the interrelation of this linguistic tool of expression with the variety of thematic fields which are

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¹ Although the traditional Serbian epic song have been normally sung to the accompaniment of the *gusle*, even in the past centuries there were documented cases of the bards who did not sing but rather “told the songs” – e.g. Tešan Podrugović, one of the most prominent bards described by Vuk Karadžić (see Karadžić 1953 /1841, XXVIII).

dominantly covered when this register is used. Finally, these phenomena are observed from the pragmatic perspective in order to point out the key functions of the current communication in heroic decasyllable in Serbian language.

Key words: Serbian language, epic register, heroic / epic decasyllable, social criticism, digital communication.

Употреба епског десетерца у савременој комуникацији на српском језику

Јуначки или епски десетерац један је од кључних елемената српске народне епике. Међу јужнословенским народима он је вековима уназад примарно везиван за феномен епске усмене традиције певања уз гусле. Сем традицијом епске поезије омеђеног простора употребе овог стиха, он је данас присутан на знатно ширем комуникацијском пољу захваљујући информационо-комуникационој технологији: интернет платформама и друштвеним мрежама намењеним интерперсоналној комуникацији и комуникацији између друштвених група. Циљ овог рада је да се направи основни пресек облика употребе епског десетерца у савременој комуникацији међу становништвом Србије и Црне Горе, да се укаже на контекстуалне оквире и феномене у вези са овом појавом, као и да се анализира међусобни однос овог језичког средства изражавања с низом тематских поља у којима данас доминантно наилазимо на употребу овог језичког регистра. Анализиране појаве су посматране из прагматичке перспективе с циљем да се истакну кључне функције које се остварују употребом епског десетерца у савременој комуникацији на српском језику.

Кључне речи: српски језик, епски регистар, јуначки / епски десетерац, друштвена критика, дигитална комуникација.

Stories told in a poetic language accompany human race from the very beginning of civilization.² Today, we know that telling stories in rhyth-

² Although the Sumerian writing system does not permit us to know for sure if the literary works from that period had a meter or rhyme (since we do not know how the words were pronounced), many poetic features and techniques have been perceived in Sumerian literary texts which indicate that they could, with very high probability, be considered poetry. For a more detailed insight into the questions, research directions and some of the results in this field, see the papers published in Vogelzang and Vanstiphout (eds.) 1996.

mical, metrical or rhymed verbal structures is closely related to the techniques of memorizing texts, as well as those of oral performing of large narrative compositions. The pivotal contribution to elucidating the techniques of composing large poetic narratives belong to Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who formulated the Oral-Formulaic Hypothesis, which marked a new era in the research of both Homeric poetry and oral epics in general (cf. Parry and Lord 1954; Lord 2000 [1960]). They owe this hypothesis to several fieldwork expeditions made to Yugoslavia (Parry in 1933 and 1935; Lord in 1950–1951 and in 1958–1959), during which they observed alive South Slavic epic oral tradition practice and collected a valuable material from epic bards they acquainted on those occasions. Singing of epic songs to the accompaniment of *gusle*, used for performance of epic songs, still belongs to live tradition, especially in the Dinaric region of the Balkans. In the nineteenth century, the time when the major corpus of traditional Serbian oral epics was collected, it was a widespread practice among general Serbian population, stretching from the Adriatic coast to the regions of the Austria-Hungarian Empire inhabited by Serbs. In 2012, the singing to the accompaniment of the *gusle* found its place in the Serbian ICH National Register, and in 2018 it was introduced in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

One of the key elements of singing to the accompaniment of the *gusle* is the practice of composing narrative songs in epic decasyllables – although today, the use of the symmetrical octosyllabic verse is also common. The first description of the process of acquiring the skill to create versified narratives in epic decasyllable comes from the first half of 19th century (cf. Karadžić 1953 [1841], XVII–XXVIII), but since then, numerous ethnographic data have been collected, mostly during the 20th century, which describe situations in which gifted persons were able to improvise spontaneously, in the very moment of speech or immediately after some event had taken place, and describe it or provide a comment on it in epic decasyllables.³ The attention has been drawn lately to the continuity of this phenomenon in the contemporary Serbian folklore, both linked to *guslar's* practice (Trubarac Matić 2018, 119–114, 131–177), and to communication among today's Serbian population on various digital platforms (Trubarac Matić 2018, 109–114).

³ For a more extensive review of some of them, see Trubarac Matić 2018, 99–108; 2019, 96–100.

In this paper, after a short explanation of the phenomenon of epic decasyllable and a description of the variety of contexts and modalities in which it is used in the present, I will focus on the usage of the epic decasyllabic verse in contemporary communication among the Serbian and Serbian-Montenegrin population, and illustrate how a traditional poetic tool, such as epic decasyllable, has found its way to contemporary communication shaped by new ITC technologies.

WHAT IS THE EPIC DECASYLLABLE?

In South Slavic literary studies the terms “heroic decasyllable” and “epic decasyllable” [epski deseterac] are used to denote a specific kind of verse which is generally associated with oral epic poetry, traditionally sung to the accompaniment of the *gusle*. However, this verse is not exclusively used for oral epics, but also for a large number of oral ballads and lyric songs – especially those with narrative elements to them. Simply put, in Serbian language, it is a verse appropriate for telling versified stories. However, in spite of the fact that during the last two centuries, many cases of the use of epic decasyllable in communication with non-literary intention had been documented, the speaking in epic decasyllables has not been recognized until recently as a specific linguistic register of Serbian language (Trubarac Matić 2018, 99–114; 2019, 96–100). As such, it is still waiting to be properly described and studied from all linguistic aspects of analysis.

The heroic decasyllable is a ten syllables verse divided in two asymmetric hemistiches, or colas, with a caesura (pause) after the fourth syllable (4 + 6). In the traditional Serbian oral epics it normally did not have a consonant rhyme. Today, the rhymed verse is more common, although the both forms coexist.⁴ In this paper, this kind of verse with consonant rhyme will be considered as a variation of the traditional heroic decasyllable – after all, a large number of examples from the traditional Serbian oral epics can be found, in which series of two or more epic decasyllables with consonant rhyme occasionally appear.

⁴ The switch from non-rhymed to rhymed verses was probably the result of the influence of poets who imitated the traditional style, using at the same time the rhymed verse. In that respect, Nenad Ljubinković calls attention to the impact of Andrija Kačić Miošić's (1704–1760) work *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskog* (Ljubinković 2010, 79, 363). An important role in this process might have had the appearance of the first 78s gramophone records of *guslars'* performances, since it has been noticed that during the interwar period the use of rhymed verses grew considerably (cf. Lajić Mihajlović & Đorđević Belić 2016, 209–210). However, the change of *guslars'* public's taste during the 20th century – favouring the rhymed verses – probably was decisive, since *guslars'* wanted to please their public (cf. Đorđević Belić 2016, 50–51).

The term traditional Serbian epics refers to the songs collected during the 18th and 19th century, among which the central place occupy those from the capital collection of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864), in which the Serbian traditional decasyllabic epics were presented for the first time to the European scholarship and broader public in extensive editions, and accompanied with an informative introduction and basic critical explanations and notes.⁵ Although there are no written recordings of South Slavic decasyllabic oral epic songs prior to the very end of the 17th century (*The Manuscript of Julije Balović*), research has proven that the existence of decasyllabic oral poetry is much older. The confirmation came from two sides: Serbian medieval literary studies and comparative historical versification.⁶

On one side, there have been scholars who found an abundant presence of heroic decasyllable verses incorporated in the medieval Serbian literature from the first half of the 13th century onwards, in which clear structural and stylistic parallels with the later oral tradition verses and traditional patterns of oral poetry have been noticed (see Kostić 1933; Milošević-Đorđević 1997, 195); this supported the hypothesis of a preexisting medieval epic oral tradition,⁷ which was probably used as literary material for shaping many pieces of Serbian written medieval literature; it also showed that, in Serbian Middle Ages, those two branches of literature (oral and written one) were not separated realms, but a system of communicating vessels in which ideological and cultural contents, together with structural forms (in terms of the usage of specific types of verses and oral formulae as language tools) were mutually shared, although only to the extent allowed by the genre.

On the other side, the comparative studies of Slavic oral, Classical Greek and Indo-European metrics turned out to be of utmost importance for gain-

⁵ The earliest Serbian traditional epic song had not been dated before the very end of the 15th century – it was not a decasyllabic one, but probably a *bugarštica* (song of long verses, most often 15 and 16 syllables). The earliest preserved decasyllabic songs are from the very end of the 17th (*The Manuscript of Julije Balović*) and the first decades of the 18th century (*The Manuscript of Erlangen*).

⁶ Apart from the Slavic poetic traditions, epic decasyllable was used in the West European literature from its very beginning, although it was abandoned by the end of the Middle Ages. The oldest written testimony of the European decasyllable with the caesura after the fourth syllable are from the beginning of the 11th century Occitan poem *Lo poema de Boecis*. The oldest French *chanson de geste*, the *Song of Roland* (the end of the 11th century) was also written in this verse.

⁷ The knowledge about the popularity of oral epic singing was also gained before indirectly, from the works of medieval chroniclers, travelers and hagiographers – see Milošević-Đorđević 1997, 194; Petrović 2008, 96–99; Suvajdžić 2014, 9–13.

ing insight into the antiquity of epic decasyllable. In that respect, the pivotal works were those of Roman Jakobson, whose insights relied considerably on the previous results of Izmail Ivanovich Sreznevsky⁸ in the research of comparative Slavic studies, especially those regarding the wide spread of epic decasyllable in the oral traditions of all Slavic peoples. Jakobson went further in the same direction, finding examples of epic decasyllable in proverbs, epic poetry and folk songs of Slavs from the very North to the very South of Europe, emphasizing the fact that this verse was not found in the oral traditions of the surrounding peoples (Finno-Ugrian, Altaic, Greek, Romanian), or that it is just of episodic occurrence in North Albanian epic poetry⁹ (Jakobson 1966, 455–459¹⁰; 1985, 24¹¹). His conclusion was that the heroic decasyllable came from the common Primitive Slavic antiquity and he sought for deeper diachronic levels building upon the works of Theodor Bergk, Hermann Usener and Josef Král in the field of Ancient Greek versification¹², as well as on the Antoine Meillet's work on Classical Greek, Vedic and Indo-European metrics.¹³ Jakobson's final conclusion was that epic decasyllable represented one of the oldest types of Indo-European verse, and he observed its close correspondence with the *paroimiakos* (παροιμιακός) – an ancient Greek proverb verse, which, according to Bergk, must have been developed prior to the formation of hexameter (Homer) and which might have been linked to some Greek epic poetry older than the Homeric one, which had not been preserved (Jakobson 1966, 459–462). Jakobson found an additional support for this hypothesis in the shared gnomic and epic functions of these two verses: “This combination of formal and functional relation between the two meters is hardly explicable, except in terms of a common Indo-European prototype, a gnomic-epic decasyllable” (Jakobson 1966, 462). In the years

⁸ In that respect the most important work of Sreznevsky is “Neskol'ko zamecanij ob epiceskom razmere slavjanskih narodnyh pesen”, *Izvestija II Otdelenija Imp. Akad. Nauk*, 9 (1860–1861).

⁹ Jakobson was convinced that the sporadic appearance of epic decasyllable in North Albanian epics was “definitely due to Serbian importation” (Jakobson 1985, 24).

¹⁰ The references to this Jakobson's work rely on the second edition of the paper “Studies in Comparative Slavic Metrics”, published for the first time in *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 3 (1952), 21–66. The paper was reprinted in 1966 in the fourth volume of his *Selected Writings* edited by Stephen Rudy.

¹¹ The references is taken from the second edition of the paper “The Common Slavic Oral Tradition”, published for the first time in *Harvard Slavic Studies* 1 (1953), 1–71. The paper was reprinted in 1985 in the sixth volume of his *Selected Writings* edited by Stephen Rudy.

¹² For more information see Jakobson 1966, 461–462; 1985, 28.

¹³ Meillet, Antoine. *Les Origines indo-européennes des mètres grecs*, Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1923.

that followed, this hypothesis was reconfirmed by Martin West (1973), John Vigorita (1976) and John Miles Foley (1990, 54–63; 2019 [1986]).¹⁴

For our further argumentation, it is relevant to underline the previously mentioned diachronic insights into the communicational function and pragmatic scope of the messages formulated in epic decasyllables, which were closely related to transmission of cognitive contents and the education of the members of community, almost certainly in conjunction with model examples given through epic narratives about the events; the extraction of certain verses from narratives and their fixing in the form of proverbs, or shaping new gnomes by following previously fixed patterns has been widely noticed.¹⁵

EPIC DECASYLLABLE IN CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION

In spite of the fact that epic decasyllable represents one of the oldest preserved artefacts of the intangible culture of Slavic peoples, it is still used among contemporary Serbian population as a mean of not only literary, but also non-literary communication, independently of *guslars'* performances.

The use of decasyllabic verse within *guslars'* tradition

Apart from the developed *guslars'* music production and official representation of *guslars'* tradition – in the so-called “*guslars'* evenings” and competitions, public celebrations and ceremonies, authentic and live practice of singing epic songs to the accompaniment of the *gusle* within its traditional context can be seen among the present day Serbian population (especially those from the Dinaric region, but not exclusively) during the family gatherings, often linked to celebrations which imply ritual actions, such as *slava* (the feast dedicated to the celebration of the patron saint of the paternal family line), Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, or at wedding feasts (in the form of the welcome songs and wedding toast sung by a *guslar*).¹⁶

There have also been documented *guslars'* performances at the re-burials of persons who had been buried for the first time in secret or

¹⁴ These results have been received with certain reserve, by Svetozar Petrović 1969; 2019 [1974]. However, he gave an important contribution to the discussion by noticing incongruity between the ictus of the trochaic pentameter and the uneven syllables of the Serbian heroic decasyllable (cf. Petrović 1969; Foley 2019, 157).

¹⁵ For deeper insight into the similarities and differences in the use and shaping of proverbs and epic formulae on the examples from Serbian tradition, see Detelić 1996: 15–16.

¹⁶ For more details, examples and analysis of this phenomenon within the context of Serbian traditional culture, see Trubarac Matić 2018, 172–177.

in mass graves under specific circumstances (war, armed conflicts, war and post-war ethnic cleansing) – once their bodies have been exhumed and identified, they are normally re-buried in the family tombs and with the proper funeral rites.¹⁷ This phenomenon is related to the ethnographically widely documented practice among Serbian population of commissioning from *guslars* or epical chronic writers the songs about the death of a prematurely or tragically deceased family member. Although many of these songs are commissioned by the families of the deceased and, therefore, paid for, there are others which are composed spontaneously by relatives or family friends. Sometimes *guslars* choose to sing of their own will, especially when the song is about the death of a public or semi-public figures considered by the *guslar* as somebody to be remembered. However, the majority of the songs of this kind recount the death of completely anonymous young people killed in traffic and other accidents, victims of high school bullying, the NATO bombing etc. In this group of songs, the most archaic function of the *gusle* song can be observed: the pseudo-communication with ancestors and deceased members of the family, community or the tribe (Trubarac Matić 2018, 104–105, 165–172).

There are cases of epic singing in a form of communication with oneself – a *guslar* retires to the solitude and sings for the sake of his own emotional and mental recovery and regaining inner peace. In one of his interviews, *guslar* Dragoslav Derikonjić from Užice says: “There are days when I feel disappointed, I take my *gusle* and talk to them. When they’re crying on my lap, all the illness get healed” (Derikonjić 2022).

Epic decasyllable in the non-guslars’ practice communication

Epic decasyllable is present in everyday speech, normally in the form of proverbs, which, in some cases, but not obligatory, can be verses extracted from epic songs – for example, *Ni po babu, ni po stričevima* (‘Neither according to the will of your father, nor according to the will of your uncles’) (Vuk II, 33, v. 129).¹⁸ The expression means ‘unbiasedly’ and it refers to the situation in which Prince Marko has to decide about who should in-

¹⁷ For more information about some of these cases, see Trubarac Matić 2018, 165–172.

¹⁸ In the David Halyburton Low’s translation, this verse (the second one in the fragment) appears as “**Do not thou bear false witness, / To pleasure either thy father or thy uncles, / But speak according to the judgment of the true God; / Lose not thy soul, my son; / Better it is to lose thy head, / Than to sin against thy soul.**” (Low 1922, 16). In the more modern translation of Anne Pennington and Peter Levi the original meaning is slightly changed from the original one: „O my dear son, **do not speak crookedly, / neither for your father nor his brothers**” (Pennington & Levi 1984, 95).

herit the Serbian throne after the death of Tzar Dušan: Dušan's son Uroš, Marko's father, or Marko's uncle. These autonomized verses serve as appropriate comments in specific situations – if they come from epic songs, they also imply implicit establishing of an intercontextual connection between the situation in which the message is uttered and the segment of the song/songs to which the uttered verses belong. In order to understand the meaning, the actors in the communication have to be familiar with these cultural contents. However, there are many proverbs in epic decasyllables that never belonged to any song such as, for example, *Svu-da pođi, svojoj kući dođi* (literally, 'Wherever you go, you return to your home', which corresponds to English expression *East, West, home's best*).

Epic decasyllable as a single, couplet or multiple verses message is often used for the purpose of political agitation, mobilization in protests, political or social sarcastic comments or parody which can appear in protest slogans, graffiti, SMS messages or on digital platforms of all kinds. During the students' and civil protests of 1996 and 1997, many of the slogans were in epic decasyllables,¹⁹ for example: *Mili Bože, Vrhovnoga suda!* ('My dear Lord, [what a joke of] the Supreme Court), *Samo šetnja Srbina spasava* ('Only walking saves the Serb'), *Vidimo se u devetom krugu! – Dante* ('See you in the ninth round [of elections] – Dante'),²⁰ *Pre suđenja dobro promućkati!* ('Shake well before the trial').²¹ The first two are adaptations of preexisting verse models: the pattern of the first one is the common epic formula *Bože mili, čuda velikoga!* ('My dear Lord, what a great miracle'), which serves for drawing attention to something out of this world;²² the second one is an adaptation of a slogan well known within Serbian culture – *Samo sloga Srbina spasava* ('Only unity saves the Serbs') widely spread among Serbs after it had appeared for the first time in the epic song *Jeka od gusala* ('The weeping of the *gusle*') written

¹⁹ The slogans from that period which are cited in this paper are taken from *Buka u modi...* See the Bibliography at the end.

²⁰ The protests started as a reaction to the manipulation with the votes in the elections held in 1996. The slogan referred to the fixing of electoral results in favor of the party of Slobodan Milošević. The transfer of meaning is possible because in Serbian the word 'krug' ('circle') is used also for 'election round'.

²¹ This slogan is interesting because it does not make reference to any traditional content, but to the instructions for the use of certain products (ie. *Shake well before using*), which in Serbian is not in epic decasyllable (*Pre upotrebe promućkati*). In the slogan, the message is adapted in a way to fit in an epic decasyllable probably because it sounded better to its author.

²² For more information about the semantic scope of the word *čudo* within the formulaic language of Serbian epics, see Loma 2002, 22–35.

by Jovan Dragašević and published for the first time in 1860 (Radojčić 2016, 247). Protest slogans in epic decasyllable were also common in the students' protest of 1968, for example, *Dosta nam je crvenih buržuja!* ('We've had enough of the red bourgeoisie!') (*Buka u modi...*). Also, such slogans can easily be found at any protest in either Serbia or Montenegro today. At the time that this paper is being written, mass student protests are taking place all around Serbia and many of the protest slogans are in epic decasyllables, such as: *Kopaćemo, al' po papirima!* ('We'll be digging, but through the papers'),²³ *Nad Kraljevom živo jaje seva!* ('Over [the town of] Kraljevo, a raw egg's flashing'),²⁴ *Pametniji više ne popušta!* ('The smarter doesn't give in anymore'),²⁵ or *Studenti su pokazali zube!* ('The students have shown their teeth') – a slogan put on the entrance window of the Faculty of Stomatology (see Picture 1).

²³ The slogan makes reference to two major causes of social and political tensions in Serbia at the moment. The first one is the struggle of the majority of Serbian population against the decision of the government to let the Rio Tinto company exploit lithium from a heavily populated region with fluvial rivers, fertile land and a significant population of farmers. The project of lithium mining is strongly supported and promoted by the EU and Germany because of the needs of the EU industry. The second is the tragic collapse of the canopy of the Novi Sad railway station that occurred on November 1, 2024, in which 16 people lost their lives and many were injured. The whole station building, the canopy included, had undergone reconstruction from 2021 to the mid-2024, and was ceremonially reopened just a few months before the tragedy. The collapse of the canopy sparked massive protests of students, first in Novi Sad and then in all Serbian universities. The protests have been receiving a strong support from the rest of the population, accusing the government of corruption and the mainstream media of censorship and manipulation. One of the key demands of the students is that the whole documentation regarding the reconstruction of the railway station must be made public.

²⁴ This is a modification of the first verse of a song from 1941 about the death of Jovan Deroko and Simo Uzelac, prominent Serbian military Chetnik commanders during the WW2. Deroko had an important role in the liberation of the town of Čačak from German forces in 1941 and later on, in the Siege of Kraljevo (in which Simo Uzelac died in battle). Deroko was killed by Partisans in November of 1941. The original verse – *Nad Kraljevom živa vatra seva* ('Over [the town of] Kraljevo, the live fire's flashing') – is modified in a way to make allusion to the protesters throwing eggs at representatives of the local authorities involved in corruption, supporting the government or being members of the governing party.

²⁵ This slogan is a reference to the well-known proverb: *Pametniji popušta – magarac ne dopušta* ('The smarter gives in – a donkey doesn't').



Picture 1: *Студенти су показали зубе!* – a slogan on the entrance window of the Faculty of Stomatology, February 2025. Private photo archive of the author

Sometimes a whole fragment of a song can be modified in order to make closer match to the actual events, but with keeping the original verse structure, so that the parallel between the contemporary events and those from the past can easily be noticed. This can be well illustrated by the recent speech of Serbian Parliament deputy Srđan Milivojević, given on October 10, 2024. Milivojević addressed members of the Parliament with verses from the epic song *Boj na Mišaru* ('The Battle of Mišar'²⁶) (Vuk IV, 30). In his speech, he raised voice against the Rio Tinto lithium mines in Serbia, slightly modifying the verses so that the name of the Prime Minister can be explicitly mentioned and creating in this way a clear parallel between the struggle against the pressure currently exerted by the EU and the oppression during the Turkish occupation:²⁷

²⁶ The song depicts the Battle of Mišar, one of the greatest Serbian victories during the First Serbian Uprising, in which Serbian forces led by Đorđe Petrović Karađorđe fought against the Turks from the 13th until the 15th of August 1806. The English translation is available in Holton & Mihailovich 1997, 300.

²⁷ During his speech, Milivojević made a series of references to several famous battles of Serbian history: the Battle of Mišar (First Serbian Uprising, 1806), the Battle of Cer, the Battle of Mačkov kamen and the Battle of Kolubara (WWI, 1914) – the last three are indirectly referred to by mentioning the Austrian general of Slovenian origin, Oskar Potiorek, who fought in all three battles and was defeated by Serbian Army or thwarted in his intention to penetrate in the Serbian territory. In his speech, Milivojević made a parallel between Potiorek and the current Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, who is often called Oskar in political jokes. Milivojević also makes reference to the Battle of Kajmakčalan (WWI, 1916) between Serbian and Bulgarian forces, in which fought and lost his life the famous Serbian battle leader Vojin Popović, known also as Duke Vuk. Here is the transcription of the original fragment of Milivojević's speech in Serbian:

(...) Under this *šajkača*²⁸ there is also a certain Duke Vuk! You see... that Duke Vuk roars from Kajmakčalan and Grunište: "I won't allow it, I won't allow it! – he says – You will not be digging! He is dead, but with us on the frontline! And let me tell you this too: do you know how this will end, citizens of Serbia? – *Neither the captain Kulin's coming back/ Neither he's coming, nor will he ever come to you. / Don't hope for him, stop hoping and looking [for him] in the distance / in vain you're providing for Vulin Aleksandar / neither he's capable for military service*²⁹ / *nor can Serbia be pacified*!³⁰ You will not be digging! I won't let you! Down with the tyrant! Long live free Serbia! There will be no amnesty!³¹

Here, Milivojević introduces the topic of lithium mines with a reference to a famous Serbian battle leader from the Balkan wars and the WW1, Vojin Popović, known as Duke Vuk, putting in his mouth the words: *Ne dam, ne dam! Nećete kopati!* ('I won't give it, I won't give it! You will not be digging') – which are put in an epic decasyllable (the word *kaže*, 'he says' is inserted in the verse in a form of the comment of the narrator). Then he misses to proceed with a regular epic decasyllable and, instead of saying *Mrtav s nama on stoji u stroju* ('He is dead, but with us on the frontline'), he uses an asymmetrical octosyllable: *Mrtav je sa nama u stroju!* ('He is dead, but with us on the frontline'). Another octosyllable will also appear at the very end, although this time a symmetrical one (4 + 4): *Neće biti amnestije!* ('There will be no amnesty'). In the translation of the cited fragment of Milivojević's speech, the text in italic letters belongs to the versified message with a clear allusion to a fragment from the epic song

(...) Pod ovom *šajkačom* ima i neki Vojvoda Vuk! E vidite, taj Vojvoda Vuk grmi sa Kajmakčalana i Gruništa: „Ne dam, ne dam! – kaže – Nećete kopati! Mrtav je s nama u stroju! I vidite da vam kažem i ovo: znate li kako će se ovo završiti građani Srbije?! – *Niti ide Kulin kapetane / Niti ide, niti će vam doći/ nit' se nadaj, niti pogledavaj / džabe 'raniš Vulin Aleksandra/ nit' ti je sposoban za vojsku / nit' se Srbija umiriti može!* Nećete kopati! Ne dam! Dole tiranin! Živela slobodna Srbija! Neće biti amnestije!

²⁸ A type of Serbian national male cap.

²⁹ An allusion to the fact that Aleksandar Vulin was the Minister of Defense (2017–2020) in spite of being exempt from compulsory military service.

³⁰ In the Holton & Mihailovich translation (see Holton & Mihailovich 1997, 303): *So it's certain that he won't be coming;/he's not started, nor will he ever come./ Don't hope for him; no need to wait for him./Bring up your son, send him to the army, for this Serbia will not be pacified!*

³¹ The whole speech can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuCb5Xh1ySQ>

Boj na Mišaru (Vuk IV, 30, vv. 77–80). In the song a black-raven responds to the wife of Turkish Captain Kulin after she asked the bird if it had been to the battlefield, seen the Turkish victory and her husband on his way home. In order to highlight the modifications, they will be contrasted; the fragment of the epic song from Vuk Karadžić's collection is shown on the left, and the modified version used by Milivojević in his speech on the right; the translation of the fragment from the song is given in the footnote:

Niti ide Kulin kapetane,
niti ide, niti će ti doći,
nit' se nadaj, niti ga pogledaj!
Rani sina, pak šalji na vojsku –
Srbija se umirit ne može!*

Niti ide Kulin kapetane,
niti ide, niti će vam doći,
nit' se nadaj, niti pogledavaj!
Džabe 'raniš Vulin Aleksandra
Nit' ti je sposoban za vojsku –
nit' se Srbija umiriti može!

The first three lines are provided almost without modification, so that the recognition of the verses can be immediate for the audience. The fourth line of the original song is used by Milićević to compose two verses: the first one is attached to the first colon of the original song, and the second to the second colon from collection of Vuk Karadžić. In the first Milićević's line, *Rani sina* ('Raise³² your son') is modified into *Džabe 'raniš Vulin Aleksandra* ('In vain you're providing for Vulin Aleksandar), which is a correctly modelled epic decasyllable, in which the name of the Vice President of Serbia is introduced in order to valorize his engagement as useless (*In vain you're providing ..*), as well as to refer to his previous engagement as the Minister of Defense (2017–2020) – which is given in the next line, also an epic decasyllable. The last Milićević's line has an extra syllable, because he added a word *nit'* at the beginning (maybe for the stylistic effectiveness of anaphora), creating in this way an hendecasyllable – which, however, is not very appealing to the ear of a native Serbian speaker.

The messages of this kind are generally perceived as effective, witty and amusing. Nowadays, they, or some of their parts or elements, are

³² In the contemporary Serbian language the verb '(h)rani' means 'to feed', but in the epic register it can have three meanings depending of the context: 'feed', 'raise' and 'preserve'.

* Neither there's coming the captain Kulin / Neither he's coming, nor will he come to you / you better stop hoping and looking [for him] in the distance! / Raise your son and send him to the army / Serbia cannot be pacified!

usually massively shared via social media, digital and mobile phone platforms in the forms of video clips, memes, simple citations, or extended text messages (in the case of longer texts).

Messages formulated in epic decasyllables can also appear in epic chronicles made for the occasion of a specific protest activity. Such was the case of the opus of songs made by Slavko Perošević during the clerical protest in Montenegro. Perošević became a chronicler of the turbulent events that took place in this country from December 2019 until the end of August 2020. The protests were against the new Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities, according to which the ownership of all the properties (churches, monasteries and real estate) which Serbian Orthodox Church owned or had purchased before 1918 was to be transferred to the state of Montenegro. The citizens massively participated in religious processions and peaceful protest walks under the slogan "Ne damo svetinje" ('We won't let you take over our sanctuaries'), which were organized all over the country and resisted in spite of the often cold weather, arrests, police violence, media pressure and threats at workplace. The final result was the abolishment of the controversial law and the fall of Montenegrin Government and the Democratic Party of Socialists lead by Milo Đukanović, who had governed Montenegro for thirty years. Slavko Perošević became a prominent figure of the protests as their epic chronicler who, by composing day to day songs in epic decasyllables or in symmetrical octosyllables, described all the major events and the deeds of the persons who became the heroes of civilian resistance and struggle during that time. His chronicles were sung, recited, or rapidly shared via digital platforms. The collection of these songs was later published in 2020, under the title *Ne damo svetinje*.

Another example from Montenegro are the ecological protests during the late autumn of 2020 against the NATO military exercises, which were supposed to take place at the mountain of Sinjajevina. A group of local people, ecologists, mountaineers and lovers of nature protested, claiming that the mortar shelling would harm natural balance and the ecosystem of the mountain. On that occasion, a local man named Radenko Pile Vuković made a protest song in epic decasyllables which soon became viral, since people started sharing it via digital platforms and attaching it to their comments on the electronic media coverage of NATO, its military exercise and civil protest.³³

³³ See, for example, the comments on the news article *Čuvari Sinjajevine* listed in Bibliography.

Ти министре, за одбрану што си,
војничким се знањем не заноси,
него бјежи са ових планина
то је било наше од давнина!
С лица мјеста преносим ти стање:
да ти идеш на своје имање,
па полигон за вјежбање прави,
на колибу НАТО радар стави,
те посматрај са радара тога
Столтенберга, команданта свога,
и његовој љепоти се диви,
а сељака пушти нека живи!
Нек планином јави своја стада
и животу бољему се нада.
У планину ће цвијета цвијеће
из свијета да довозе смеће?!
Кад издижу људи на катуне
да слушају рафал и плутуне?
И дијете у коћети знаде,
ће се војни полигони граде
и ће НАТО инсталира базе,
ће се поља тенковима газе –
ту зелене траве не удара,
фукарлуком земља заудара,
ту се сваки живот осакати,
а вода се и земља галати!
Нека знају слуге и полтрони
градити се неће полигони,
на планину нашу и катуне
без народног устанка и буне!

You, Minister of defense,
don't get carried away by military knowledge,
you better run away from these mountains,
which have been ours since ancient times!
I'll tell you the situation from the spot –
You better go to your property
and build there a training ground,
put a NATO radar onto your hut
and watch, from the radar of yours,
watch Stoltenberg, your commander,
and admire his charms.
Let the peasants live,
let them graze their herds on the mountain
and keep hope for a better life.
To the mountains, where flowers bloom,
to bring the world's garbage?!
When people go up to their mountain huts
[should they] listen to the bursts and volleys?
Even a child in a cradle knows:
where military training grounds are built,
and where NATO installs its bases,
where the fields are trampled by tanks,
there's no green grass to grow;
the land there stinks of scam,
everyone's life is crippled,
the water and land are polluted!
May the servants and bootlickers know
there won't be training grounds built
on our mountain and our grazing land
without the uprising and rebellion of people!

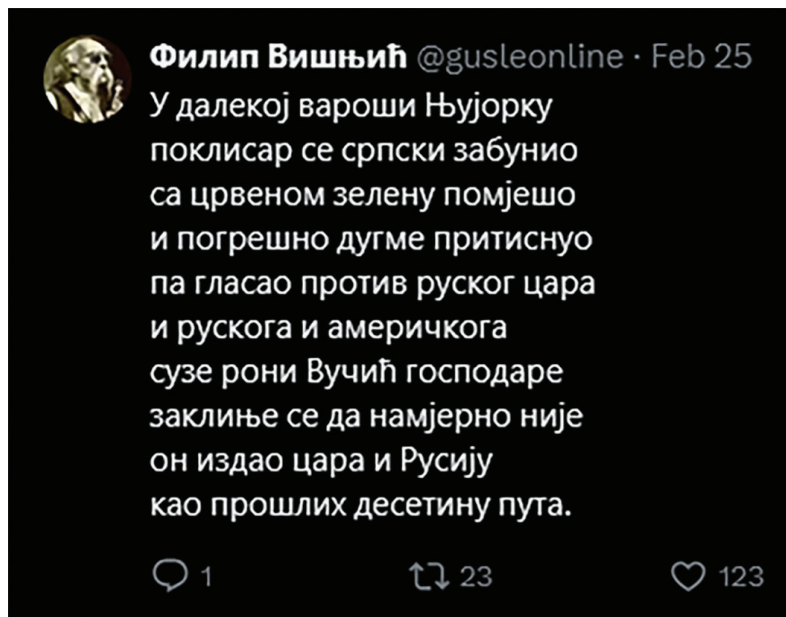
Decasyllabic texts in social media and digital platforms

Apart from the previously mentioned ways of communicating in epic decasyllables among the present day Serbian and Montenegrin population in the last ten to fifteen years, we can observe the use of messages in epic decasyllable made to be used exclusively in the digital space. They are created to exist on the Internet and be transmitted and shared via different digital platforms – which normally affect the length of the message – and serve as a tool for expressing political standpoints and commenting on events from everyday political and public life, often in parodic tone and with the aim of ridiculing, launching critique or just

making fun. Versified messages of that kind address political and social issues, problems and polemics in contemporary Serbia and the rest of the world. For example, on the Facebook page of *Anica djevojka*, the author provides original texts in epic decasyllables, in which she, in a parodic manner and sometimes with bitter sarcasm, expresses critique of current daily-political events, as well as their main protagonists; this includes sarcastic comments on the President, Prime Minister and the Government members, as well as daily political events and topics, including: lithium exploitation, corruption, privatization of public companies, public speeches of politicians, the new Slavija Square fountain in Belgrade, the opening of the first IKEA store in Serbia, the problems with the garbage landfill in Vinča, etc.

The same range of topics appears on the X account of *Filip Višnjić*,³⁴ which contains the Bio note with a single epic decasyllabic verse in Cyrillic letters which says: *Zeman doš'o, valja tvitovati* ('The time has come to start tweeting') – a witty allusion to a verse from the famous Višnjić's epic song "Početak bune protiv dahija" (The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas): *Zeman doš'o, valja vojevati* (The time has come to start battling). Due to the format of the platform, the number of verses is smaller than on Facebook. What is interesting about this account is that those who leave their comments, also try to formulate them in epic decasyllable, creating in this way a kind of epic-decasyllabic exchange of standpoints, ideas, impressions and emotions in a form of a dialogue. The versified messages normally appear almost immediately after the events take place, like the one from the picture 2, which thematizes Serbian voting in favor of the United Nations General Assembly's Resolution on Ukraine adopted on February 25, 2025. That same day, Serbian president said this had happened by mistake and immediately a versified mock comment on the event appeared on the X platform – resonating with the widely present mistrust in the explanations given by the President regarding his political decisions and actions (picture 2):

³⁴ Filip Višnjić (1767–1834) is one of the most famous *guslars* who sang to Vuk Karadžić some of the best pieces of Serbian traditional oral epics.



Picture 2: Screenshot of the mock verses on the Serbian voting at the UN General Assembly on October 25, 2025. X account Filip Višnjić.

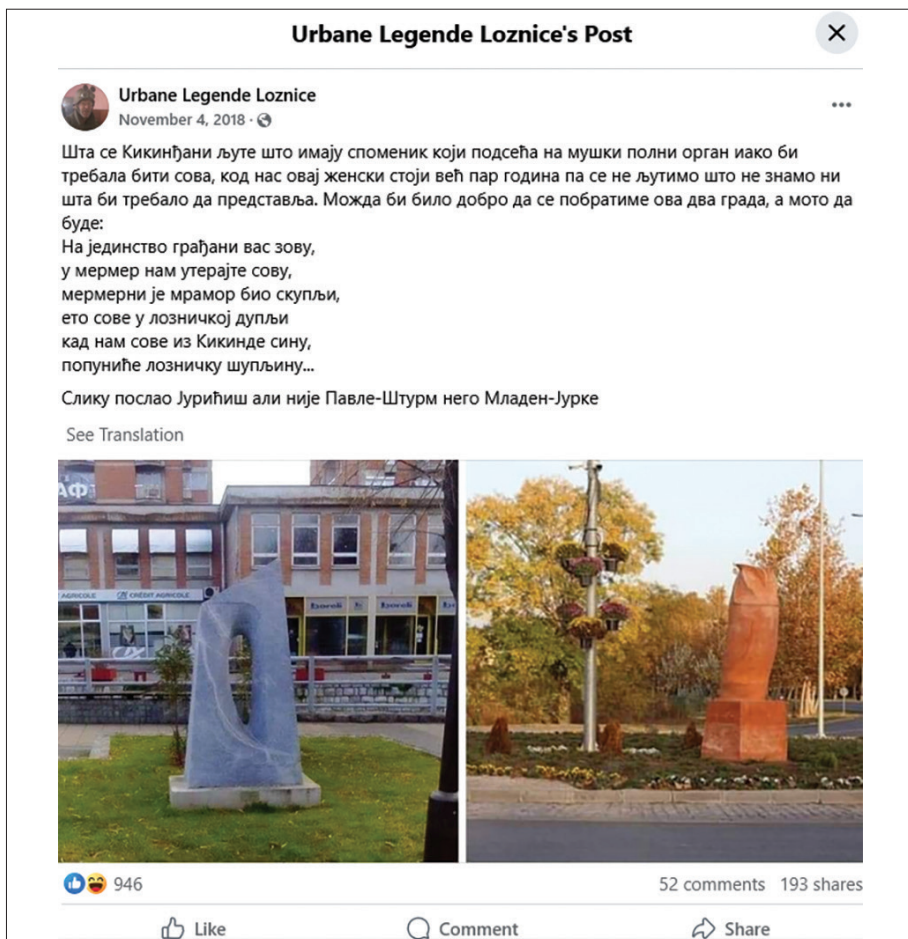
U dalekoj varoši Njujorku
poklisar se srpski zabunio
sa crvenom zelenu pomješo
i pogrešno dugme pritisnuo,
pa glasao protiv ruskog cara
i ruskoga i američkoga.
Suze roni Vučić gospodare,
zaklinje se da namjerno nije
on izdao cara i Rusiju
kao prošlih desetinu puta.

In the faraway city of New York,
the Serbian envoy got confused,
he mistook the red for the green
and wrong button he pressed
thus he voted against the Russian Tzar,
both the Russian and the American.
Vučić, the master, his tears is shedding
swearing it was not done on purpose
that he betrayed the Tzar and Russia,
as he did some ten times before.

The use of epic decasyllable on the Internet is not always linked to political topics and important social problems. Sometimes it is used just for fun, as it has been the case with episodes or scenes from the cult drama television series *The Game of Thrones* retold in epic decasyllables on the *Anglozine portal za jezik i književnost*,³⁵ where one can read songs

³⁵ See <https://srpski.anglozine.com/author/stefan/>

such as *Žitije Džona Snježnoga* ('The Life of Jon Snow'), *Boj na Crnobujici* ('The Battle of the Blackwater'), *Smrt Kralja Džofrija* ('The Death of King Joffrey') and *Stradanje Starka Nenada* ('The Calvary of Ned Stark') (Stefan 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2014d). Another example involves the lascivious mocking of the shape of the sculptures put in the public spaces of the towns of Kikinda and Loznica – the one in Kikinda was meant to represent an owl, but people found it resembling rather something else and made critical comments on Facebook; a citizen from Loznica responded by contrasting the picture of the two statues, proposing closer relation between these two towns in a sexually explicit versified message made in epic decasyllables (see pic. 3).



Picture 3: Screenshot of the Facebook post with the picture of two statues and mock verses.

FINAL REMARKS

Although epic decasyllable represents one of the most ancient artefacts of Serbian and Slavic intangible cultural heritage, it is widely used by contemporary Serbian and Montenegrin population both in literary and in every day non-literary communication. Today, it is a complex phenomenon, which exists between, on one side, the traditional folkloric genre of epic song sung to the accompaniment of the *gusle* (ranging from the intimate acts of family rituals related to the communication with the deceased family members, to the public ceremonies and music production) and, on the other, the contemporary post-folkloric phenomena generated within the culture of constant inter-contextual exchange of messages through different channels of oral and written, online and offline spaces of communication. The pragmatic range of the usage of epic decasyllable in modern Serbian language reflects the same complexity, but one can notice a strong tendency of using versified messages in epic decasyllables with the intention of social and political critique, or launching messages which are subversive towards the mainstream narratives. As a linguistic structure – which in Serbian language implies the usage of specific register of speech abundant with didactic and gnomic meaning related to stories of national truth and pride, struggle and accumulated experience of generations – its usage in the context of contemporary post-modern society can create a wide range of added semantics originating from the (in)congruency between the narrated content and the system of values implicitly present within the linguistic structure and the formula of speech characteristic for this register of Serbian language. These include humor, sarcasm, bitter critique, parodic tone, panegyric halo, or just a *vox populi* frame for expressing attitudes towards contemporary phenomena, everyday existential challenges, or the narratives and ideologies promoted through the mainstream media. The versified messages in epic decasyllable show a homogenizing and mobilizing potential among the contemporary Serbian population, who spontaneously and often unconsciously activate the usage of this register of Serbian language in situations which call for social and political engagement.

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