

Political leaders, media and authoritarianism in Croatia: The Media Strikes Back?

Maja Šimunjak

Department of Media, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom

The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT, United Kingdom.

M.Simunjak@mdx.ac.uk

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This study focuses on the media representation of political leaders in Croatia, the newest Member State of the European Union, with an aim to capture the extent to which and ways in which political leaders have been portrayed in the media in periods characterised with varying degrees of illiberalism. A longitudinal content analysis of three daily newspapers from 1990 to 2018 reveals that in spite of the fact that media freedom decreased in the last decade, and the society became more authoritarian, there is little evidence to suggest that the press is increasingly demonstrating illiberal tendencies in the era of illiberal drift.

Keywords: content analysis, media representation, Croatia, illiberal democracy, political leaders

Introduction

This paper¹ focuses on the media representation of political leaders in Croatia, with an aim to contextualise the ways in which contemporary political leaders are portrayed in the media in reference to their historical representation during periods characterised with higher and lower degrees of illiberalism. The key concepts and developments that this study engages with are political leadership, media freedom and the authoritarianism of the society, as each has been important in recent discussions of the rise of illiberalism in the Central Eastern Europe (CEE). Specifically, illiberalism will in this study be examined through three main elements that are said to characterise it: centralised leadership (Bermeo 2016; Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Hajnal 2016), lack of media freedoms (Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Puddington 2017),

and authoritarianism in society (Shattuck 2016). In line with this, the paper will address periods in which a system advances from illiberal to more liberal characteristics through the process of democratisation as those experiencing democratic progress, while those in which a system gradually regresses from liberal to illiberal characteristics as periods of democratic regression, backsliding or illiberal drift² (Bermeo 2016; Cianetti et al. 2018; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Knott 2018).

First, this study builds on literature indicating that CEE illiberal democracies are characterised by the lack of media freedom. It is argued that the media are often controlled by the state, directly through ownership or management, or indirectly through clientelist networks of companies and individuals close to the governing elite (Brogi et al. 2017; Puddington 2017). These media outlets usually strongly support the regime in periods of growing illiberalism and are as such used as “governmental propaganda machine” (Sadurski 2018, 47; see also Bustikova and Guasti 2017;). There are numerous examples of political pressures on media in CEE countries in the past decade, which range from more subtle strategies of political communication, such as refusing to answer journalists’ questions, to clear control over media outlets via ownership or regulation (Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Knott 2018; Sadurski 2018). For example, Robert Fico, who was the prime minister of Slovakia from 2012 to 2018, often refused to engage with journalists who he did not see as friendly, while in Czech Republic, the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who came to power in 2017, actually owns a considerable share of the Czech media market (Brogi et al. 2017; Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Shekhovtson and Sierakowski 2016).

Furthermore, illiberalism is also said to be manifested as an excessive centralization of power. There are formal pathways to achieving concentrated power, which Bermeo (2016) discusses under the concept of ‘executive aggrandizement’ (see also Bustikova and Guasti 2017), but there are also more informal routes in which it is not so much the formal political

structures that are leading the process, but rather key political actors and clientelist networks among them (Hajnal 2016; Shattuck 2016). This 'informal' centralization of power can be manifested in an increasing power of political leaders within political structures, such as parties and governments, but also in the ability of the key political actors to interfere in the electoral and other democratic processes and the judiciary (Bieber 2018; Džihic n.d.; Markowski 2015). The process is often also discussed in literature as one aspect of the personalisation of politics, a concept which suggests individuals have increased power and visibility, often at the expense of institutions they represent and/or lead (Langer 2011; McAllister 2007; Poguntke and Webb 2005). CEE countries are considered to be particularly vulnerable to these developments due to their often underdeveloped and weak institutions, which may be unable to prevent the centralisation of power and interferences in liberal processes (Bugarič and Ginsburg 2016).

Arguably, in countries where the political elite has a strong hold over the media and there is a lack of civil liberties, there is also insufficient transparency about political processes due to which citizens are cut off from knowledge about the activities of those who exercise real power (Markowski 2015). This might make it easier for the political elites to manipulate with the views of citizens and create support for the new, centralised leadership style. It can be argued that CEE societies may be particularly susceptible to accepting strong leaders as a better option to leadership than democratic structures, as there is evidence that authoritarianism, usually considered to be characterized by a preference for strong leaders and uncritical submission to a superior, but at the same time exercise of power over one's subordinate (Šiber 2007), has a long tradition in this region. Šiber (2007, 148) argues, drawing on the findings from a comparative study of personal attitudes in the communist and Western societies, that people who were living in European communist societies expressed higher levels of authoritarianism in their uncritical acceptance of authority than those in the

West. While there is evidence to suggest that the degree of authoritarianism in the majority of CEE societies decreased during the democratisation process, as visible in the support for political systems that de-centralise power, change of executives with elections, and exercise of a range of civil and political rights (Freedom House 2018), there are indications that some CEE societies have again grown more authoritarian in the past few years (Cianetti et al. 2018). This is evidenced in the rise of support for illiberal structures and strong leaders, intolerance towards minorities and the rise of nationalism, particularly among those who consider democracy to have failed them in the light of the financial crisis that hit the region in 2009 (Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Shattuck 2016).

The aim of this study is to examine how media, as a political mediator and the main source of information for citizens, reports about the most powerful political actors in a CEE country during the most recent period arguably characterised by an illiberal drift, and how this representation differs, if at all, from previous periods in which a country experienced different degrees of centralisation of power, media freedom and authoritarianism. In other words, the study draws on the concept of personalised politics, and one of its aspects in particular – personalized media reporting, and examines how, if at all, it may be used as an indicator of illiberalism. The findings will help us understand what decreased media freedom means in practice – in media content, the type of information about power holders that citizens have access to and how similar or different current state of suggested illiberalism is to previous periods of illiberalism and liberalism, or rather, democratic backsliding and democratic progress. The issue is examined in the context of Croatia, the newest Member State of the European Union and a CEE country that never achieved full democratic potential. The following chapter discusses the practice of political leadership in the CEE region in more detail, focusing in particular on the concept of centralised and personalised politics, before providing more contextual information about Croatia as the object of study.

Political leadership in Central Eastern Europe: Individuals vs institutions?

The concept of personalised politics, i.e. politics characterised by political actors, media and voters' focus on individual politicians, and particularly political leaders, rather than political institutions and collectives, has been widely discussed and researched, albeit mostly in the context of established, Western democracies (e.g. Maier and Adam 2010; Poguntke and Webb 2005; de Vreese, Esser and Hopmann 2017). The discussion of the implications of personalised politics in the Western context has shown that the main issues of concern are unbalanced distribution of power, weakening of political parties, and irrationality of voters' choices (Langer 2011; Poguntke and Webb 2005). The challenging of institutional checks and balances is a serious concern of personalised politics in Central Eastern Europe too. However, the main potential effects in this context seem to relate to the development of democratic institutions, including media, and the institutionalisation of party systems.

Writing about the early democratisation period, Schöpflin (1993, 268) nicely captures the centrality of political leaders by explaining that “almost hypnotically, people turned to personalities, virtually without regard to their political programmes, as a repository for society's hopes and desires in particular, because persons were felt to be more reliable, more authentic and thus more likely to embody what the individual wanted.” Research into the levels of trust that citizens in early post-communist societies put in different political actors and institutions confirms this thesis, showing that citizens in nine examined post-communist countries tended to trust political leaders more than institutions (Mishler and Rose 1997). Furthermore, it seems that the political processes were also revolving around individuals given that party leaders are said to have dominated over their parties in this period, contributing to under-institutionalised party systems (King 2002; Lewis 2000). Mainwaring (1999) describes weakly institutionalized party systems as those in which politics is

dominated by individuals, not parties; levels of party identification are low; voters' volatility is high and person-centred voting is more common than the one based on parties and issues. All these features are usually ascribed to early post-communist party systems (Colton 2002; Kitschelt 1995; Lewis 2000; O'Dwyer and Kovalčik 2005). Parties centred on their leaders are less likely to support the development of programmatic party competition which is favoured by the advocates of party democracies. Rather, these parties are often charismatic or clientelist and favour patronage-oriented politics (Kitschelt 1995), often putting leaders at the centre of their activities and communication efforts.

These patronage-oriented politics have often led to the rise of massive state bureaucracies. Clientelist and charismatic parties, once in power, have tended to return the favour to their supporters by employing them in state institutions and in this way strengthening their clientelist networks. This leads to ineffective governance and state bureaucracy since most of the employed are not qualified for positions they have gotten (O'Dwyer 2004). Another problem with these practices is that they result in the weakening of mechanisms of democratic accountability. Given that the parties and their leaders can win elections and exercise power by relying on informal practices, such as corruption and clientelism, their accountability to voters is weakened (Ledeneva 2006; Mainwaring 1999). Also, strong party leaders tended to rule their parties in an authoritarian style, silencing opposition voices and centralizing the decision-making processes (Kasapović 2001; Lewis 2000). This was particularly evident in the Western Balkan leadership, with Croatia's Franjo Tuđman and Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milošević rule in the 1990s (Bieber 2018). While institutions arguably grew stronger in later stages of the democratisation across CEE (Fagan and Kopecky 2018; Magone 2015), there seems to be no shortage of strong leaders who position themselves above political institutions since the 1990s. Examples include Hungary's Viktor Orbán (Bugarič and Ginsburg 2016; Shattuck 2016), Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński

(Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Puddington 2017; Sadurski 2018), Slovakia's Robert Fico (Rupnik 2016) and Croatia's Ivo Sanader (Nikić Čakar 2009).

Political leaders and media

What are the consequences of personalised politics, and particularly democratic systems dominated by strong leaders, on the media as an political communication actor? The link is unclear, and rarely discussed in both theoretical and empirical terms. There are indications, though, that in democratic systems that see a rise of a strong leader, the media suffers consequences. Specifically, according to the Freedom House (2018), there is clear evidence that the freedom of the media decreased during tenure of those CEE political leaders who are considered to have ruled, or still do, with illiberal values and practices, such as those mentioned above. Hungary's media went from being free to partly free since Orban came to power. The same can be observed in Poland since PiS, ruled by Kaczynski, won parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015. Similarly, media freedom in Slovakia deteriorated while Fico was in power (2012-2018), and in Croatia there was a clear decline in media freedom during the tenure of Ivo Sanader in the 2000s.

Whether it is the leaders themselves that drive these changes, or the institutions they head and/or clientelist networks that surround them, the practices they have at their disposal to try to influence and perhaps ultimately control the media seem to differ based on the type of the media system in which they operate. A useful media system categorisation for mapping these practices is that offered by Dobek Ostrowska (2015), who suggests that CEE countries who have entered the European Union can be classified as either members of the Hybrid Liberal or Politicised Media model. She classifies countries such as Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia in the Hybrid liberal model, in which the media are mostly free, their politicisation is weak, and the media system is characterised by foreign ownership whose

goal seems to be set on economic, rather than political gain. Given this, it is not surprising that the political actors aiming to tame the media need to resort to direct actions, such as introduction of new legislation, in order to be able to achieve their goals. Examples may be the changes to the public service media legislation (Hinsey 2016; Sadurski 2018) and the proposals for restriction of foreign media ownership (Puddington 2017; Sadurski 2018) in Poland. Political actors in the Politicised Media model can be more subtle in weakening critical press, as they can draw on clientelist networks in this process. It is suggested that in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia, where the media are not fully free, there is a high degree of politicisation and political parallelism, lack of transparency in media ownership, and widespread clientelist relationships among political, economic and media elites (Dobek Ostrowska 2015). Arguably, in this kind of a media system, political actors that aim to secure favourable coverage can do so through informal networks and pressures, as was observed in Croatia when it was revealed that the former PM Ivo Sanader planned to control the media by siphoning state advertising to “obedient media houses” (Biočina 2010). No matter the strategies at hand, one thing may be speculated to be common to systems with illiberal tendencies and strong leaders – the aim to decrease the amount of critical reporting about the leader and increase favourable coverage.

Indeed, if a country is experiencing democratic backsliding or an illiberal drift (it is assumed it reached a state of ‘liberal democracy’ or else it would not have become a Member State of the EU), certain changes in how political leaders are represented in the media can be expected. Increase in the society’s authoritarianism, centralisation of power, and stronger control of media should result in a different media portrayal of political leaders as central figures in this system. For example, it may be expected that media will focus more on political leaders as individuals if the power is centralised, given such leaders are the most important decision-makers in a society, making reporting more personalised. However,

personalised media reporting is a key feature of contemporary political journalism (de Vreese et al. 2017), and it is quite possible that this type of reporting develops in modern time regardless of the illiberal drift. Hence, observing only the level of prominence of political leaders in the media reporting is insufficient, and this indicator should be examined in relation to a more nuanced evidence related to the portrayal of leaders which may be better suited to suggest how media under political pressure reacts in a period of illiberal drift. Accordingly, it can also be hypothesised that the media in less liberal periods, or those experiencing illiberal drift, scrutinises political leaders less, and, in general, reports more positively about them if they are acting in a deferential manner (Dzihic n.d., Markowski 2015; Sadurski 2018). It could also be expected that this kind of deferential media focuses less on leaders' private lives, as is usually the case in deferential journalistic cultures (Stanyer and Wring 2004).

There is little empirical evidence confirming if any of these practices are taking place. This research was set to fill this gap by examining the similarities and difference in how political leaders are represented in the media in different periods of democratisation, that is, analysing how, if at all, leaders' portrayal differ between periods characterised with more illiberalism and those with more liberal tendencies. To do this, four main research questions about leaders' portrayal in the media have been asked.

RQ1: Does the media focus more on political leaders in periods characterised with more illiberalism than in those with more liberal tendencies?

RQ2: Does the media report political leaders with less transparency, that is, reports less about what they do, what kind of skills and qualities they have etc., in periods characterised with more illiberal tendencies?

RQ3: Does the media report less about leaders' private lives and qualities in periods characterised with more illiberal tendencies?

RQ3: Does the media report political leaders more positively in periods characterised with more illiberal tendencies?

The questions are examined in the context of Croatia, the newest Member State of the European Union and a CEE country that, as will be argued in the chapter below, never achieved full democratic potential.

Croatia – drifting between illiberalism and liberalism

Croatia declared independence from SFR Yugoslavia in 1991, following which a war escalated which lasted until 1995. Given the military conflict, it is perhaps not surprising that the country was throughout 1990s ruled in, as some say, an authoritarian way, with the political system focused on the head of the executive, President Franjo Tuđman. Unlike many CEE countries which opted for parliamentary systems that would diffuse and de-centralise political power in the early period of democratisation, Croatia showed preference for institutional arrangements which increase the focus on individual political actors (Easter 1997), which gave President Tuđman extensive powers in this young democracy. Jović and Lamont (2010, 1613) succinctly captured Tuđman's domination over Croatia in 1990s by stating that “not only did Franjo Tuđman effectively control all state institutions and organisations, but he intervened in civil society, kept the media under firm control, and even shaped popular culture”. Accordingly, reporting in the 1990s is considered to have been heavily shaped by political pressures (Malović 2004; Peruško 2013), while research into personalized reporting during this period confirms that the President was as an individual political actor more media visible than his party as an institutional actor, indicating that the reporting was quite personalized (Šimunjak 2018). Overall, while there is some evidence of democratic progress relative to the preceding period of communism, this first period of Croatian history can be described as quite illiberal.

In the second decade following the transition, Croatia introduced institutional arrangements which decreased the degree of personalized power (Ilišin 2001) and the indexes of press freedom showed that the country's media moved towards being more autonomous (Freedom House 2018). The 2000s were marked by Croatia's negotiations to enter the EU, and it was evident that major efforts have been made in this period to increase political rights, civil liberties and media freedom (Cianetti et al. 2018, Švob-Đokić et al. 2011). While analysis of electoral campaigns suggests that politicians continued to practice a personalised approach to politics, putting individuals at the centre of political processes (Grbeša 2008), research into media reporting shows that the media put more focus on political institutions than individual politicians in this period, indicating de-centralisation of power in the country (Šimunjak 2018). Given relevant indicators, this period in Croatian democratisation can be considered as one characterised with democratic progress, as it is significantly more liberal than the early democratisation period in the 1990s (Bieber 2018; Radeljić 2013).

Even though 2000s seem to have been more liberal than other periods of Croatian history, there is evidence to suggest that Croatian society has in this period started growing more authoritarian. University of Zagreb run election surveys before every parliamentary election until 2011, with one variable aiming to grasp the degree of authoritarianism among the electorate – the question of whether a citizen prefers a strong leader or democracy in tough times. The data³ suggests that at all times since Croatia became a democracy there was at least a fifth of the electorate that was more in favour of strong leaders. Also, data shows that the electorate is increasingly authoritarian, with a trajectory leading to what could be considered pre-democratic values.

Furthermore, several liberal standards started to deteriorate as soon as Croatia secured its accession to the EU. While the degree of political and civil rights seemed to have remained consistently high since the accession in 2013, relative to the previous decade, the

society grew more authoritarian in the 2010s, as evidenced in the civil society's initiatives to curb civil and political rights of certain groups in the society⁴, and the degree of media freedom decreased (Freedom House 2018). With regards to the political context, Rupnik (2016, 79) declared that Croatia "confirms the illiberal drift in the region" based on the observation of the 2016 conservative-nationalist government, which has been "purging public media and cultural institutions while cutting funding for independent media and civil society groups" (Rupnik 2016, 79). However, interestingly, based on Freedom House (2018), Croatia's political rights and civil liberties have been consistently rated at 1.5 out of 7 (lower scores mean more freedom) since 2010. This is the best score Croatia ever had, as unlike countries like Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary until 2012, it never scored the overall lowest score of 1 which would indicate full political rights and civil liberties⁵.

Similarly, Croatian media were never considered to be fully free by the Freedom House (2018). The best score its media freedom received was in 2002-03, but even then, it was only on the verge of being declared free, still falling into the 'partly free' category. Since then, the degree of the media freedom has deteriorated, particularly in the past decade. This places Croatia in the company of other CEE countries that are members of the EU, but whose media have not been considered fully free in the most recent years, like Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. Of these, only Romanian media, like Croatian, were never in the past considered fully free.

It could be speculated that audiences might see media classified as partly free, and discussed in terms of increasing political influence, as a not particularly trustworthy source of information. Given this, it is interesting to note that, according to the Eurobarometer data (2012-2017⁶) from the past five years, the trust in all mediums but TV has been growing steadily since the Croatian entry into the EU. Hence, in spite of the decline of media freedom,

Croatian audiences' trust in it has increased. The trust in television has been hit most in this era of illiberal drift, which doesn't surprise given the pressures that the 2016 government exerted on the PSM⁷. Curiously, the medium that gained most in terms of trustworthiness in the same period is the written press, which is also considered to be least regulated and controlled and in large part in foreign ownership (AZTN 2017; Bilić et al. 2017). Consequently, it can be suggested that in times of increased illiberalism audiences have decided to put their trust in media that is least perceived to be under political influence. Croatian media have also been considered in the past decade as quite liberal in terms of issues they have supported and ways in which they have reported about some of the illiberal elements in the society⁸. Hence, although media seem to be facing increased political pressures in the 2010s as compared to the 2000s, they are still considerably freer than was the case in the illiberal period of the 1990s. Hence, it can be argued that the 2010s represent a period of democratic backsliding or illiberal drift, as this period is more illiberal than were the 2000s, but the illiberal tendencies observed in most recent times differ significantly from illiberal processes taking place in the early period of democratisation (Bieber 2018).

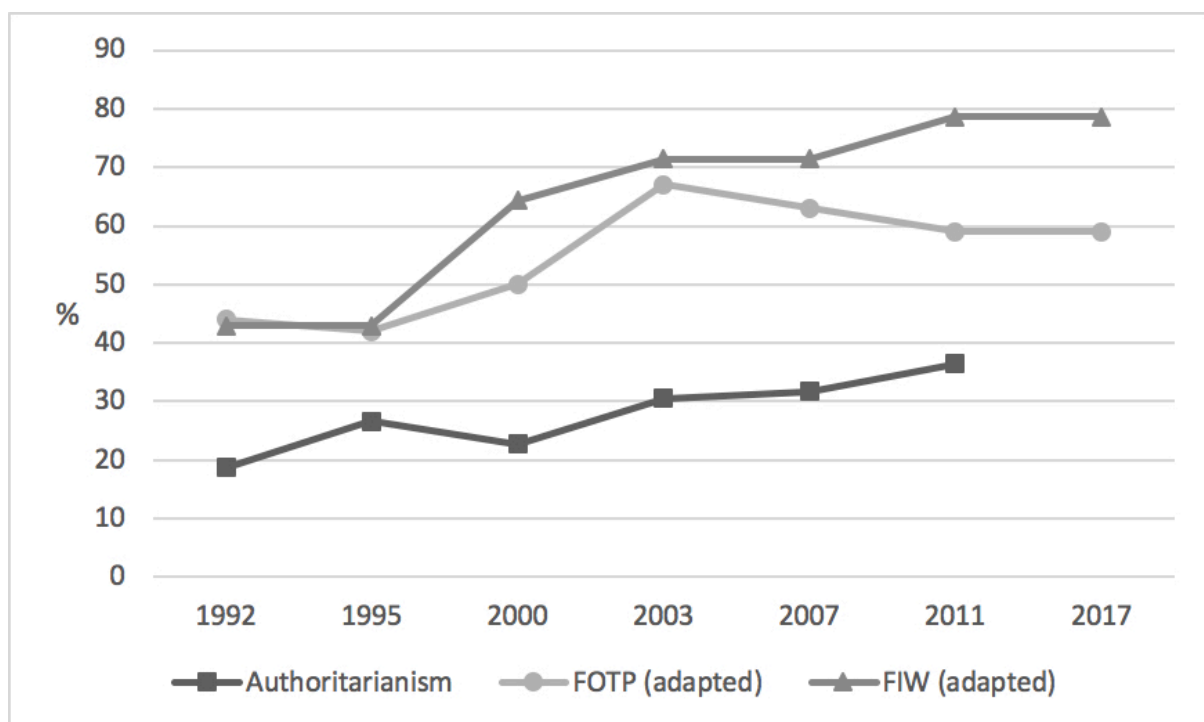


Figure 1. The degree of authoritarianism in the society, presented as a % of citizens preferring strong leaders to democracy (source: University of Zagreb's election surveys); freedom of the press scores (FOTP), adapted to a 0-100% scale where higher numbers represent more media freedom (source: Freedom House); and the freedom in the world score depicting the degree of political rights and civil liberties (FIW), adapted to a 0-100% scale where higher numbers represent more freedom (source: Freedom House).

In line with the outlined research questions, this study will examine what kind of similarities and differences exist in Croatian leaders' portrayal between current era dubbed as a period of 'illiberal drift' with a period of 'liberal democracy' in 2000s and 'illiberal democracy' found in the early democratisation era.

Research design

In order to answer research questions, a longitudinal content analysis of main Croatian daily newspapers was conducted in the period from 1990, when Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia, to 2018. Given that the aim of this analysis was to determine trends over time in leaders' media representation, quantitative content analysis was a logical choice since it is the method most suited to detecting the frequency of references to certain content and identifying recurrent patterns (Deacon 2007; Berger 2011). Also, it was important to use a method which would allow certain generalizations from the data, and content analysis is considered to be the best quantitative textual method that allows for generalized conclusions (Hesmondalgh 2006; Berger 2011). It should also be noted that the findings from this study are based on the manifest meaning of media text, since content analysis is not well suited to the analysis of latent, hidden meanings (Hesmondalgh 2006). In addition, given that content analysis is limited to providing descriptive information about media texts, this study will not be able to reveal why the media reported in a particular way, that is, it will not be able to

reveal their intentions, nor how the audiences received the messages from the media (Berger 2011).

The analysis covers a time frame from 1990 to 2018, providing data for all Croatian political leaders who were heads of the executive and stayed in office for more than three years. In total, the analysis includes one President (Franjo Tuđman) and five Prime Ministers (Ivica Račan, Ivo Sanader, Jadranka Kosor, Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković). Croatia had a semi-presidential political system in the 1990s in which the President was considered the head of the executive, so their representation was analysed (Ilišin 2001). Since 2000, Croatia has had a parliamentary political system and according to the Constitution the head executive is the Prime Minister, so the analysis focuses on them since this point in time.

Material

The material of analysis are national daily newspapers, as the only relevant mass medium that is readily available throughout the examined period. Although Croatian audiences in recent times mainly rely on online media and television for news (Newman 2018), online media was not a viable material for analysis as it hasn't been present in the early democratisation period, while the choice of television would limit the source to one media outlet in the 1990s as the television market was only deregulated at the end of this decade. Consequently, daily newspapers, which notably are the medium that have gained most trust of Croatian audiences in the past decade, have been chosen as the material of analysis.

The main material for this analysis is the national daily newspaper *Večernji list*, which is the only existing mass media outlet that dates back to 1990 with a full archive that is readily available. Editions of *Večernji list* are taken as a main source and included in analyses of coverage of every head of the executive. Two other dailies are used to supplement the findings from the *Večernji list*. The first one is *Vjesnik* which ceased publication in April

2012 so it was not used for the analysis of Plenković's media portrayal. The other is *24sata* which was established in 2005, so it was used for analyses of Kosor, Josipović, Milanović and Plenković. Therefore, there are at least two sources used in the analysis of every head of the executive's coverage with an aim to avoid relying on only one source, to increase the validity of findings, and enhance the ability to generalize.

These three dailies represent an interesting mix of different types of daily newspapers operating in the Croatian print media market. *Vjesnik* was established as a communist publication and was not privatized in the democratic era (Novak 2005). Therefore, it is an excellent example of a state-owned media. Also, in the commercial media market of democratic Croatia it was considered to be the daily that was closest to being a quality paper (Jergović 2004). *Večernji list* was privatized at the end of 1990s and can be seen as a representative of a daily that was transformed from a state-owned to a commercial daily (Malović 2004; Tuđen 2007). Also, according to its content and format, it is usually characterized as a semi-tabloid (Kanižaj 2006). Therefore, its ownership, content and format are different from *Vjesnik's*. Finally, *24sata* is considered to be the only real tabloid in the Croatian market (Car and Andrijašević 2012). It was established and is still owned by a private media conglomerate (ibid.). Therefore, *24sata* represents a third type of daily in the Croatian newspaper market: a daily established in a democracy, by private owners, with tabloid characteristics. It has been the most read daily newspapers in Croatia ever since it started publication.

Sample

The unit of analysis is an article, defined as a totality of words, pictures and illustrations that form an independent part of a newspaper and whose elements usually revolve around the same topic. The sample includes every article that referred to each of the heads of the

executive (either by name or post) in the week preceding their election/appointment to office, and any article that mentioned them during two weeks in March spread across their second and third year in office. The aim was to obtain a sample of articles that was representative of both the intense political coverage and the ‘normal’ coverage, and also to be as comparable as possible. Therefore, the first week of analysis aims to capture intense coverage and is usually the one preceding the election in which the head of the executive came to power. However, in one case (Jadranka Kosor) the leader came to power by appointment, so the first analysed week is the one preceding appointment. That is the period of the most intense coverage of the leader and in that way comparable with campaign coverage. In order to find articles representative of ‘normal’ periods, the focus was put on March coverage since it is the only month in which there were no elections (presidential, parliamentary, local or European) throughout the examined period. Also, the focus is on either the first or the second week in March to avoid the Easter holidays.

Exception was made in cases of Franjo Tuđman whose first year in office was not included in the analysis. Tuđman acted as the President of Croatia since 1990, but Croatia did not formally declare independence until 1991, so the 1992 presidential elections can be seen as the first formal elections in the independent state. Therefore, the last week of the 1992 presidential campaign has been included as representative of Tuđman’s first year in office.

Coding sheet

In order to establish leaders' visibility, the number of articles mentioning the leader has been compared to the total number of articles published in the timeframe of analysis for a particular leader. It is presented as a percentage of all published articles. Furthermore, the analysis introduced the concept of a leader's persona. Drawing on Corner (2000), “persona” is in this project primarily understood as a person’s perceived personality, a politician’s image

as it is presented in the public sphere. Hence, for the reference to a leader to also be a reference to his/her persona, some part of a leader's personality, life or qualities, must be mentioned. In other words, only those references to a leader which mention him/her in relation to something he/she does or fails to do, thinks, says, how he/she is, which skills he/she has, are considered to be references to a leader's persona. Consequently, persona-centred reporting is presented as a percentage of all articles that mentioned the political leader, that also mentioned his/her personae.

In order to establish the context in which a leader was mentioned, each article in which a leader's persona was mentioned was examined for the pre-dominant context in which it was mentioned. Three main values were offered: political, private and political/private (mixed) context. These distinctions were based on the differences between private and political persona as suggested by Corner (2000), Van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer (2011) and van Zoonen and Holtz-Bacha (2000). If the features of a leader's persona were mentioned pre-dominantly in relation to him/her as a person who is performing a political role, the political context value was to be chosen. If they were mentioned pre-dominantly in relation to a leader as a person performing roles that are usually associated with the private sphere (father, spouse, sports enthusiast etc.), the private context value was to be chosen. Finally, if the article referred equally to the features of a leader's persona in both contexts, and/or it made explicit connections between a leader's political and private persona, the value political/private was offered. In order to establish evaluative comment of a leader's persona, reference to it was coded as pre-dominantly positive, negative or neutral. Specifically, if a leader or his actions were not evaluated or there was both criticism and endorsement, the article was coded as neutral. If the leader was pre-dominantly praised, it was coded as positive. If he/she was mostly criticized, it was coded as negative.

Overall, 44.030 articles have been examined in the study, of which a final sample of 1638 articles, those in which a head of the executive has been mentioned, have been studied in detail. Inter-coder reliability test was conducted with another coder who coded 200 randomly chosen articles (12.2% of the sample). Average reliability score calculated using Holsti's method of agreement across main categories was 0.96, with individual variable scores ranging from 0.82 to 1.

Findings

RQ1- Leaders' mediated visibility increases in more illiberal periods.

Daily newspapers report about current PM Plenković twice as much as they did about Milanović in early 2010s, and in equal measure as they did about the 1990s President Tuđman. This would indicate that the media prominence of main political actors in the society has returned to the levels observed in more illiberal periods of Croatian history. However, before jumping to conclusions about what this means in terms of the position of political leaders in Croatia, it is important to examine the nature of this increased coverage. Specifically, it is important to examine what kind of information is being reported about political leaders and what is the tone of this coverage.

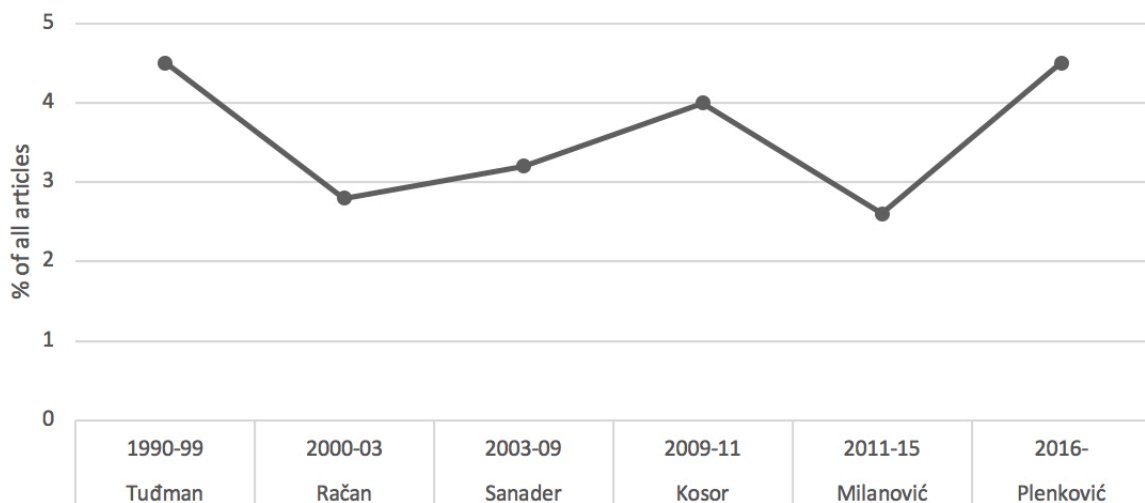


Figure 2. Percentage of all articles mentioning a head of the executive. N = 44.030

RQ2 – Leaders’ personae are not less visible in more illiberal periods.

When media mention political leaders, do they report about their personae, i.e. what they do, how they feel and what kind of people they are? The data suggests that there are no drastic differences between the amount of information media reported about political leaders as individuals since the 1990s. However, there is a weak positive trend evident over time. This means that the public has over time received increasing amount of information about political leaders as individuals, i.e. who they are and what they do, with most information about them available in the public discourse in the most recent period. Hence, most recent reporting seems to offer most transparency about political leaders' activities and qualities. When this information is coupled with the data related to RQ1, it could be suggested that in the current period in which Croatian society is exhibiting certain illiberal tendencies, the media puts more focus on political leaders than it did in periods characterised with less illiberalism, and this higher visibility serves to increase transparency in political leaders’ activities.

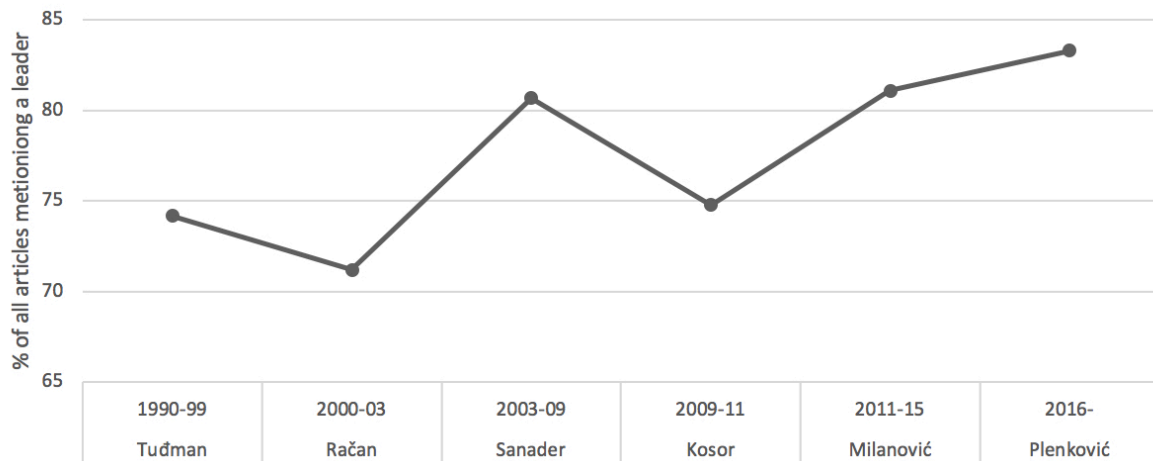


Figure 3. Percentage of all articles mentioning a head of the executive that contain a reference to his/her persona. N = 1.638

RQ3 – Leaders’ private personae are equally visible in all periods.

Data shows that current PM Plenković's persona, as all others, is mainly presented in a political context. His private persona has been politicised more than that of any other of his predecessors, but this has still been done on a very rare occasion (5% of all articles that mention his persona), while articles focusing primarily on his private life are extremely uncommon, as was also the case in the past. Hence, it can be concluded that there are no significant differences in the extent to which media are willing to report leaders' private matters between what can be considered more and less liberal periods since 1990, suggesting a consistency in the style of reporting political leaders' personae.

The glimpses into the private lives of political leaders in the post-communist period show that the media is allowed to report leaders' private lives, albeit there is a reluctance in pursuing more forcefully this style of reporting. Croatian media's lack of willingness to report private lives of political leaders seem to be more in line with values of journalistic cultures characteristic of Mediterranean countries, where this type of information is not considered appropriate to be reported by the media itself (Stanyer and Wring 2004).

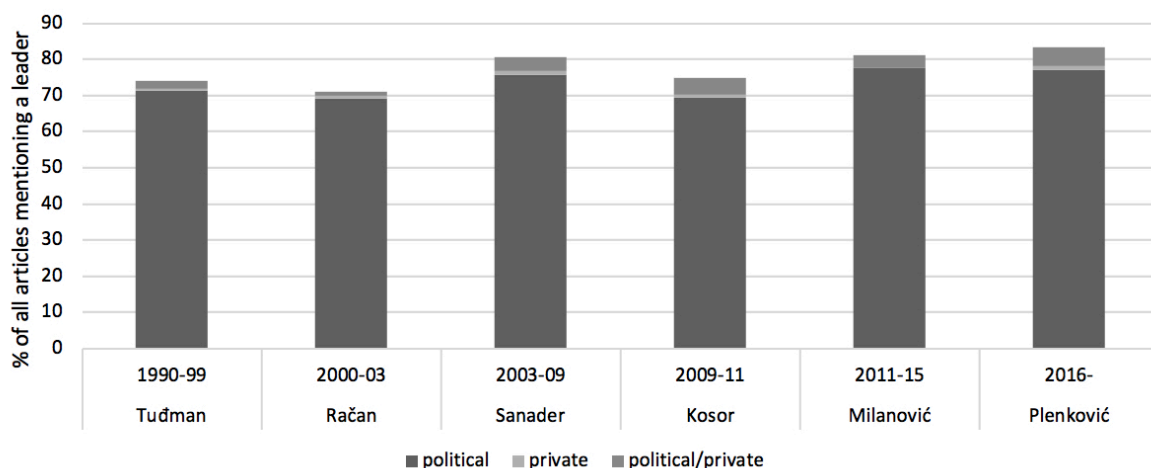


Figure 4. Structure of references to a leader's persona presented as percentage of all articles mentioning a head of the executive. N = 1.638

Perhaps more importantly for the topic pursued in this article, this finding suggests that the increased reporting about the head of the executive in the most current period not only focuses on leaders' activities and qualities, but also mostly to those related to their political functions. This would mean that the public is receiving more information about what their leaders do in their political roles than was the case in periods characterised with less illiberal tendencies. Arguably, this should increase transparency in political processes and activities.

RQ4 – Media are not less critical of leaders in more recent illiberal periods.

The findings related to RQ1-3 are, in itself, insufficient to suggest that the print media is trying to hold political leaders to account in the most recent period of Croatian democratisation. It would be plausible that the media has increased their focus on political activities of heads of the executives, but only to glorify them and help build their cult, as was the case in communism and in some countries, also in the early post-communist period. In order to establish whether the media is really aiming to scrutinise political leaders and increase transparency in the political processes, it is essential to examine the tone of newspaper coverage. Here, the data and trends over time are quite clear - most recent heads of the executive have been portrayed more negatively and less positively than any other leaders before them. There is a clear trend towards more critical media reporting over time and there is no indication that this trend is being reversed in the recent period characterised with increased illiberal tendencies.

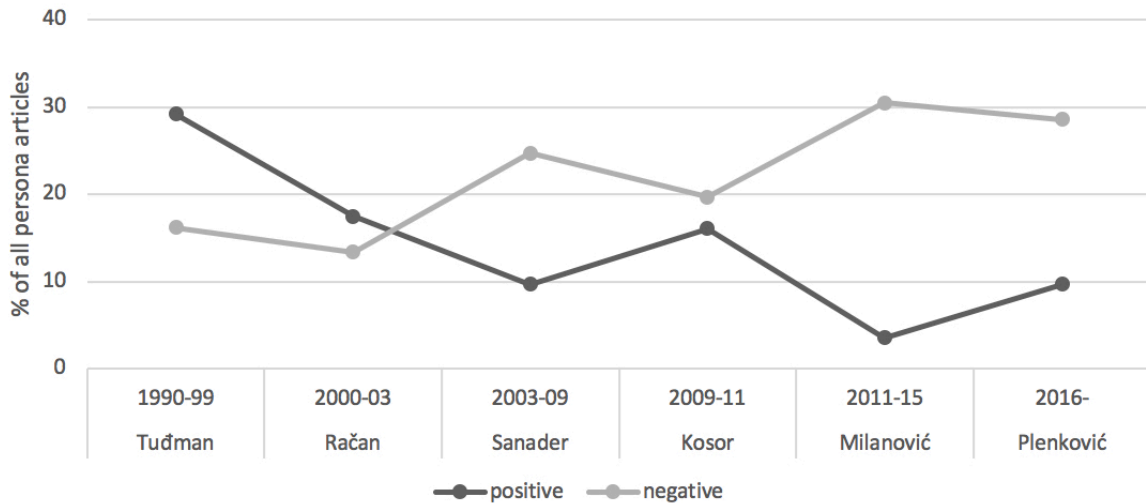


Figure 5. Evaluative comment of a leader’s persona presented as a percentage of all articles mentioning a head of the executive’s persona (n.b. ‘neutral’ variable not presented). N = 1.259

Discussion & Conclusions

Even though there is evidence that media is under more political pressure now than it was a decade ago, the degree of civil liberties is stagnating, and the electorate is increasingly authoritarian, most expectations of the conduct of media in this context have not been met. Leaders visibility in the media *has* increased from what might be considered a more liberal period and matches that observed in the early illiberal period. However, with more articles mentioning heads of the executive in the most current period of democratisation, there is increased amount of information about leaders’ activities and qualities in the public discourse, which can arguably increase the transparency of political and decision-making processes. Perhaps even more importantly, the print media, which is consistently gaining trust of its audience, is most critical of political leaders than it ever was since the beginning of the democratisation period, even more than in the more liberal period of democratisation. And finally, while the portrayal of political leaders remains within the constraints of the political context, there is no evidence to suggest that the media is more deferential now than it was in the more liberal period.

These findings have several important implications. In the first place, more caution should be employed when making claims about the ‘illiberalism’ in the CEE, as the evidence from this study suggests that the illiberal drift observed in the past decade has some significant differences to other periods characterised with illiberal elements in the past. For one, while we can see that the indexes of media freedom show that the situation in the region is increasingly problematic, the Croatian case shows that this does not easily translate into less critical and more deferential media reporting which would serve the ruling political elite, as it did in the early democratisation period. Instead, there are significant differences in how media portrays the most powerful political actors in the era of illiberalism in the first post-communist period and the current era of illiberal drift. Most notably, in spite of the illiberal drift and pressures that some other media outlets in the country are experiencing (particularly PSM), the print media seems to show a certain resilience to political pressures as it continuously increases the scrutiny with which they report heads of the executive. This also indicates that traditional definitions of illiberalism may need rethinking, as it appears there may well currently be different forms of illiberalism across CEE. It was not in the scope of this study to establish these, but findings do suggest there is a need for further examination of the illiberalism in the region from the perspective of media, and especially journalistic reporting, as journalistic output is rarely examined in detail.

Indeed, this study reveals that more caution is needed in making assumptions about how media output, and consequently information available to citizens in the mediated public discourse, is affected by changes in the overall media freedom. It is sometimes assumed that less media freedom, as observed through various indices, means more political control over media content and less criticality in how political actors and processes are mediated (e.g. Dzihic n.d.). However, the Croatian case suggests that while this may be true for some, more exposed and politically vulnerable media outlets, such as PSM and media subsidized by

various government schemes, this is not necessarily true for the entire media system, as was the case in the democratic periods prior to privatisation and commercialisation of the media sector (Gross 2004; Bajomi-Lazar 2013; Gulyas 2003). While clientelist relationships between media owners and political elites are not uncommon in the region (Dobek Ostrowska 2015), this case study suggests that important national media actors can continue in times of an illiberal drift with practices they have developed in more liberal periods – increasing transparency in political processes and holding powerful to account. It was beyond the scope of this study to establish the factors driving these trends and practices in Croatia, but it is worth examining them in reference to journalistic roles and related trust in media, and media ownership.

First, it appears this kind of approach to political reporting in times of an illiberal drift pays off. The audiences can be seen to reward the media that continue to perform their watchdog functions by increased trust in the content they produce. It has been argued that digital media in some CEE countries have been able to continue with objective and critical reporting in spite of the increased pressures (Shattuck 2016), but it is important to note that the same is true in some countries, like Croatia, also for certain traditional media, like the print. Croatian audiences' trust in digital media grew over the past five years as well, but the sector that gained most trust in this period is the press (Eurobarometer 2012-17⁹). This is quite important for a media sector that is in decline (Newman 2018), as the increased trust and watchdog positioning could help rejuvenate the sector and give it new importance and meaning. It is also important for CEE media in general to acknowledge that perseverance in critical political reporting and pursuit of investigative reporting are valued by audiences and can allow media not only to perform the role of holding powerful to account (Allan 2010), but also regain some of their importance in the society, which, it has been argued, has been

diminishing with the proliferation of digital technologies (Splichal and Dahlgren 2016; Charles 2014) and changes to political economies of media around the world (Street 2011).

Second, it is important to note that newspapers analysed in this study reported most critically in periods when they were owned by private and foreign entities. There are obvious concerns in countries such as Czech Republic and Romania where politicians own significant shares of the media market and there are pressures on the PSM (Shekhovtson and Sierakowski 2016; Puddington 2017), and so far less focus is put on the role that the private media is playing in the media market characterised with increased political pressures. As this case study shows, private media, and particularly those in foreign ownership, may be key to maintaining the scrutiny over political processes in CEE countries experiencing illiberal drifts. Ruling political elites seem to be aware of this, as there are attempts to put pressure on independent media through the reduction of state advertising (Shekhovtson and Sierakowski 2016; Brogi et al. 2017) and foreign media ownership (Puddington 2017). The findings of this analysis demonstrate how important in practice are private and foreign-owned media outlets in holding political elites to account, which suggests that more focus should be put on the monitoring and protection of their political independence in countries that are experiencing illiberal drifts.

Potential connections between critical press, their ownership and audiences outlined above are obviously at this point only speculations which can be used to form further hypotheses that can be tested in some future research. As the study was based on a textual analysis, it does not allow making inferences about correlations or causations with other variables. Another important limitation of this study is the fact that it is a case study and hence its findings are not generalisable across the CEE region. However, the case study allowed us to test some initial assumptions about how the media content can be used to reflect, or rather react to, illiberal elements in different periods of democratisation, and as

such, it provided evidence that enables us to start questioning some of the theories about the media behaviour in contexts considered to be experiencing illiberal drifts. Future research could examine whether the trends observed in this case study can be observed across the region, or at least in similar contexts, which factors drive specific media behaviour in different forms of illiberalism, and also what kind of consequences critical reporting in times of illiberal drift has on the relationship between citizens and political elites – particularly on the trust in institutions and the susceptibility to populist appeals.

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¹ Parts of this manuscript are derived from author's doctoral thesis (see Šimunjak 2014).

² For a useful discussion of the connotations and implications of different terms used in this context see Bustikova and Guasti (2017).

³ The author would like to thank Dr Nebojša Blanuša and Dr Goran Čular, who made available the electoral survey data.

⁴ Two high-profile civil society actions illustrate these developments well. The first case is the constitutional referendum on the definition of marriage that took place in December 2013. Following the initiative of the ruling left-wing coalition to legalise same-sex relationships, a conservative civil society organization 'On Behalf of the Family' (Croatian: U ime obitelji) gathered more than 700,000 signatures to secure a referendum on the subject. The referendum passed with two thirds of those who voted casting their ballot for discrimination of same-sex couples. Second, the decision of the ruling right-wing coalition in 2017 to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the so-called Istanbul convention, again saw a civil society backlash supported by conservative parties and the Catholic Church. The citizen-led initiative 'The Truth about the Istanbul convention' (Croatian: Istina o Istanbulskoj) organised several protests, arguing that the convention is promoting 'gender ideology' which is not in line with cultural aspects of the Croatian society.

⁵ Croatia has consistently scored 1 in the category of political rights and 2 in the category of civil rights since 2010 (Freedom House 2018).

⁶ All reports are available here -

<http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/index#p=1&instruments=STANDARD>
Accessed 07 June 2018.

⁷ Soon after the HDZ-MOST coalition took power in early 2016, the public service media came under pressure from HDZ's Minister of Culture Zlatko Hasanbegović. Specifically, more than seventy PSM staff members, from the director to journalists, were dismissed following the parliamentary elections, based on management appointment procedures that allow Croatian parliament significant influence over staffing (Bilić et al. 2017).

⁸ Most notably, mainstream media have opposed the 2013 civil society initiative to curb rights of same-sex couples (Raguž et al., 2018; Skelin 2013) and openly argued for ratification of the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in 2017-18 (Nakić 2018).

⁹ All reports are available here -

<http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/index#p=1&instruments=STANDARD>
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