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From a Leader-centred to a Party-centred System? The Curious Case of Media (De-)personalisation in Yugoslavia and Croatia, 1945–2015

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Abstract

It is often argued that the politics of Central Eastern European countries revolve around political leaders. This can inhibit the development of fragile political institutions and the process of democratisation in general. This article examines patterns of media representation of political actors in the transition from a communist to a post-communist setting in the case of Yugoslavia and Croatia. The results show that, although there are significant similarities between the prominence of leaders in the communist and early post-communist eras, in the process of democratisation media attention has shifted significantly from leaders to parties as collectives .

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES PATTERNS AND TRENDS RELATED TO MEDIA representation of political leaders and political parties during the process of democratisation from a system of authoritarian, communist rule to a democratic, post-communist one.¹ The aim of the study is to test the ‘media personalisation’ hypothesis, developed and examined in

¹ Communist and post-communist systems and the process of democratisation are understood in this article as comprehensive, and not only political concepts. Accordingly, a communist system is considered to be a one-party system with tendencies towards state and common ownership and deferential, politically controlled media (Furtak 1986; Voltmer 2008; Lauk 2009). Democratisation is understood as a process in which a communist system transforms

established Western democracies, in a Central Eastern European context. According to mainstream scholarship relating to the media prominence of political leaders and parties, the media have in the past few decades increased their focus on political leaders as individuals at the expense of collective political bodies, such as parties or governments (McAllister 2007; Maier & Adam 2010; Langer 2011). This phenomenon is usually considered to be an aspect of the ‘personalisation of politics’ and is referred to as ‘media personalisation’ (Rahat & Sheafer 2007; Boumans *et al.* 2013).

One of the most comprehensive comparative studies of the media representation of political actors in European societies, albeit not a longitudinal one, shows that personalised reporting is a contemporary characteristic of not only Western European societies but also those of Southern and Northern Europe (de Vreese *et al.* 2017). Of 14 examined European democracies, political institutions are more media-visible than individual politicians only in Spain and Switzerland, and even there by only a small margin (de Vreese *et al.* 2017). None of the new European democracies formed after the fall of communism in 1990s were included in the analysis. Furthermore, existing longitudinal studies seem to support the claim that media reporting in previous decades was less personalised and that more attention was given to political institutions (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000; Langer 2011). However, the evidence again speaks only for political actors’ representation trends in established (Western) democracies, such as the US, the UK, France, and Canada.

This study aims to contribute to political communication scholarship by examining the development of the media representation of political actors in Central and Eastern Europe. Alongside the fact that the personalisation phenomenon is under-researched in this setting, another reason for studying it in the context of democratisation is the central place of individual actors within political systems in this region, both under communism and in the current post-communist era: collective political bodies and institutions, such as governments and parties, are under-institutionalised and dominated by politicians, especially leaders. The literature on European communist leadership cults suggests that communist leaders were the single most important political actors in the countries they ruled, and that their cults were created by an extensive use of mass media (Apor *et al.* 2004; Leese 2014). Similarly, it is argued

into a democratic system: ‘the introduction and extension of citizenship rights and the creation of a democratic state’ through reforms of a country’s political, economic, cultural and social system (Grugel 2002, p. 5). Consequently, post-communist systems are defined as new systems formed after the fall of communism that have underwent, or are still undergoing, the process of democratisation (Grugel 2002; Voltmer 2008).

that post-communist politics and political communication are also dominated by individuals and that this continuous centrality of leaders can inhibit the development of already fragile political institutions, party systems, and the process of democratic transition in general (Lewis 2000; King 2002; Tomšič & Prijon 2010).

By examining the validity of these claims, this article exposes the limitations of mainstream media personalisation theory, particularly its universality and applicability beyond the Western world, and reveals new media representation trends in a Central Eastern European country. Consequently, this study contributes to the literature on democratisation and political communication by testing the media personalisation hypothesis in the context of Central Eastern Europe, examining the extent to which European communist leadership cults can be seen as extreme forms of media personalisation, and exploring how, if at all, media representation of political actors changes during the process of democratisation.

The personalisation hypothesis

Personalisation theory suggests that political communication has over the past few decades become more focused on individual political actors, especially political leaders, while the visibility and importance of collective political actors, such as political parties and governments, has decreased (Poguntke & Webb 2005; McAllister 2007; Maier & Adam 2010; Langer 2011; Bjerling 2012). This shift in the focus on individual political actors has most frequently been theorised and researched with regards to the increasing importance and power of political leaders within executives and parties (Poguntke & Webb 2005; Rahat & Sheafer 2007), a greater emphasis on political leaders in election campaigns and promotional materials (Maier & Adam 2010; Lengauer & Winder 2013), leaders' effect on voting behaviour (Curtice & Holmberg 2005; Karvonen 2010; Balmas *et al.* 2014) and the increased visibility of political leaders in media reporting (Rahat & Sheafer 2007; Downey & Stanyer 2010; Maier & Adam 2010; Langer 2011; Boumans *et al.* 2013). This study is focused on the last aspect, often termed 'media personalisation'.

There is a growing body of evidence that supports the media personalisation thesis, at least in established Western democracies where this kind of research has mostly been carried out. Specifically, research has shown that since World War II, political leaders have become more media-visible at the expense of their parties in the United

Kingdom (Langer 2011), Austria, France, the US and Canada (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000).² There is also evidence that political leaders have become more media-visible in Germany since 1945 (Wilke & Reinemann 2001; Reinemann & Wilke 2007), although the trend is not linear; also, research shows that the German media reported the 2009 general elections by focusing more on political parties than leaders (Holtz-Bacha *et al.* 2014). Amongst existing longitudinal studies focused on personalised reporting, only analyses of the Swedish media show almost no support for the media personalisation hypothesis. While political leaders have not become more visible in Swedish media over the past few decades, there is no evidence that they have become decreasingly media prominent (Johansson 2008; Bjerling 2012).

The focus of existing research into media personalisation is mostly on the representation of political leaders, usually party leaders and heads of the executive. Balmas *et al.* (2014) term this ‘centralized personalization’, claiming there is hardly any evidence on the visibility in media reporting of politicians who do not hold the highest political positions, and whether they have become more prominent in the media over time. They define this process as ‘decentralized personalization’ and suggest it demonstrates that ‘power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians’ (Balmas *et al.* 2014, p. 37). This indicates that the power is not centralised, but rather dispersed within the members of the collective who are gaining media visibility.

In sum, the cases of Germany and Sweden clearly show that the phenomenon of media personalisation is not universal or consistent across Western democracies. However, as Maier and Adam (2010) concluded in their state of the field analysis, there is a fair amount of evidence to support the hypothesis that political leaders have become increasingly media-visible since the end of the Second World War. What the overview of media personalisation research also shows is that most literature is Western-centric, and that we are only able to speculate how, if at all, personalised reporting develops beyond the Western world.

Leadership cult—extreme form of media personalisation?

If personalised politics are those in which political communication actors—the media, politicians and parties, and voters—focus on political leader at the expense of political collectives, leadership cults can be seen as an extreme form of personalised politics: the ‘god-like glorification of a modern political leader with mass media’ (Plamper 2004,

² For a rare insight into personalisation in a non-Western context, see the following studies of personalised politics in Israel (Rahat & Sheaffer 2007; Balmas *et al.* 2014).

p. 33). It is argued that all European communist systems established following World War II had leaders who developed cults, but their strength differed from country to country, and from leader to leader (Leese 2014). Some of the most frequently mentioned in this regard are the cults of the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin and Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito. However, other less known and discussed communist leaders are also considered to have had cults, such as Hungary's Mátyás Rákosi, Poland's Bolesław Bierut, and Bulgaria's Georgi Dimitrov (Apor *et al.* 2004).

It is suggested in the literature that these cults were developed because of, among other things, certain characteristics of communist countries' political, party and media systems. First, it is claimed that reporting in systems with concentrated power (for example, presidential systems) is more personalised than in other systems where power is more evenly spread among political actors (parliamentary systems) (McAllister 2007; Langer 2011). There is some evidence to support this.³ If institutional characteristics really do contribute to an increased focus on individual political actors, then the institutional settings of communist systems might represent an ideal context for personalised reporting. Specifically, the constitutions of early European communist systems concentrated political power in the hands of an individual. In the first years following World War II, when most of the Central Eastern European communist systems were created, these countries were without exception ruled by strong leaders who held almost all political power (Furtak 1986). In the later communist period, starting from late 1950s, there was a shift from vesting one individual with this amount of power to a dual leadership. Political power was divided in these later stages of communist systems between the party leader, usually called the general secretary, and the formal head of the executive, who most frequently held the position of prime minister or president (Blondel 1992). Since it is argued that all important decisions were taken by the party, and that the role of state institutions was primarily to 'put the party's decisions into effect' (Furtak 1986, p. 10), it would be logical to assume that the general secretary of the communist party had more power than the other leader, the formal head of state (McCauley & Carter 1986). However, this move towards dual leadership can be seen as indicative of communists' desire to distribute power rather than concentrate it only in countries where the two positions could not be held by the same person. In the cases of Yugoslavia, Albania and Romania, the head of state was at the same time the party leader, so power was still concentrated and the political system was in the hands of a single individual (Blondel 1992). Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that the leaders of these respective countries—Yugoslavia's Tito, Albania's Enver Hoxha and Romania's Nicolae

³ See Dalton & Wattenberg (2000).

Ceaușescu—had the strongest and most enduring leadership cults (Leese 2014). Hence, if a presidential political system in established Western democracies has the potential to make political communication actors focus on the individual who is vested with the most power at the expense of political collectives, the default power configuration of communist systems might contribute even more strongly to personalised politics.

Second, the leadership cult literature suggests that political actors intentionally put the spotlight on the political leader in the early days of communist systems because the party had not yet been consolidated and was still weak. In other words, the focus on the political leader at the beginning of the communist period was considered necessary as the only way of legitimising the new system, given that the party was not yet organised and established (Ake 1966). The purpose of the strong leader was to unite different social groups by reshaping rituals and myths to create common goals (Cavalli 1998; Šiber 2007). The focus on the individual instead of the collective was therefore a political decision adopted for two main reasons: to legitimise the new system and to simplify the education and socialisation of the people (Apor *et al.* 2004). Legitimisation was based on the premise of the leader's greatness and extraordinary qualities: the message that was communicated to the public was that there was no other person capable of running the country. The leader was also used as a means of simplifying values, beliefs and behaviours for the largely uneducated public, setting an example of how people should behave, what they should value, and what their interests should be.

Third, it is argued that these cults were created by the extensive use of mass media (Plamper 2004; Rees 2004; Eatwell 2006; Janjetović 2009). As Lauk (2008, p. 199) writes: the primary task of news presentation in former communist bloc journalism was not to chronicle daily events, but to glorify the Communist Party and its leaders.' Consequently, it may be hypothesised that communist reporting was personalised and centred on the political leader. There is, however, very limited evidence for this theory.⁴ In their seminal work on news values, Galtung and Ruge claimed that communist countries had a 'structural' style of presenting news characterised by an emphasis on social forces while 'the names of the actors' simply disappear. A focus on individuals in news stories was more common in Western media (Galtung and Ruge 1965, p. 68). More recent studies support their claim that communist media reporting was, unlike in the West, more strongly structural rather than person-centred in style. For example, Gerbner's

⁴ A rare study that confirms this theory of person-centred media output is Martensson's analysis of three major Soviet newspapers in 1964, which found that Soviet newspapers pursued a person-centred rather than structural reporting style (Galtung & Ruge 1965, p. 87).

analysis of the coverage of the 1960 General Assembly meeting in the *New York Times* and Hungarian newspapers showed that the *New York Times* named individuals around every line and a half, while Hungarian newspapers did so every eight lines (cited in Robinson 1977). This suggests that the *New York Times* used a more person-centred presentational style, while the communist Hungarian paper presented the meeting in a more structural way (Robinson 1977, pp. 167–68). Two studies comparing Yugoslav and American news coverage, both carried out by Robinson (1977) at the beginning of 1960s, further reinforce this hypothesis. One study showed that the Associated Press placed the emphasis on individuals in 30% of its news items, while the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug did so in 23%. The difference is not great, but it does point to a more structural presentational style practised by the communist news agency. Robinson's other study examined the same two agencies' coverage of the Vietnam War. Here, the Associated Press put the focus on individuals in 70% of its news items, while only 25% of Tanjug's reports were person-centred. Robinson (1977, p. 170) concludes that the Yugoslav reader acquired 'a more structural explication of the issues involved'.

These two competing theories—one claiming that communist media practised a person-centred presentation style, and the other that its coverage was more structural—make it difficult to reach any sound conclusions about the media representation of political actors in European communist societies. In addition, authors writing in the post-communist period emphasise the differences rather than the similarities across European communist media systems, pointing to the fact that it is problematic to generalise in this context (Curran & Park 2000; Lauk 2008; Oates 2012; Tworzecki 2012; Coha 2013). Therefore, the real extent to which mediated political communication was centred on individuals, especially on political leaders, in communist systems, remains ambiguous.

Democratisation—from leaders to parties?

Certain continuities from the communist era can be observed in the early post-communist period, i.e. during the 1990s when the Central Eastern European countries entered the transitional phase of the democratisation process. The choice of institutional design in these new democracies largely depended upon the model of transition, which in turn depended upon the legacies of the former system (type of regime, level of industrialisation, former experiences with democratic regimes) (Easter 1997). In the end, the choice of institutional design was decided on the basis of the power relationship between the communist elite and their opposition. In the countries where the communist elite retained control over legislative, executive and judiciary institutions during the transition period, it was able to determine the institutional

design of the new system without having to negotiate with opposition forces. The communist elites consolidated in this way, who considered that they would 'have the most to gain by limiting the access of others to state's power resources', opted for presidential political systems that represented the continuation of the focus on individual political actors from the former regime (Easter 1997, p. 211). Since such presidential systems promoted 'a concentration of power on charismatic individuals' and the dominance of 'personal competition' over 'team spirit' (Kitschelt 1995, p. 452), they were the first choice of communist elites leading the transition because they expected to benefit from the 'name recognition of local and national leaders and clientelist networks' (Kitschelt 1995, p. 453). The presidential political system was the most common institutional choice of post-communist countries (Easter 1997).

However, the prevailing political system choice of post-communist countries of Central Europe was either a parliamentary system or a mixed, semi-presidential one. The parliamentary system was the most common outcome of the transitions in which the opposition forces gained considerable power at the expense of the communist elites following internal fragmentation (Easter 1997). Since in this situation neither the opposition nor the communist elites were confident in securing enough public support for autonomous rule, they opted for a system in which neither would be able to control all power resources if elected. A parliamentary system was also a way of preventing the rise of a new strong leader, a principle deployed in the establishment of new Western democracies after World War II (Cavalli 1998). A semi-presidential system was the rarer choice. Kitschelt (1995) argues that this was the choice of a communist elite that had lost certain amount of power but was still able to negotiate with opposition forces. By introducing a semi-presidential system, the communist elite was able to partly secure the continuation of personalised politics while necessarily complying with some of the opposition's demands, which usually related to decreasing the focus on individual political actors and enhancing the power of collectives.

Whichever the choice of new political system, it is argued that post-communist political actors decided to keep the focus on individuals at the expense of collectives (Lewis 2000). This was partly down to the nature of the newly formed party systems. Scholars mostly agree that the new parties that emerged after the introduction of multi-party systems were, at least in the beginning, poorly organised, without roots in society that would help them make ties with citizens, and lacking clearly defined identities, given the high level of uncertainty about the needs and interests of the electorate. Additionally, except for the reformed communist parties, the new parties had little or no political, let alone democratic experience (Kitschelt 1995; Lewis 2000; Tomšič & Prijon 2010; Gheorgita 2015). Since these weak parties were not able to attract and mobilise voters, party systems were often characterised by 'the

dominance of individuals and political leaders over party structures' (Lewis 2000, p. 154). This was particularly true for systems with charismatic parties, which Kitschelt (1995, p. 449) defines as 'not much more than an unstructured mass of people rallying around a leader'. In short, it seems that, even when multi-party parliamentary systems were introduced, parties were weak and unorganised and therefore dependent upon their leaders and clientelistic networks. This presumably led to the emphasis on leaders by political actors.

Given that it is usually suggested that the political elite remained in control of media, at least in the early post-communist period (Gross 2003; Lauk 2009; Lani 2013), it could be expected that if the political elite decided to focus on individuals in their communication, it had the power to make the media report in a similar way as well. However, the extent to which the political elite was able to control the media varied among post-communist countries, and across different stages of democratisation. Hence, even if political actors were able to make media personalise their reporting in some post-communist countries and periods, their influence might have decreased with the rise in the autonomy of media, the institutionalisation of the party system, and the rise of civil society. Once the media reached this 'second phase of mediatization'⁵ (Stromback 2008), in which it became mostly free from political influences, it might have started reporting by following media logic, that is, by adhering to news values and journalistic storytelling techniques, such as simplification, personalisation and polarisation. In other words, it can be speculated that the more freedom media gained in the post-communist period, it pursued more person-centred reporting, in line with media logic.

In summary, while mainstream personalisation theory suggests that political communication nowadays is more personalised than was the case a couple of decades ago, the literature concerning European communist and post-communist systems suggests that political communication there was always personalised and continues to be so. The aim of this article is to put these assumptions to the test and examine to what extent the media personalisation

⁵ Stromback (2008) argues there are four phases of the mediatization of politics. In the first phase, the media becomes the most important source of information, making politics mediated. In the second phase, media gains more independence from political actors and starts to be governed by media logic. The third phase is characterised by growing importance of media, due to which political actors start to *adapt* to media logic in order to ensure their politics are mediated. In the final phase, political actors *adopt* media logic as their own, which means that the media has *colonized* politics.

hypothesis is relevant in an authoritarian system and during its various stages of democratisation. Specifically, the questions that this study aims to answer and hypotheses that are being tested are as follows:

RQ1: Can leader cults be seen as representing an extreme case of media personalisation?

H1: The communist leader was the most media prominent political actor in his time, and his media prominence is significantly higher than that of his successors in the democratic era.

RQ2: How, if at all, does media prominence of political actors change in the process of democratisation?

H2: Political leaders remained highly media visible during the process of democratisation, at all phases of the process being more media prominent than collective political actors and institutions.

RQ3: Is there evidence to suggest that power is being portrayed in the media as increasingly diffused and ascribed to institutions rather than individuals in the process of democratisation?

H3: Politics remained portrayed as dominated by individuals during the democratisation process, with political parties defined by and associated with primarily their leaders.

Research design

These questions are answered through a longitudinal content analysis of major national daily newspapers in communist Yugoslavia, and one of its successor states, Croatia. These cases have been chosen because the analysis of the media portrayal of the communist leadership in Yugoslavia has great potential to provide insights into an extreme case of media personalisation, and there is evidence to suggest that a high degree of media personalisation has continued in post-communist Croatia as well, which provides a prime testing ground for the hypothesis of continued media personalisation.

Specifically, the Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito, might represent an ideal example of the extreme form of media personalisation as it is widely held that he alone kept multinational Yugoslavia together (Zaninovich 1983; Pavlowitch 1992; Velikonja 2008; Kolář 2014). Not only did he inspire one of the longest-lasting leadership cults in Europe, but there is also evidence to suggest that his cult lives on (Carmichael 2010). As Volčič (2007, p. 30) writes, ‘everywhere in the former-Yugoslav republics, Josip Broz Tito seems to continue to embody Yugoslavia that many

people remember in a positive light. Hence, analysis of Tito's media representation might give valuable insights into whether leadership cults represent an extreme case of media personalisation.

Furthermore, the early post-communist period in Croatia was also dominated by an individual, President Franjo Tuđman. When it gained independence, Croatia opted for a semi-presidential political system, which concentrated significant power in the hands of the president. Although Tuđman was officially sharing his executive power with a prime minister, it is often suggested that Tuđman held absolute power (Radoš 2005; Boduszynski 2010). Jović and Lamont (2010 p. 1613) nicely capture Tuđman's domination of Croatia in the 1990s: '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.' This all suggests that politics was quite personalised in the early post-communist period as well.

Croatia is usually considered to have entered the consolidation period of the democratisation process in 2000s (Čular 2005), following its transformation into a parliamentary democracy, the rise of an autonomous mass media, the development of civil society, and the election of political leaders who were no longer, as Tito and Tuđman were, considered 'fathers' of the nation (Ilišin 2001; Udovičić 2011; Freedom House 2017). However, this did not necessarily mean a rise in the importance of political parties. Nikić Čakar (2010) claims that Ivo Sanader, who succeeded Tuđman as the leader of the biggest Croatian political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*—HDZ), and led it throughout 2000s, made the party presidential by placing himself at the centre of party processes, electoral campaigns and the executive, resulting in the continuation of personalised politics in the late stages of democratisation.

Overall, the study of Yugoslavia and Croatia, one of its successors, seems ideal for testing the hypotheses of communist leader cult-building through mass media, and the continued focus on political leaders in media reporting during the democratisation process. The study covers a time period from 1945, when Tito came to power, until 2015. Reporting on six political leaders, all heads of the executive in office for more than three years, was analysed, specifically, two presidents (Tito and Tuđman) and four prime ministers (Račan, Sanader, Kosor and Milanović).⁶

⁶ In 1990s Croatia had a semi-presidential system in which the president was head of executive. From 2000, when the parliamentary system was introduced, the president and the prime minister switched roles, with the prime minister or his/her government gaining most executive powers. Hence, since 2000 prime ministers have been heads of the executive and are included in the analysis.

The materials of analysis are daily newspapers, since these are the only primary source available for such an extensive period. To get an overview of the representation of political actors in mass media, three daily newspapers published on Croatian territory were analysed for the examined period. The first one is *Vjesnik*, established as a state-owned publication in 1940 and usually considered to be the nearest, among the papers in our survey, to a broadsheet (Jergović 2004; Novak 2005). It continued to be state-owned until it ceased publication in 2012. The second source is *Večernji list*, a daily that was founded by the state in 1959 and privatised at the end of 1990s, and can be considered to be a half-tabloid, that is, a hybrid publication with elements of both quality and tabloid papers (Kanižaj, 2006). It was the second-most read paper in the whole of Yugoslavia, and it was always either the top selling paper in Croatia, or among the top three with highest circulation. The third source is the daily *24sata*, the only Croatian tabloid, which was established by Styria Media Group AG in 2005 and soon became the most read paper in the country (Car & Andrijašević 2012). It was included in the analysis of the leaders who came to power after 2005, so that the study would reflect the commercialisation and tabloidisation of the media that occurred in the 2000s. The analysis focuses on the final week of the election campaign in which a leader first came to power, or the week prior to a leader's appointment to office if he/she did not win office through elections.⁷ These weeks were chosen as periods that illustrate most intense reporting on politics and political actors. A total of 16,363 articles were sampled from the selected newspapers in the time periods specified above. The subset of data analysed in more detail—1,116 articles—consists of all articles that mention the leader and/or his/her party (see Table 1 for details). An inter-coder reliability test⁸ was conducted with a second coder who coded 120 articles (11.9% of the sample). The inter-coder reliability scores for all

⁷ Exceptions were made in cases of Tito and Tuđman, whose first years in office were not included in the analysis. In the case of Tito, the materials (newspaper archives) were not available for his first years in office (1945–1948). Instead, the year in which Tito was appointed president for the last time (1974) was chosen as the first year of analysis, since two newspapers' archives were available from this point in time. The second exception was made in relation to Tuđman: although he acted as president of Croatia from 1990, 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 was included as representative of Tuđman's first year in office.

⁸ Inter-coder reliability score was calculated according to Holsti's (1969) method of agreement— $2A/(N1+N2)$ —whereas A is the number of units in which coders agree and N1 and N2 are the number of units coded by each of the coders.

relevant variables were 1, indicating full agreement between the first and second coder and hence, credibility and reliability of data.

Table 1: Sampling details

| Leader | Period in office | Sample | | |
|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| | | Time frame | Total articles | Leader & party mentions |
| Tito | 14/1/45-4/5/80 | 10-16/05/74 | VL=677 VJ=740 | n=169 |
| Tuđman | 30/05/90-10/12/99 | 25-31/07/92 | VL=1315 VJ=1088 | n=229 |
| Račan | 27/1/00-23/12/03 | 27/12/99-2/1/00 | VL=1357 VJ=1104 | n=129 |
| Sanader | 23/12/03-6/7/09 | 15-21/11/03 | VL=1732 VJ=1730 | n=240 |
| Kosor | 6/7/09-23/12/11 | 30/6/09-6/7/09 | VL=2094 VJ=1138 24S=966 | n=247 |
| Milanović | 23/12/11-22/1/16 | 26/11/11-2/12/11 | VL=1074 VJ=568 24S=780 | n=102 |
| Total | | | 16363 | 1116 |

Notes: Total articles = total number of articles published in a newspaper in the analysed week; Leader and party mentions = number of articles that mention a leader and/or his/her party; VL= Večernji list; VJ = Vjesnik; 24S = 24sata)

Findings and discussion

To examine the extent to which the media focused on individual politicians and political parties, and whether their media visibility changed in the process of democratisation, three indicators were created. The first one looks at the percentage of articles in which a political leader was mentioned relative to all published articles in his/her sample (see Figure 1); the second reveals the ratio of leader-to-party mentions (see Figure 2); while the third provides a more nuanced look at the media prominence of individual and collective political actors by examining the extent to which politicians other than political leaders appear in party-related articles (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 1: Percentage of all articles in analysed newspapers mentioning a head of the executive

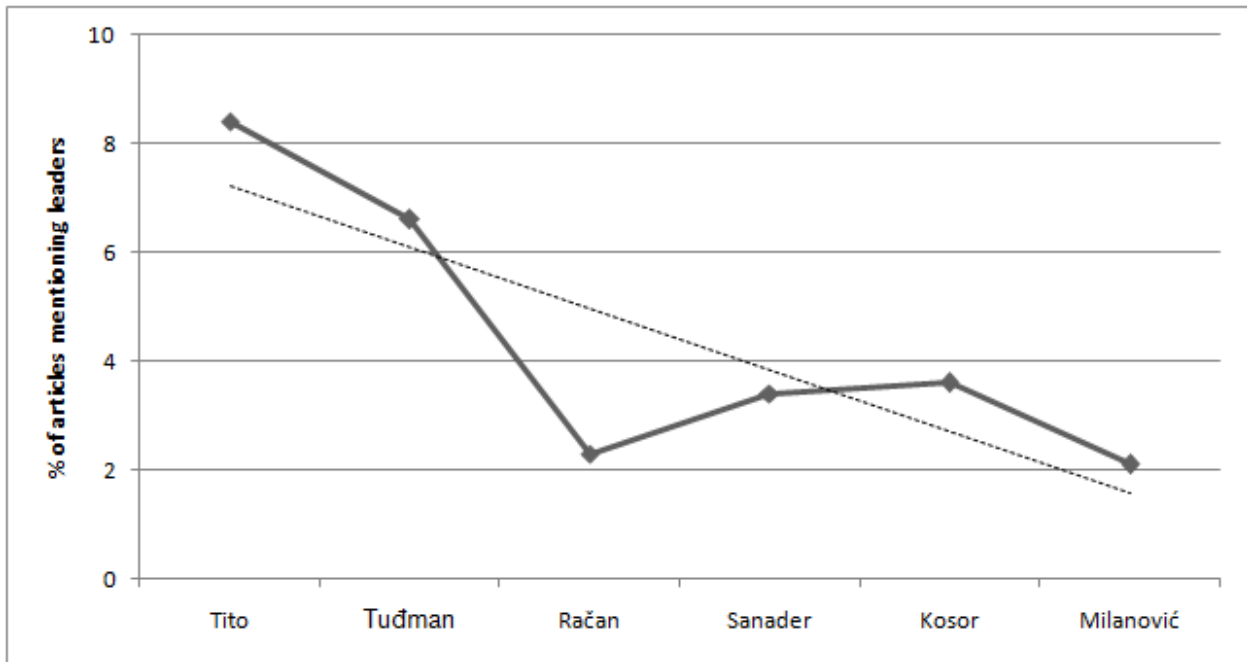


FIGURE 2: Ratio of leader-to-party mentions

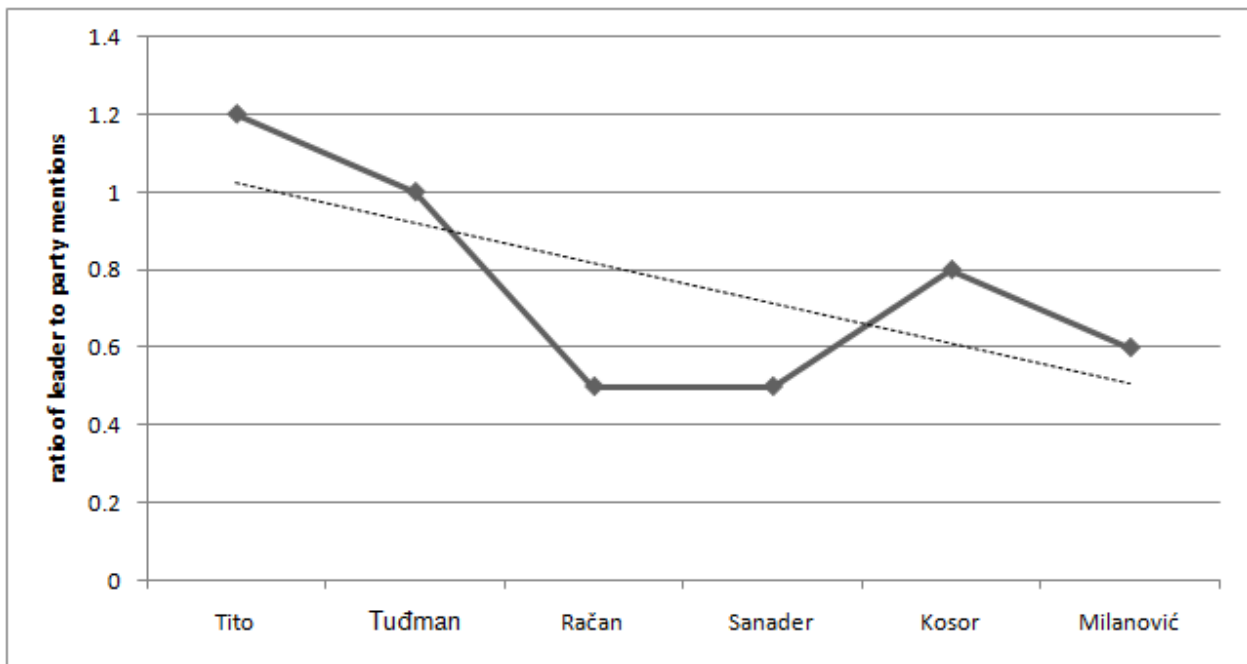
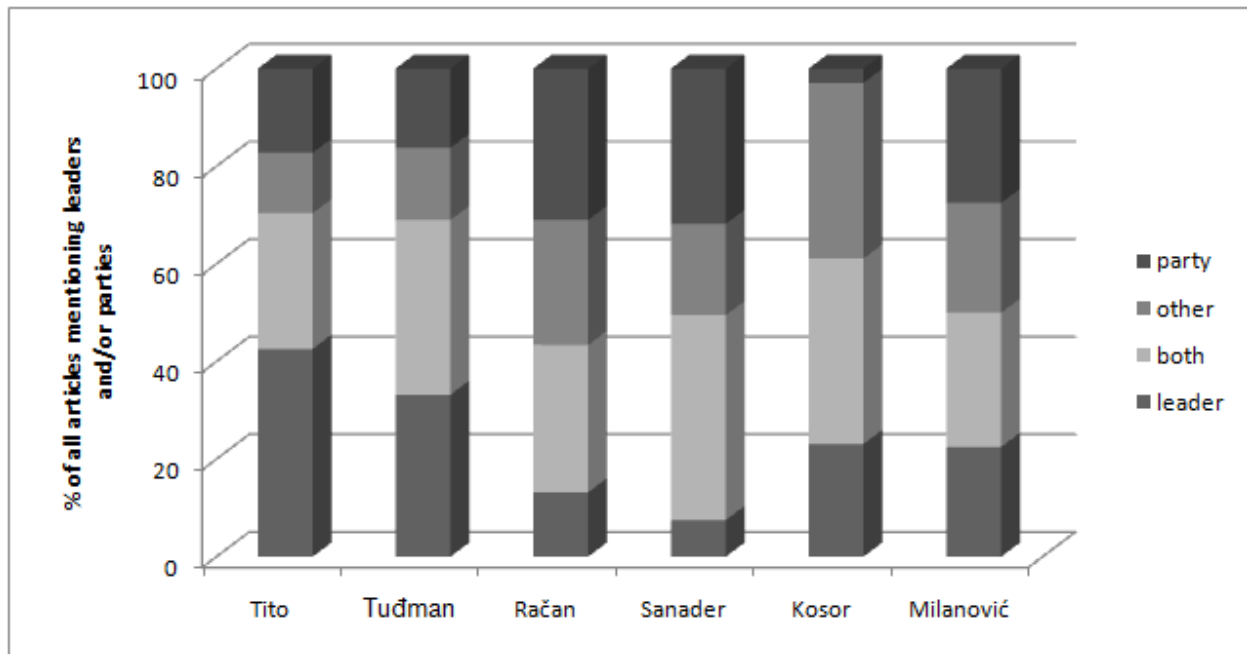


FIGURE 3: Percentage of articles mentioning political leader and/or his/her party that refer only to leader (leader), only to party (party), party and leader (both) or party and some other party member (other)



The communist leader—the one and only

The analysis of Yugoslav media seems to support the theories advocated in the leadership cult literature, since all three indicators show that communist media reporting was more personalised than structural in style. However, the leadership cult theories can be seen as only partly justified by this data, since Tito’s media prominence does not seem to be as extensive as the literature suggests.

Specifically, as is evidenced in Figure 1, and in line with H1, Tito was the most media prominent political leader in Yugoslavia, mentioned in 8.4% of all articles published in the week before his appointment, and no leader in the democratisation period was close to reaching his level of mediated visibility. Furthermore, even when his media visibility is compared to that of his party, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (*Savez Komunističke Jugoslavije*—SKJ, before 1952 the Communist Party of Yugoslavia - *Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*), which was the only party in Yugoslavia and was considered central to all aspects of life (Furtak 1986), Tito still remains the most media prominent political actor in communist media. As is evident from Figure 2, the ratio of leader-to-party mentions in Tito’s case is 1.2, which means that he was more frequently mentioned in newspaper coverage than his party. Finally, a more detailed analysis of these references to him and/or his party, as is shown in Figure 3, also reveals that

as an individual he was the most visible political actor in the communist-era press of Yugoslavia. Of the articles that mention him and/or his party, Tito on his own appeared in 42.6%, while he was mentioned in 27.8% of the articles that mentioned the party. Hence, according to Tito's media visibility, claims made in the leadership cult literature that the communist leader was the single most important political actor in this system seem to have merit. Whether the media was reflecting power relations in the country or constructing a perception of them (Hughes 2007), perhaps as instructed by the political elite who controlled them, Tito's media prominence suggests that there might indeed have been a cult-building process in place and that he might have been the central figure in the political communication of this system.

Notwithstanding, it remains questionable whether this data completely justify the hypothesis of the leader's centrality to media communication in the communist system (Blondel 1992; Plamper 2004; Leese 2014). Tito might have been mentioned twice as often as most post-communist leaders, but he was still mentioned in only 8.4% of all published articles within his sample. Also, he was mentioned more frequently than his party, but the ratio of 1.2 points to the fact that the party was not significantly less visible than he was. In comparison, de Vreese *et al.* (2017) show that in the UK and the US, in 2012, politicians were almost four times more media-visible than their parties. Hence, the extent to which communist media put the focus on the leader does suggest that he was the most important political actor, but the amount of this attention does not seem to be as significant as would be expected from the leadership cult literature. However, this data does show that, relative to reporting in most periods of democratisation, reporting in communism was quite leader-centred. Accordingly, H1 has been confirmed.

The persistence of the leadership cult

To answer the question of how, if at all, the reporting style changed during the democratisation process, we need to look at the similarities and differences between reporting during communism and in the different periods of democratisation. The data from the empirical analysis of communist and post-communist newspapers points to significant similarities in personalised reporting in the communist and post-communist period, but only in the transitional stage of the latter. Specifically, all three indicators point to the fact that leader-centred reporting related to communist leader Tito is quite similar to the reporting of the first Croatian president, Tuđman, who was head of the executive during the 1990s. According to Figure 1, continuity can be observed between the communist and early post-communist period with regard to the percentage of articles in which leaders were mentioned. There is a drop from

Tito (8.4%) to Tuđman (6.6%), but no other leader after them received the same or higher levels of media attention. In addition, Figure 2 shows that these two leaders were reported similarly in relation to their parties. While Tito's ratio of leader-to-party mentions was 1.2, Tuđman's was 1. No head of the executive in the consolidation phase of democratisation was more or equally media-visible as their party. Finally, a more detailed analysis of references to leader and/or party points to the same conclusions in the case of Tuđman as in the case of Tito. As is evident from Figure 3, both Tito and Tuđman were on their own more than twice as media-visible as their parties on their own. Also, the majority of articles that mentioned Tito's party also mentioned him, which is the case with Tuđman and the HDZ as well. Boduszynski (2010, p. 92) writes about the HDZ in the 1990s as being 'characterized in large part by the charismatic authority of President Tuđman', who established a 'strong centralized leadership' (Lamont 2010, p. 62), which is a practice that seems to have been visible in media reporting as well.

In short, the similarities between the amount of media attention given to Tito and Tuđman, and the differences between Tuđman and other post-communist leaders, point to the fact that there might be more similarities between communist and transitional, early post-communist eras than among post-communist leaders.

Centralised depersonalisation

In spite of the similarities in the extent to which leaders and political parties were media-visible during the communist and early post-communist periods, overall all three indicators show that the media's focus on the most powerful individual political actors—heads of the executive—has significantly decreased since the communist era, hence refuting H2. In other words, when the trends over time are examined, it becomes evident that the most powerful politicians are progressively less media-visible. This has resulted in the centralised depersonalisation of media reporting, although the trend is not linear.

Specifically, the percentage of articles mentioning leaders in most intense political periods drops from 8.4% (Tito) to 2.1% (Milanović), with quite a strong negative trend evident in Pearson's coefficient of -0.9. The negative trend is also strong in relation to the ratio of leader-to-party mentions ($r=-0.77$), since the ratio decreases from 1.2 (Tito) to 0.6 (Milanović). Furthermore, from the sample of articles mentioning the leader and/or his party, the percentage of articles solely mentioning the leader drop from 42.6% (Tito) to 22.5% (Milanović), Pearson's coefficient being -0.72. In short, all data related to the leader-centred media reporting of head executives points to the fact that the media coverage has decreasingly focused on the most important and powerful politicians in the country. While it

is beyond the scope of this study to examine the factors driving this trend, it is worth noting that the most significant decrease in the media prominence of political leaders came in the consolidation phase of the democratisation period when Croatia introduced the parliamentary system and proportional electoral system, and the autonomy and commercialisation of media both increased. These might have been some of the factors that contributed to a greater focus on political institutions in this young democracy.

While the most powerful politicians lost a significant amount of media attention during the democratisation process, there is evidence to suggest that political parties were given increased media attention. Specifically, in the consolidation period, no head of the executive was more media-visible than his/her party, with the ratio of leader-to-party mentions varying between 0.5 and 0.8 (see Figure 2). However, while the number of articles solely mentioning the leader—that is, leader-centred reporting—continually decreased over time, party-centred reporting measured as the percentage of articles in which the party is mentioned on its own (without any other party officials), does not show any significant trend (see Figure 3). If Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor is excluded from the analysis, and according to some indicators her case can be seen as exceptional among the post-2000 leaders,⁹ there is a positive trend ($r=0.75$) demonstrating that the media are increasingly giving more attention to parties as collective bodies, independent of their leaders and members. This positive trend in party-centred reporting and the negative trend in leader-centred reporting have led to parties becoming more media-prominent on their own than their leaders are as individual actors in the consolidation period of the democratisation process (with the exception of Kosor). In other words, since 2000 there were more articles that only mentioned the party than mentioned only its leader. Given that political scientists claim that, even in this consolidation stage, Croatian politics were dominated by political leaders (Nikić Čakar 2010; Raos 2015), the way in which the media represents political actors is perhaps surprising. This dissonance would suggest that the media is not merely reflecting the hierarchy of political power in the society, but that it may be attempting to construct them by creating a perception of the importance and centrality of political parties in political processes. In the light of democratisation theory, and for advocates of party democracies (Manin 1997; Langer 2011), this may be seen as a positive development since it suggests a break with the authoritarian past and the potential rise of the importance of political institutions.

⁹ Kosor is the most media prominent post-2000 leader according to the percentage of articles she was mentioned in. Also, among post-2000 heads of executive, she has the highest ratio of leader-to-party mentions.

Overall, the identification of centralised depersonalisation is an important finding, since it demonstrates that trends related to the media representation of political actors in this Central Eastern European country are quite different to those observed in other European democracies. Specifically, while media personalisation theory and research suggests that political leaders have over the past few decades become more media-visible (McAllister 2007; Langer 2011; Balmas *et al.* 2014), this study shows that a young Central Eastern European democracy experienced a completely opposite trend. In addition, this analysis suggests that political institutions in contemporary society are far more media-visible in the examined Central Eastern European setting than research suggests they are in other parts of Europe (de Vreese *et al.* 2017). This indicates that the media personalisation theory has serious limitations, and that theories related to developments in modern politics and political communication should not be applied uncritically beyond the context in which they were developed and tested.

Decentralised personalisation

In spite of mentioned trends, Figure 3 also shows that overall, references to parties are in all cases dominated by references to individual political actors: leaders or other party officials. Thus, although parties are in general quite prominent in media reporting, they are continually seen as almost inseparable from their members. As is suggested in the literature concerning post-communist party systems, and outlined in H3, individual political actors, especially leaders, dominate parties (Lewis 2000) and parties are often defined by their leaders and not the other way around, as is the case in Western democracies (King 2002; Grbeša 2008). The strength of connection between leaders and their parties is visible from this analysis too. All parties studied in this analysis were most frequently mentioned alongside their leaders, and less in connection to other party members. This seems to confirm H3.

Parties continued to be largely defined by their leaders throughout the democratisation period in Croatia; however, this analysis also shows that, during this process, the parties were increasingly associated with party members other than the leader in media reporting. Figure 3 shows that the amount of reporting in which the party is mentioned alongside a party member other than the head of the executive has grown over time ($r=0.73$). This suggests that a leader might be seen, based on media reporting, as the most important or powerful person in the party, but following the transitional period, other party officials were accorded more space in the media. In this way the media might have contributed to creating a public perception of a more democratic party system in which parties are not solely the means that political leaders use to accomplish personal goals but rather institutions in which different

interests and ideas can be shared and advocated, and political power is, at least to an extent, diffused among its members.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to test the media personalisation hypothesis in a Central Eastern European context by examining the extent to which European communist leadership cults can be seen as extreme forms of media personalisation, and how, if at all, the media representation of political actors changes during the process of democratisation. While the study is limited by being an exploratory case study, which means that its findings cannot be generalised beyond the researched case, it does point to several important findings.

First, the Yugoslav communist leader Tito was, as expected, represented in the media as the central and most important political actor in communist politics. He was also more media-visible than any political leader of the new democracy that followed the transition period. However, it is questionable whether the extent of his media prominence warrants the idea of communist leadership cults representing the most extreme form of media personalisation. Indeed, while one of the most powerful communist leaders in Europe was only slightly more media-visible than his party, evidence suggests that in contemporary UK and US politicians are four times more visible than their parties (de Vreese *et al.* 2017). This might mean that communist leadership cults do not represent extreme media personalisation, and that the extent to which some Western media nowadays personalise political leadership is unprecedented in modern history.

Second, the results show that although there are significant similarities between the representation of leaders in the communist and early post-communist eras, political leaders received significantly less media attention in the process of democratisation (centralised depersonalisation). This trend suggests that individual political actors have been slowly losing power in this Central Eastern European country, while parties as collectives are gaining relevance. This is the opposite trend to that predicted by the mainstream media personalisation theory and research (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000; Langer 2011). Consequently, the relevance and applicability of existing media personalisation scholarship to Central Eastern Europe is questionable, as it does not seem to contribute to understanding of the development of media personalisation in this context. There is a need for a comparative study to shed light onto the generalisability of this finding, and to contribute to development of new theories better able to explain patterns in the media representation of political actors in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. However,

it should be noted that in spite of the observed depersonalisation trend, results show that parties are still represented as dominated by individuals, especially their leaders, as was hypothesised based on existing literature (Lewis 2000; King 2002).

Alongside centralised depersonalisation, Croatia has experienced a trend of decentralised personalisation, meaning that party members other than political leaders are increasingly mentioned in media with the parties they represent. Both of these trends suggest that Croatia's media is increasingly representing political power as more diffused and less centralised and personalised. This is contrary to media representation patterns found across other European regions (de Vreese *et al.* 2017), so this again shows that theories and phenomena found elsewhere should not be uncritically ascribed to the Central Eastern European context. These findings also suggest that some assumptions about powerful political leaders in Central Eastern Europe who appear to centralise and personalise politics should be critically examined, as the media seem to be indicating that power is more diffused and less centralised than was the case in the past, and is the case in other European regions.

Given that this study was a textual analysis, it was not possible to determine if the media reporting was motivated by specific intentions; that is, it was only possible to speculate if there was any strategy on their part. Also, it was not possible to establish how audiences received the mediated information. Future research on these topics is needed to reveal whether the media really are strategically and intentionally trying to create the perception of diffused and depersonalised power and as such, are acting as active advocates of party democracy. Further research could also shed more light on how the changing media representations of political actors were perceived by the audience, and whether the trends of centralised depersonalisation and decentralised personalisation can be seen as characteristics of European new democracies in general.

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