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WHAT IS CELEBRITY POPULISM? THE CASE OF THE CROATIAN SINGER MIROSLAV ŠKORO

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to expound on the concept of celebrity populism, a phenomenon gaining strength across the world but still lacking a credible conceptual underpinning. We rely on two well-established concepts, populism and celebrity politics, to develop a definition of celebrity populism as a powerful formula that combines the attractiveness of populist messages with the awe of celebrity culture. Unlike other conceptualisations of celebrity politics, we differentiate between populist and mainstream (pluralist) politics and suggest that we should evaluate celebrity populism on its own merits, rather than subjugate it to a generic concept of "celebrity politics". We distinguish three categories of populist celebrity politicians: populist celebrities, celebrity populists, and super celebrity populists. Finally, we test our categorisation on the case of the popular Croatian singer and politician Miroslav Škoro.

KEY WORDS: populism, celebrity politics, celebrity populism, Croatia, Miroslav Škoro

Kaj je zvezdniški populizem? Primer hrvaškega pevcu Miroslava Škora

IZVLEČEK

Cilj tega prispevka je razložiti koncept zvezdniškega populizma, pojava, ki se krepí po vsem svetu, a še vedno nima verodostojne konceptualne podlage. Zanašamo se na dva dobro uveljavljena koncepta, populizem in zvezdniško politiko, da bi razvili definicijo zvezdniškega populizma kot močne formule, ki združuje privlačnost populističnih sporočil s povečevanjem zvezdniške kulture.

Za razliko od drugih konceptualizacij zvezdniške politike ločimo med populistično in mainstream (pluralistično) politiko ter predlagamo, da bi morali zvezdniški populizem ovrednotiti v skladu z njegovo lastno vrednostjo, namesto da bi ga podredili generičnemu konceptu »zvezdniške politike«. Razlikujemo med tremi kategorijami populističnih zvezdnikov: populistični zvezdniki, slavni populisti in super slavni populisti. Na koncu svojo kategorizacijo preizkusimo na primeru priljubljenega hrvaškega pevca in politika Miroslava Škora.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: populizem, zvezdniška politika, zvezdniški populizem, Hrvaška, Miroslav Škoro

1 Introduction¹

In June 2019 Miroslav Škoro, one of the most famous Croatian singers and entertainers, released a pompous YouTube video in which he announced his candidacy for the 2019–2020 presidential election. On that occasion, he pointed out that he intended to be a tool of the people in the fight against established Croatian political elites who had become alienated from the people and who cared only about their particular, partisan interests (Škoro 2019a).

At about the same time, the biggest global political news was the victory of the famous comedian Volodymyr Zelensky in the Ukrainian presidential election. Zelensky ran with his party *Servant of the People* (*Sluha narodu*), named after the homonymous Netflix series in which Zelensky played a kind-hearted teacher who runs for president. When he announced his candidacy for President of Ukraine on YouTube and other social networks, Zelensky asserted that he would hold the presidency as a “servant of the people” in the fight against the corrupt Ukrainian political elite. In April 2019, Zelensky defeated the then President Petro Poroshenko in the second round of the presidential election, winning 73 percent of the vote. His newly established party *Servant of the People* garnered 43 percent of the vote in the June parliamentary election, or 254 out of a total of 450 seats, thus securing also a clear parliamentary majority.²

Miroslav Škoro and Volodymyr Zelensky differ in a number of features, as do the Ukrainian and Croatian political systems, yet they also share many similarities. First, both Škoro and Zelensky had made enviable careers in the world of enter-

1. The article is part of the project “Textual analysis of the populist discourse in the 2020 parliamentary election in Croatia” funded by the University of Zagreb.

2. Election Guide – Democracy Assistance&Elections News. Available from <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3163/> and <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3256/> (Accessed 20. 11. 2021).

tainment and show business before they engaged in politics. Therefore, both of them can be classified as *celebrities*. Second, both Škoro and Zelensky decided to enter the political arena with messages that divinise the people and demonise the mainstream political elites, which puts them into the category of populist politicians. Third, both Škoro and Zelensky gained considerable support of the citizens soon after entering political arena. This is, of course, truer for Zelensky, who used this support to win the presidential and then the parliamentary election and who, eventually, became a key figure in Ukrainian politics. Škoro, on the other hand, won 24.5 percent of the vote and came in third in the first round of the presidential election in Croatia in December 2019.³ After the presidential election, Škoro, like Zelensky, founded a party – *Domovinski pokret Miroslava Škore (Miroslav Škoro Homeland Movement)*, which won 16 seats in the July 2020 parliamentary election, thus becoming the third strongest party in the Croatian parliament.⁴

Considering these similarities, it is justified to ask to which category of politicians Škoro and Zelensky belong? This question is relevant because it seems that standard political-ideological categorisations and classifications do not provide a satisfactory answer.

In this paper, we argue that they are both illustrative cases of *celebrity populism*, a phenomenon that has been gaining strength across the world but still lacks solid conceptual underpinning (Grbeša in Šalaj 2023). The main goal of this paper is to provide an explicit account of the concept of *celebrity populism*, i.e., to identify and explain the basic features of this breed of politicians. We develop the idea of *celebrity populism* from two well-established concepts – *populism* (Grbeša and Šalaj 2018; Hawkins et al. 2019; Mudde 2004) and *celebrity politics* (Marsh et al. 2010; Street 2004; Wheeler 2013).

In the first part of the paper, we provide a brief overview of contemporary research on populism and present our understanding of this phenomenon. The second part of the paper presents key accounts on *celebrity politics* and describes the typology of celebrity politicians that is relevant to our conceptualisation. In the third part, we connect these two key theoretical concepts, elaborate our understanding of *celebrity populism*, and propose our categorisation of celebrity politicians. In the fourth part of the paper, we apply our conceptualisation to the analysis of Miroslav Škoro's political profile. We focus on the period of the 2019–2020 presidential campaign in Croatia. Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, we attempt to determine to which extent Miroslav Škoro's political profile can be explained by the concept of *celebrity populism*.

3. <https://www.izbori.hr/pre2019/rezultati/1/index.html> (Accessed 5. 11. 2021).

4. <https://www.izbori.hr/sabor2020/rezultati/1/> (Accessed 5. 11. 2021).

2 Populism as Meta-Ideology

An overview of contemporary literature dealing with *populism* (e.g., Grbeša and Šalaj 2018; Hawkins et al. 2019) suggests that there are at least five approaches to this phenomenon, three of which have emerged as dominant. According to the first of the two approaches, *populism* is regarded as a specific form of organising political parties. Taggart thus defines *populism* as a specific type of political party organisation, characterised by a high level of centralisation, where a charismatic leader plays the key role in the party (Taggart 1995: 41). Within the second approach, *populism* is understood as a strategy of political mobilisation characterized by “the mobilization of ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people” (Jansen 2011: 82). These two approaches seem to be the least represented in contemporary populism studies.

The third approach sees populism as a political-communication style. Proponents of this approach (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2014) believe that the only common feature of different populist actors is a rhetoric based on appeal to the people. According to Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 332), the political actors who use this particular style of communication can be politicians and political parties, but also leaders of social movements, interest group representatives, and journalists. Advocates of this approach believe that populist actors do not have a sufficient number of common features for populism to be considered a political ideology.

Similar to this approach is the fourth conceptualisation of the phenomenon which sees populism as a particular “discursive frame”. In the words of the most distinguished proponent of this approach, Paris Aslanidis, populist discourse should be perceived as “the systematic dissemination of a frame that diagnoses reality as problematic because ‘corrupt elites’ have unjustly usurped the sovereign authority of the ‘noble People’ and maintains that the solution to the problem resides in the righteous political mobilization if the latter in order to regain power” (Aslanidis 2016: 99).

Contrary to conceptualizations that regard populism primarily as a “style” or a “discourse”, a fifth approach has developed, which understands populism as a political ideology. At the core of this approach is the assumption that all populists understand politics as a conflict between two homogeneous and mutually antagonistic groups – the honest people and the corrupt political elite.

Proponents of this “ideational approach”, which has prevailed in the scholarly research in the last two decades (see Hawkins et al. 2019), believe that populism

expresses certain ideas about how modern politics should look like, which is why it is reasonable to treat it as a political ideology.

Ideational understanding of populism has been inscribed in probably the most influential modern definition of populism offered by Cas Mudde. He argues that populism is an “ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004: 543).

Acknowledging the relevance of all five approaches, in this paper we rely on *ideational approach* and we argue that populism may be understood as a specific *political meta-ideology* (Grbeša and Šalaj 2018). *Political meta-ideologies* can be understood as a superior gender notion (genus) to the notion of political ideologies. In other words, meta-ideologies include ideologies that, on the one hand, share some common characteristics, while on the other hand, they differ in many other features. At the same time, political meta-ideologies differ from each other in how they understand politics, political processes and the organisation of political life. Building on recent research insights into contemporary political ideologies (Freeden 2013; Freedon et al. 2013; Vincent 2010), we believe that there are three dominant political meta-ideologies: *monism*, *pluralism*, and *populism* (Grbeša and Šalaj 2018). *Monism* as a meta-ideology encompasses ideologies that differ one from another in a whole range of features, but at the same time share one common characteristic – that there is only one, absolute political truth and only one correct way of organising political life. Furthermore, another principle common to all monistic ideologies, is that any kind of attempt to bring this political monopoly into question is not allowed and is therefore punishable, regardless of whether the monopoly is based on class, race or religion. According to this logic, monistic meta-ideology encompasses fascism, communism, and religious fundamentalism. Another meta-ideology, *pluralism*, is the genus of all those political ideologies that accept a pluralist view of politics and a pluralist structure of the political community. This includes a spectrum of highly diverse ideologies, from conservatism to social democracy. Despite their differences, these ideologies can be placed in a common category because they all consider legitimate the existence of different, heterogeneous social groups, ideas, interests, attitudes and values that coexist in a society and compete with each other for the opportunity to temporarily govern that society.

Therefore, in this paper, populism is understood as a political meta-ideology, parallel to monism and pluralism and characterized by the co-occurrence of two features: positive evaluation of the people and general diffuse political anti-elitism. This construction of systemic conflict between the people and elites is coupled

with the “crisis talk” (Homolar and Scholz 2019) and, sometimes, with the rage against the “dangerous others” who are, along with elites, responsible for “the crises”. The identity of the “dangerous others” depends on the ideological leaning of the populist actors - right populists usually target migrants and minorities (e.g., Pajnik et al. 2020) while left populists commonly criticise financial institutions (Mouffe 2018).

In sum, populism can be distinguished from monistic meta-ideology, which claims that there is only one political truth and one correct way of political organisation, and from pluralism, which, in the sense of meta-ideology, considers societies to be very heterogeneous and that there are many differences among citizens and political elites. Although differentiation between pluralism and populism is not clear-cut, conceptualising populism as an ideology in its own right is essential to ideational approach to populism (Hawkins et al. 2019).

3 Celebrity Politics

Another phenomenon and theoretical concept we rely on in this study is *celebrity politics*. Drake and Higgins (2006) point out that the issue of influence of celebrities on politics and on the political process is not a new one. They refer to Wright Mills’s famous 1956 book *The Power Elite* which claims that the growing popularity and influence of celebrities turns them into a new power elite that can be compared to a political elite. Nevertheless, most research on the relationship between the political and celebrity spheres focuses on the period from the second half of the 20th century, and it has been inspired by two processes. On the one hand, traditional politicians are increasingly trying to connect with celebrities and resort to patterns of behaviour typical of celebrities. On the other hand, celebrities from the realms of show business or sports are increasingly entering the space of formal politics.

Corner and Pels argue that the “celebrity power is progressively being translated from the popular entertainment industries towards more ‘serious’ fields such as business, politics, art and science” and that “the only future for political personality is that of celebrity” (Corner and Pels 2003: 8). Similarly, Driessens argues that “[c]elebrity has become a defining feature of our mediatized societies” (Driessens 2013: 641). He suggests that we have been witnessing “diversification of celebrity”, which means that celebrities are no longer confined to the world of entertainment or sports, but that other social fields, including politics, may also produce celebrities (ibid.: 644). He differentiates between processes of *celebritisation* and *celebrification*, whereby *celebritisation* refers to all-embracing “societal and cultural changes implied by celebrity”, while *celebrification*, in con-

trast, “comprises the changes at the individual level” which transform ordinary people or public figures into celebrities (ibid.: 643).

In his seminal work on the power of celebrities, David Marshall defines celebrities as those people who “enjoy a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us watch” (1997: ix). Marshall (ibid.) argues that contemporary social scientists have realised that contemporary political processes can be better understood if they incorporate irrationality and emotions into their models. This can largely be found in the world of entertainment, where celebrities often try to express the feelings of the audience. Marshall believes that something similar occurs in the political sphere, where political leaders seek to express the attitudes and feelings of citizens. Therefore, the increasingly frequent connection of politicians with the world of entertainment and celebrities can be understood as an attempt of these politicians to connect more firmly with citizens by borrowing “from the relationship of trust and admiration that is associated with figures in popular culture” (Street 2001: 191). This celebrification of politicians may include a wide range of activities, from celebrity endorsement and posing with celebrities, to imitating behaviour of the stars and adopting “mannerisms, gestures and styles of popular culture” (ibid.: 191).

The increasing celebrization of politics has encouraged scholars to conceptualize relationship between political and celebrity spheres and to categorise celebrity politicians accordingly. The pioneering conceptualisations developed by West and Orman (2003), Street (2004) and the later works of ‘t Hart and Tindall (2009) and Marsh, ‘t Hart and Tindall (2010) have been particularly influential in this regard. West and Orman (2003: 2-4) differentiate among *political newsworthies*, who rely on their performance to engage with the public; *legacies*, who were born into a well-known family; *famed nonpoliticos (elected officials)*, who were well-known before being elected; *famed nonpoliticos (lobbyists and spokespersons)*, who are, basically, celebrities who endorse or advocate certain causes; and finally, *event celebrities*, who become famous because of a scandal, tragedy or similar.

Street’s (2004) relatively simple, yet influential, classification is based on the relationship between politics and popular culture. He argues that the convergence between politics and popular culture translates into two types of celebrity politicians. The first type, CP1, is a celebrity originating from the world of show business or sports who becomes an elected politician, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, who became the Governor of California. The second variant of CP1 is a traditional, elected politician who engages with celebrity techniques

that typically belong to the world of pop culture in order to gain sympathies and attract voters. The second type, CP2, includes celebrities who engage for a common cause and use their celebrity power to influence political decisions, such as Bono Vox, Angelina Jolie etc. CP2s also go by the name *celebrity diplomats* or *celebrity activists* (Cooper 2008; Tsaliki et al. 2011).

In this paper, we rely on the classification proposed by David Marsh, Paul t'Hart and Karen Tindall whose typology is based on two criteria: the sphere of origin and the nature of the relationship with the other sphere (2010: 327). They differentiate between five categories of celebrity politicians. *The celebrity advocate* is a non-political actor who wishes to influence the public agenda or advocate for a certain policy; *the celebrity endorser* is a non-political celebrity who endorses a candidate or a party; *the politician who uses others' celebrity* is an elected politician who relies on someone else's celebrity or fame. In our paper, we rely on the remaining two categories, *celebrity politicians* and *politician celebrities*. *Celebrity politicians* are celebrities from non-political spheres who become elected politicians (also Street's CP1, subtype 1). *Politician celebrities* are those actors whose sphere of origin is politics; however, their public behaviour, personal life or connections to celebrities change their public appeal to the extent that they no longer exclusively belong to the political sphere but also to the celebrity sphere (also Street's CP1, subtype 2).

4 Celebrity Populism

The connection between celebrity politics and populism has often been regarded as inherent or intuitive, since performance and style are central to both (e.g., Moffitt 2016; Pels 2003; Street 2004; 2018). Street even suggests that "[T]he rise of populism, and how this is understood, draws the celebrity politician within its ambit, as does discussion of the mediatization and personalization of politics more generally" (2018: 9). However, studies that explicitly address the relationship between populism and celebrity politics are still rather modest (for exceptions see Alomes and Mascitelli 2012; Bartoszewicz 2019; Enli 2017; Giglioli and Baldini 2019; Grbeša and Šalaj 2023; Schneiker 2019; Street 2018; Wood et al. 2016). In the following paragraphs, we elaborate the connection between populism and celebrity politics as we believe that the concept of *celebrity populism* and its derivatives can be useful in describing, explaining and evaluating contemporary political processes in democratic societies.

Populists, like celebrity politicians, have the power to energize and mobilize otherwise apathetic publics (Marsh et al. 2010). Moreover, emotions and distrust with mainstream political elites are central to both celebrities and populists.

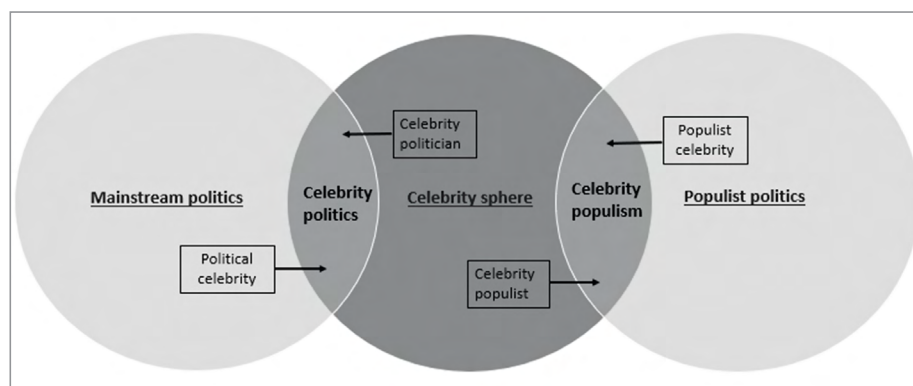
Wirz points out that “populist communication is inherently more emotion-eliciting than nonpopulist communication and therefore especially persuasive” (Wirz 2018: 1131), while Street (2018: 9) argues that populists tend to elicit adoration that resembles behaviour of fans. Such attempts to understand behaviour of contemporary citizens and voters through the lens of fans were present well before the recent surge of populist politics across the world. In this respect, the work of Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) is particularly important. She argues that fans and political citizens have several things in common: they emerge as the results of performance of artists and politicians, they follow their objects closely, they promote them, they discuss them among themselves and “come to informed judgements and propose alternatives” (Van Zoonen 2005: 16). The difference between them may be, as Van Zoonen suggests, “in the type of psychological relationship that fans have with artists and citizens with politicians: affective and emotional versus cognitive and rational” (ibid.). However, she challenges this constricting “dualism” between ratio and emotions and argues that “we can accept the mechanisms of fandom as a basis for rethinking engagement with politics” (ibid.). *Fandom*, maintains Van Zoonen, “is built on psychological mechanisms that are relevant to political involvement” and these are “fantasy and imagination on the one hand, and emotional processes on the other” (ibid.). It is plausible to assume that this type of emotional investment in politics, typical of fandom, has been most intensively displayed by populists.

Celebrity politicians, like populists, often play the card of “political outsiders” who are not part of the resented establishment: “they are new, they are exciting, they are unpredictable” (Marsh et al. 2010: 324). t’Hart and Tindall (2009) indicate that the more dissatisfied the publics are with traditional politics, the greater the opportunities for celebrities to successfully run for office. The same goes for populists (Grbeša and Šalaj 2018).

Although the connection between celebrity politics and populism may seem apparent, a demanding mission to combine them into a solid concept that would identify specific features of the celebrity-populist blend, as opposed to celebrityhood of traditional non-populist politicians, has only just begun. Building on Marsh, t’Hart and Tindall’s (2010) distinction between celebrity politicians and politician celebrities, Grbeša and Šalaj (2023) proposed a definition of *celebrity populists* vs. *populist celebrities*. In their view, “the *celebrity populist* is a celebrity who acquires populist rhetoric to run for elected office and in some cases, maintains this rhetoric while holding elected office” while “*populist celebrity* is a populist politician who engages with different celebrity techniques to mobilize supporters and celebritize his/her image”. They claim that both types of celebrity populism represent “a powerful communication mix that combines

attractiveness of populist messages with the awe of celebrity culture” (ibid.). The contribution of such conceptualisation is that, unlike other conceptualisations of celebrity politics, it differentiates between populist and mainstream (pluralist) politics. Figure 1 demonstrates how the sphere of mainstream politics, populist politics and the celebrity sphere merge into different types of celebrity politics and celebrity populism.

Figure 1: Celebrity politics and celebrity populism.



Source: Grbeša and Šalaj 2023.

Grbeša and Šalaj (2023) conceptualisation distinguishes between: 1) *political celebrities*, mainstream politicians who resort to celebrity discourse to construct their celebrity persona; 2) *celebrity politicians*, celebrities who come from the celebrity sphere (usually entertainment or sports) and run for elected office using mainstream, non-populist discourse; 3) *populist celebrities*, populist politicians who adopt elements of celebrity discourse to acquire and/or retain public support; and 4) *celebrity populists*, celebrities who come from the celebrity sphere and rely on populist discourse (rhetoric of anti-elitism and people-centredness) to win an election and/or maintain public support.

In this paper we upgrade this conceptualisation acknowledging that the use of celebrity techniques by celebrity politicians may vary, regardless of their meta-ideology (pluralism or populism) and the sphere of origin. For instance, a singer who uses populist narrative to become an elected politician is, according to Grbeša and Šalaj’s (2023) definition, a *celebrity populist*. However, such conceptualisation tells us nothing about his/her use of celebrity techniques in his/her campaign communication or in office if elected. Therefore, we base our upgraded conceptualisation on three dimensions: *sphere of origin* (celebrity sphere or politics), *meta-ideology* (populist politics or mainstream (pluralist) politics) and *the use of celebrity techniques* for political purposes.

In the first dimension, we use the term *sphere of origin* as defined by Marsh, t'Hart and Tindall (2010) which refers to the original location of an actor's profession. Therefore, we differentiate between two categories - *professional politicians* and *celebrities*. With regard to the second dimension, we identify all politicians either as *populists* or as *mainstream (pluralist) politicians*. In this respect, in democratic systems, all those actors who advocate one of the pluralist meta-ideologies, such as Christian Democracy, liberalism, social democracy, conservatism, greens, etc., can be classified as *mainstream politicians*. Our third dimension is related to the adoption of techniques and communication styles that are otherwise characteristic of the celebrity sphere. These techniques include association with celebrities (through endorsement, photo opportunities and similar), adopting styles and behaviours typical of show biz celebrities, using cues from pop culture to associate with voters and introducing elements from private life to gain public sympathy (Street 2001, 2004; van Zoonen 2006). Within this dimension, we distinguish between two categories of politicians - *those who rely on celebrity techniques in their political behaviour* and *those who do not*.

By combining these three dimensions, we obtain a classification with eight possible categories of political actors demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Celebrity politics and celebrity populism: a three-dimensional model.

	Sphere of origin		Celebrity sphere	Use of celebrity techniques	
	Meta-ideology				
	Populist politics	Mainstream (pluralist) politics			
1	-	+	-	-	Mainstream (pluralist) politician
2	+	-	-	-	Populist politician
3	-	+	+	-	Celebrity politician
4	+	-	+	-	Celebrity populist
5	-	+	-	+	Political celebrity
6	+	-	-	+	Populist celebrity
7	-	+	+	+	Super celebrity politician
8	+	-	+	+	Super celebrity populist

Category 1 includes *mainstream pluralist politicians* who have built their political careers from the very beginning through the political sphere, advocating some of the pluralist political ideologies and relying rarely, or not at all, on celebrity techniques. Category 2 includes *populist politicians* whose sphere of origin is populist politics and who in principle do not use celebrity techniques.

Categories 3 and 4 include actors who enter the world of politics from the celebrity sphere, but, once they enter politics, they choose not to rely on celebrity techniques, i.e., they attempt to profile themselves as 'serious' politicians, accepting communication strategies and techniques that correspond to the traditional political sphere. Category 3 refers to *celebrity politicians* who advocate one of the pluralist ideologies while category 4 refers to politicians who advocate populist ideology, which is why we brand them *celebrity populists*. Although it seems unlikely that celebrities who resort to populist rhetoric will not capitalize their celebrity background, our initial impression is that Miroslav Škoro represents such a case, which we attempt to test in the analytical section of the paper.

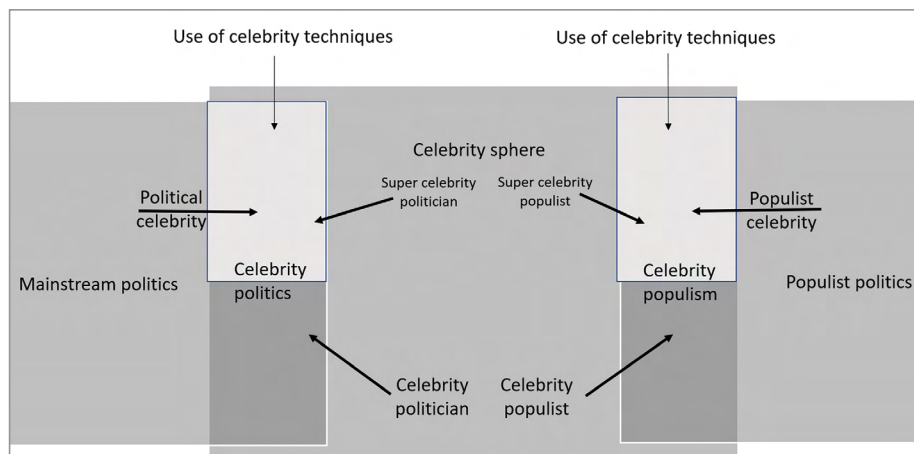
Categories 5 and 6 encompass actors who come from the realm of politics but frequently use various celebrity techniques. Category 5 includes politicians who promote pluralist ideology, and we call them *political celebrities*, while category 6 includes politicians who advocate populist political ideology and whom we call *populist celebrities*.

The last two categories, 7 and 8, include actors who enter politics from the celebrity sphere, and who abundantly use *celebrity* techniques in their political activities. Given their double connection with the celebrity sphere, these actors are denoted by the adjective *super*. Depending on their ideological position, we differentiate between *super celebrity politicians* (category 7), and *super celebrity populists* (category 8). Conditionally, the examples in the category 8 include the former US President Donald Trump, Italian politician and the former leader of *Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement)* Beppe Grillo, former Reykjavik mayor Jon Gnarr, Polish politician, singer and actor Pawel Kukiz and Bulgarian politician and singer Slavi Trifonov. These examples are only illustrative, and their conclusive classification as *super celebrity populists* would require a comprehensive analysis.

It is important to emphasise that proposed categories represent ideal types, as all categorizations do, and that in real life they may overlap. For instance, it is common for mainstream politicians to resort to populist rhetoric, especially during election campaigns. Nevertheless, this still doesn't make them "true populists" but rather "populists in style", as suggested by Grbeša and Šalaj (2019). Also, categories presented here are dynamic, which means that certain actors in different periods of their political activity may cut across different categories.

Figure 2 presents Grbeša and Šalaj's (2023) conceptualisation, upgraded with the dimension *use of celebrity techniques*, which generates two additional categories of celebrity politicians – a *super celebrity politician* and a *super celebrity populist*.

Figure 2: Celebrity politics and celebrity populism: a three-dimensional model.



The category of *super celebrity populists* is the quintessence of connecting populism and celebrity politics. These politicians enter the political arena with the capital of their celebrity identity, adopt the emotionality and drama of populist discourse, and continue to communicate with their supporters using the conventions of fandom (see Street 2018; Wood et al. 2016). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that *celebrity populists in general* and *super celebrity populists in particular*, in different ways and to a different extent, personify the idea of Van Zoonen's "political fandom" (2005). In the next section, we preliminarily test our categorisation on the case of the Croatian singer, entrepreneur and politician Miroslav Škoro.

5 Celebrity Populism of Miroslav Škoro

Ever since Croatia gained independence in the 1990s, the country has been interchangeably governed by two major parties – the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) and the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija*, SDP). However, in the last couple of years, the supremacy of the HDZ and the SDP has been challenged by a number of populist options. The advent of populism in Croatia has been inspired by resentment towards the

established political elites (Grbeša and Šalaj 2018) and one of the lowest levels of trust in institutions within the EU (Eurobarometer 2020; Henjak 2017).

A total of eleven candidates ran in the 2019-2020 presidential election. The HDZ's incumbent Kolinda Grabar Kitarović and the SDP's Zoran Milanović, who eventually won the election, went to the second round as the frontrunners. Miroslav Škoro, a political outsider, won 24.45% of votes and finished the race third. Škoro is best known for his singing career and his numerous patriotic hits. He also has a doctorate degree in economics and has been a successful entrepreneur. Since 2015 he has been engaged in viticulture and winemaking. From 1995 to 1997, he served as Consul General of the Republic of Croatia in Hungary. In the 2007 parliamentary election, he was elected an MP on HDZ's list and was the party's (unsuccessful) candidate for Mayor of Osijek in the 2008 local election. He left the parliament after only eight months, disappointed with politics and arguing that politics had nothing to do with real life.⁵

Škoro made his original career in the field of music. This secured him a celebrity status, which is why Škoro, in terms of his sphere of origin, can be regarded as a *celebrity politician*.

In order to be able to define Škoro's political profile with respect to the remaining two dimensions - populist or pluralist political ideology and the use of celebrity techniques - we analysed his communication during the 2019-2020 presidential election campaign in Croatia. We combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine if and how his populist narrative merged with celebrity cues into *celebrity populism*.

5.1 Research Design

Using quantitative content analysis, we analysed a total of 69 posts published on Škoro's official Facebook page during the period of official election campaign, from 9 to 22 December 2019 (Škoro 2019b). The focus of the analysis was on Facebook communication because digital media are confirmed to be well-suited for the promotion of both populist and celebrity discourses (e.g., Manning et al. 2016; Enli 2017). In addition, according to *The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2020)*, social media is the main source of news for 55% of citizens in Croatia, with Facebook being convincingly the most popular social media platform (for 74% of citizens).

5. Available from <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti-hr/novosti/hrvatska/predsjednicki-izbori2019/3612387/biografija-predsjednickog-kandidata-ko-je-miroslav-skoro/> (Accessed 5. 11. 2021).

We supplemented the analysis of Facebook posts with a qualitative analysis of two video announcements released on Škoro's official YouTube channel – the opening (2019a) and the closing (2019c) video. The first is the already mentioned announcement of the presidential candidacy of 22 June 2019, while the second is the video that Škoro released on 30 December 2019, before the runoff of the presidential election between Zoran Milanović and Kolinda Grabar Kitarović held on 5 January 2020.

As a part of the quantitative analysis, we first examined the presence and valence of populist cues in Škoro's Facebook posts, including: 1) presence and valence of references to the people; 2) presence and valence of references to political elites; and 3) presence of references to "dangerous others" other than political elites. We used binary codes, "yes" or "no", to detect presence and "positive", "negative" or "neutral" codes to establish valence. We then coded posts for the presence of various elements of celebrity politics: 1) references to the candidate's personal life, including elements of humanization and 2) references to popular culture or show business. In defining indicators of celebrity politics, we relied on van Zoonen's (2006) conceptualisation of celebrity politics as a phenomenon constituted by popularization and personalization. Both celebrity categories were coded with binary codes, "yes" or "no". Although posts contained elements other than texts, such as photos (26), videos (22) and links to news articles (4), we decided to code only textual parts of the posts and to use additional content to qualitatively substantiate the findings.

The agreement between coders was strong across all categories. It ranged from Cohen's kappa = 0.87 to 1.00.

5.2 Results

Miroslav Škoro referred to the people in 28 posts (positively in 20 and neutrally in eight posts). Škoro sees the people as his allies and as a source of strength in his crusade against corrupt elites: "This is unstoppable! The people have decided, and God is helping us!" (2019b, 13 December). Škoro insisted that he was "responsible solely to his people" (ibid., 9 December), and as president, he would ensure that people play a greater role in decision making through referenda.

The central place of the "people" in his campaign is visible in his slogan "Let's give Croatia back to the people", while Škoro's connection with the people permeates selected YouTube announcements. Škoro begins his presidential video announcement by quoting exactly the part of the constitution, which says that power comes from the people and belongs to the people.

He claims that this constitutional provision was constantly on his mind when he decided to run. "The only representative in the political system who represents

the whole nation and the only one who is still directly elected by the people is the President of the Republic," says Škoro (2019a). He asserts that he wants to be the people's president, that is, the president who will be "a tool of the people in the fight for a decisive turnaround" (ibid.). In the closing video, Škoro says:

As one of you, I can honestly say what I will do as a voter. I will definitely go to the polls and I will not allow them to manipulate my ballot. At the polling station, I will take my ballot and circle one of the numbers. HOW-EVER, it will be neither number one nor number two. I will write and circle number three - you, my Croatian people! (...) You gave me your vote in the first round, and I will give it to you in the second, until we sweep away this oligarchy together in the parliamentary election and give Croatia back to the people (2019c).

The entire political discourse of Miroslav Škoro during the election campaign was imbued with positive references to the people. Moreover, a positive reference to the people was often accompanied, as the previous quote suggests, by a pronounced identification with the people.

Another dimension of populism, anti-elitism, appears in the eight Facebook posts, with all posts being markedly negative. Additional eleven posts contain attacks on mainstream politicians, mostly on frontrunners Milanović and Kitarović, who are commonly regarded as a proxy for political establishment.

Harsh criticism of Croatian political elites permeates Škoro's YouTube videos. In his announcement video, Škoro states that Croatia is ruled by a controlled party system in which the two strongest parties alternate in power with their trading partners and that these political elites are completely alienated from the people (2019a). In a statement published before the second round of the election, Škoro told his voters that he was "guilty" because he "dared to run against the oligarchic duopoly" and that it really did not matter who would be elected between the two remaining candidates because Croatia would still be ruled by an opportunistic clique "which evokes Croatian sacrosanct principles until it gets votes, and then the government turns its head away from its own people and ignores their protests and referendum initiatives" (2019c).

The assumption that Miroslav Škoro can be classified as a *populist* rather than a *mainstream pluralist politician* is confirmed by the presence of positive references to the people and negative references to the political elites, which were detected both in his Facebook messages and video announcements.

The third dimension of populism, which can help determine the type of Škoro's populism, is the presence of "dangerous others". The analysis of Facebook posts shows that he mentioned "dangerous others" in a total of six posts. Although

Škoro identifies a whole range of enemies, from the polling agencies to the media and powerful financial interests, it is not possible to identify a group that he invariably defines as “dangerous others”. However, in Škoro’s case, one can still speak of a right-wing populism, which is suggested in his YouTube posts in which Škoro continuously addresses the people as “Croats”, which implies that he understands the concept of the people predominantly in its ethnic sense. Also, in his announcements, Škoro often calls for God’s help, so, for example, he states that the people and he will “together change and, with God’s help, awaken Croatia” (2019a).

As for the analysis of the elements of celebrity politics, in only four posts we detected links to the sphere of popular culture or show business, and in none of the posts did Škoro refer to his personal life. The only reference to his singing career was when he posted a link that was announcing his television interview, featuring a glamorous photo of himself holding a microphone (2019b, 16 December). The remaining references to pop culture were used to promote his slogan and his number on the list (11). For instance, he posted a link to Elvis Presley’s *It’s Now or Never* and wrote “Jacques Houdek [a fellow singer] sent me one great song this morning. I listen to it for the 11th time in a row” (ibid., 22 December).

Although Škoro entered the political arena as an extremely popular singer, he was reluctant to use his celebrity capital to appeal to the people on his main communication platforms - on his Facebook page and in his YouTube videos. Although the analysis did not encompass all campaign channels, it is plausible to assume that communication on his most prominent campaign vehicles would indicate the strategic course of the campaign.

It seems that Škoro tried to distance himself from his celebrity background. Moreover, he seemed insulted when political opponents and media mentioned his singing career. In the closing video he protests:

But, from that historic 22 December, I progressed from a deserter, war profiteer, singer and Serbian son-in-law to a gentleman and a co-candidate (...) Nothing has essentially changed, only the fact that they need us now. Don’t worry, on the feast day of Epiphany, when the outcome of the election is known, we will be referred to as “the tamburitza player and his outsiders” again (2019c).

The analysis thus showed that the candidate coming from the celebrity sphere heavily relied on populist rhetoric on his main campaign platforms, while ignoring celebrity techniques. We can only speculate about the reasons behind this decision, but our assumption is that this was a strategic choice based on the

assessment that emphasizing Škoro's career of an entertainer would make him appear less credible.

How should we, then, classify Miroslav Škoro? If we look at the conceptualisation shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, we can conclude that Škoro is a *celebrity populist*. We base this categorisation on the fact that Škoro made his original career in the sphere of celebrities, and after entering the political arena, he advocated, at least when it comes to the presidential election campaign, a populist ideology. However, unlike some other politicians with a similar combination of sphere of origin and populist ideology, such as Donald Trump, Beppe Grillo or Volodymyr Zelensky, Škoro rarely used celebrity techniques. Škoro led a very conventional campaign in which he tried to distance himself from his identity as a popular singer and pushed his entrepreneurial and scientific achievements to the fore. We hypothesise that this strategy was the result of a fear that frequent use of celebrity techniques would make him come across as frivolous and reduce his electoral chances. Therefore, we believe that Miroslav Škoro is a rare example of a celebrity populist who, unlike *super celebrity populists*, comes from the celebrity sphere, but after entering the political arena, is reluctant to use celebrity techniques.

6 Conclusion

In the last thirty years, two phenomena have particularly marked the field of political communication - populism and celebrity politics. However, there are surprisingly few studies that explicitly connect these two concepts and seek to understand how their marriage changes the space of contemporary politics. This paper seeks to make a step forward in this respect and encourage systematic research into the phenomenon we refer to as *celebrity populism*.

Building on the assumption that the appeal of celebrity politics and populism rests on some common features, such as performativity, the central role of personality and emotions, and distrust of mainstream political elites, we develop a definition of celebrity populism. In contrast to the established definitions of celebrity politics and the corresponding categorisations of celebrity politicians, in our conceptualisation we emphasize the importance of explicitly distinguishing political meta-ideologies that are combined with celebrity discourse. The seductive power of the populist-celebrity marriage suggests that we should evaluate celebrity populism on its own merits, rather than to subjugate it under a generic concept of "celebrity politics". Such approach enables us to consider potentially explosive implications of this emerging phenomena and to analyze the anatomy of specific cases, in terms of their celebrityhood and the type of populism they invoke.

Building on previous conceptualisations of *celebrity politics* (Marsh et al. 2010) and *celebrity populism* (Grbeša and Šalaj 2023), we develop our classification by combining three dimensions: *sphere of origin* (politics or celebrity sphere), *meta-ideology* (mainstream (pluralist) politics or populism) and *the use of celebrity techniques*. Thus we come to a total of eight categories of political actors: 1) *mainstream* and 2) *populist politicians* whose sphere of origin is mainstream or populist politics and who commonly avoid celebrification of their political personae; 3) *political celebrities*, mainstream politicians who resort to celebrity discourse to construct their celebrity personae; 4) *celebrity politicians*, celebrities who come from the celebrity sphere and run for elected office using mainstream, non-populist discourse but don't rely extensively on celebrity component of their persona; 5) *populist celebrities*, populist politicians who acquire elements of celebrity discourse to win over the voters or public sympathy; 6) *celebrity populists*, celebrities who come from the celebrity sphere and rely on populist discourse (rhetoric of people-centeredness and anti-elitism) to win an election and/or maintain public support but are reluctant to campaign on their celebrity background; 7) *super celebrity politicians*, celebrities who come from the celebrity sphere and use mainstream, non-populist discourse in their communication but rely abundantly on their celebrity capital and celebrity techniques and 8) *super celebrity populists*, celebrities who acquire populist rhetoric and rely heavily on celebrity techniques to communicate with the publics. The last category, *super celebrity populists*, represent the essence of the celebrity populism phenomenon. In a celebritized world characterized by massive distrust with mainstream political elites, super celebrity populists emerge as a new, attractive breed of politicians whose point of appeal surpasses traditional politics. Their psychological relationship with voters, based on affectionate and emotional factors rather than rational ones, resembles the relationship of fans with their idols.

In the analytical part of the paper, we used the case of the Croatian singer and politician Miroslav Škoro to test our categorisation. The analysis of his communication during the 2019-2020 presidential election showed that Škoro can be classified as a *celebrity populist*. If the sphere of origin is taken as the criterion, Škoro is a true celebrity, whereas, according to the discourse used in the campaign, he is a true populist. However, Škoro's reluctance to use his popularity of a singer in the campaign and to rely on his career of an entertainer, in virtue of which he entered politics as a famous person, makes it impossible to classify him as a *super celebrity populist*. It was precisely this possibility of celebrity politicians or celebrity populists to step out of their celebrity shoes when they enter politics that prompted us to introduce a dimension of using celebrity techniques, which proved to be justified. Finally, methodology presented in this

paper provides a replicable tool for capturing and categorizing various cases of celebrity populism. It also serves as an incentive to further develop this concept and to improve its measuring categories.

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