

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICS

A comparative analysis of the impacts on  
democratization and autocratization in  
Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro

**Ema Džejna Smolo,**  
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Politics around Europe are becoming one-man (rarely woman) shows. From the likes of Orban and Janša to Vučić and Đukanović – the political influence seems to be vested deeply in the capacities and wills of an individual.



Trends like personalization are addressed as attributes to politics, and rarely as stand-alone phenomena.



Personalization of politics is one of those phenomena that are an increasing attribute to political parties and politics world-wide, but at the same time it is profoundly affecting the very idea of balance of power, and endangering democratic concepts.



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## FOREWORD

Whether on television, through social media, or at political rallies, the dominance of party leaders over substantive party politics is becoming ever more difficult to ignore. This situation where the messenger is more important than the message is not new; in fact, historically, it is the dominant form of political discourse. From kings to dictators, from revolutionaries to democratic champions, strong individuals have always been at the forefront of political change. For centuries the messenger was seen as the personification of the political message, while the policies that were advocated included distinct personal whims of the leader. And for much of the past decades, if not centuries, democratic progress aimed to limit personalist rule and increase accountability of leaders. In recent years this has started to change. Through a confluence of events perpetuated by globalization and the rise of social media, the rise in personalization of politics in both consolidated and weak democratic societies is significant. An individual-centric approach is upending institutionalized political debate. This allows leaders with authoritarian tendencies to accumulate power, sideline political opposition, and avoid institutional scrutiny while speaking directly to their followers. Clientelism and corruption usually follow. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the recently democratic countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Most attention on the causes and effects that personalization of politics has on democratic backsliding is directed at Hungary and Poland. Only recently has there been more interest in the countries of Southeast Europe, especially Serbia and Montenegro, as well as Croatia. The three present distinct cases with a shared political history and different democratic trajectories in the past two decades. The role of leaders in each is also profoundly different. In Croatia, we can witness an unease with dominant leadership since 2000, along with a preference

for institutionalized leadership strongly bound to party politics. The interplay of two strong political parties assures that most institutional checks are kept in place, and that individual personalities rarely dominate political debates. In Montenegro, an extensive period of executive dominance by Milo Đukanović, the leader of the DPS party, came to an end in 2020. The neo-patrimonial and leader-oriented style of democracy established under his rule is still largely intact and has become integral to the political system. In this case, we are witnessing challenges to his personalist leadership by others with similar traits. In Serbia, the personalization of politics since 2012 has created a toxic environment where Aleksandar Vučić intertwines the fate of his person with that of his SNS party, the institutions of the state, and that of the Serb nation. Opposition to any of these is viewed as opposition to all, effectively sidelining any criticism and scrutiny of his increasingly authoritarian and clientelist rule. This is the personalization of politics at its most dangerous where even basic democratic institutions in Serbia, such as elections, can no longer be taken for granted.

The research by Ema Džejna Smolo looks in detail at how party politics came to be personalized in Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia and asks why this is the case. It is a valuable addition to the academic literature that allows us to understand the driving factors behind personalist autocratic rule and the mechanisms it uses to remain in power, including pervasive corruption and state capture. By analyzing and comparing the three cases, she clearly draws out the connection between the unaccountable personalization of politics and democratic decline in Southeast Europe.

*Damir Kapidžić  
Faculty of Political Sciences  
University of Sarajevo*

# INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Serbia held parliamentary elections, where the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka, SNS) was already expected to enter the parliament with sizeable support, yet the party itself was nowhere to be seen: the election list was titled “Aleksandar Vučić – for our children, “while the incumbent President did not in fact run for parliament. No candidates for parliament on behalf of SNS (or any other party for that matter) were on TV interviews in media, and the incumbent President was on billboards throughout the country. Why? According to the inquiry by Balkan Insight, it is because the Serbian people trust Aleksandar Vučić and because “he (Aleksandar Vučić) cares for people like them. “The indubitable trust in the benevolence of his leadership, or at least the illusion of it, reduces the Serbian Progressive Party to no more than its leader or even causes it to be redundant altogether because the President of Serbia is the country’s guarantee of success, not the parliament or its members (Vasović, 2020). And Serbia’s elections are not a novelty, for that matter.

Politics around Europe are increasingly becoming one-men (very rarely women) shows. From the likes of Orban and Janša to the former Yugoslavian republics with Milo Đukanović and Aleksandar Vučić – the political influence seems to be vested deeply in the capacities and the wills of an individual. What is more concerning is an increasing impression of the political system depending on these individuals, regardless of their formal roles and jurisdictions. And these slight examples of multiple positions held or changed and electoral slogans are just a tip of the personalization of politics iceberg that is sinking democracy in the post-Yugoslavian countries, mainly Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia, where I recognized the most grounds for comparative analysis. In all three countries, democratic backsliding or executive dominance is not a novelty topic (Kapidžić, 2020). But what seems to be neglected is that such trends are only a visible consequence of undetected decision-making patterns or are addressed as a mere attribute to politics, but not much more than that. Personalization of politics is one of those phenomena that are slowly and surely becoming a worldwide attribute to political parties and politics in general, but that is profoundly affecting the very idea of balance of power, and by extension, endangering democratic concepts.

How is it any different when a leader of a constitutionally democratic state, under the auspice of democratic legitimacy, is equating all state functions not even to his party, but his persona, to when Louis XIV equated himself to the state? Of course, there are differences and centuries of political system development. Still, the striking similarity of the tendency to centralize power is enough to base a premise that personalization of politics in certain countries seems to exist, and it is, more often than not, anything but democratic. This paper will aim to explore this phenomenon of overstepped influence by political leaders in Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia, in regards to the acknowledged and tested democratic backsliding in these countries, but also potential legacies of the common former regime that may or may not be directly affecting personalization of politics and lack of democratic development in all three.

In his ironic guide to unnamed Balkan autocrat(s), the Balkan Prince(s), Florian Bieber writes that “you can only rule if you claim to be a democrat, (...), but you can only continue your rule for a long time by not acting on these claims. (...) Good luck, there are some who are doing well... “ (Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 2020). Even thick with sarcasm, the advice he gave foreshadowed an evident trend: democracy in some countries is becoming subject to a rule of individuals, aided by autocratic tools and a pretense of democracy.

But what is the added value of extrapolating the personalization of politics in the post-Yugoslavian area? On the one hand, it serves to demystify the influences of the common former regime on the post-break-up developments by pinpointing what structures were too weak or too unwilling to carry on the democratic transformation. On the other hand, it gives potential insights into what “new” democracy could be. With a rising tide of populism, personalization, globalization, distrust towards politics and political parties in general, and remaining expectations for democratization in the Western Balkans – what is the future of democratic processes in the Western Balkans when it comes to party politics and the so-called patterns of authoritarianism?

## CONTEXT

Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro all belong to the third wave of democratization, with a political history that ties them structurally to the same federative republic, that, presumably, left a mark on the political development after the break-up, as well as had certain homogenizing effects on the behavior of elites and the political culture present today. The democratic backsliding in the countries chosen for the research have already been a topic in scientific writing (Bieber, 2020; Kapidžić, 2020), as well as the process of democratization of post-Yugoslavian countries (Kostovicova & Bojičić-Dželilović, 2006.); (Keil, 2013.); (Džihic & Segert, 2012), to which category all of the three countries adhere, so this paper will not go into a qualitative analysis on the quality of democracy in the region, that has already been proven far from even good, lest ideal. Instead, it will look at how personalization relates to this low quality of democracy, especially in the context of specific attributes such as political accountability. Accountability and the norms and conditions through which politicians come to executive positions distinguish rulers in democracies from autocratic political systems. Therefore, this paper describes the effects of personalization on the quality of democracy through its relations to such attributes of democracy, like political accountability (Schmitter & Karl, 1991.). However, diverse practices produce diverse effects, and every system is bound to have its concept and level of consolidation of democracy. That is why it is important to note that this research paper does not measure but rather describes and infers from the phenomenon of personalization in the complex relationship between the governing and the (not so) willingly governed.

Personalization of politics is often mentioned in the context of Tuđman and Milošević in the 1990s, in contexts of constitutional development (Smerdel & Sokol, 2006.) or comparative analysis on democratization (Dolenec, 2013.), and the question no longer seems to be if personalization of politics existed in the region upon democratic transformation, but rather why and how it continues to persist today.

But what is personalization as a broader trend, if not just a nifty way to describe autocrats in, at least, nominal democracies? The “weight” of political leaders and their influence in politics is already shifting in quite obvious way.

The examples range from Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia to Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid. The change in Italy even got an appropriate nomenclature from postwar *partitocracy* to “*leaderocracy*.” Scholars recognize these two phenomena on two levels: party changes - a decline in party strength in favor of the party’s leader; and political personalization in a general sense. (Rahat & Kenig, *From party politics to personalized politics? Party change and political personalization in democracies*, 2018.) It is important to note that, as a phenomenon, it affects both structures (institutions and political parties) and agency (political elites and the electorate, through political culture). Rahat and Schaefer propose a definition of political personalization as “a process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines (Rahat & Sheaffer, *The Personalization(s) of Politics: Israel 1949-2003*, 2007., str. 65). In essence, political personalization is inextricably a multidimensional process and a process first and foremost, meaning it occurs over time, with various trajectories and the ability to grow and shrink in presence. Depending on the political figures in focus, it can be either a decentralized or centralized trend. Former is defined as a process in which several individuals increase their influence instead of a group (several parliamentarians as opposed to their coalition). The latter is a process in which a single figure rises in prominence. The existing analysis also points to centralized personalization being more common than the decentralized version of the process, which is why this overview focuses on centralized personalization of politics by incumbent Heads of State in Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia (Rahat & Kenig, *From party politics to personalized politics? Party change and political personalization in democracies*, 2018.). A broad consensus among all reviewed authors (Passarelli, 2019; Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Pogunte & Webb, 2005) and even Weber’s studies on charismatic leadership (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2019, 39-40) is that the two phenomena, personalization, and presidentialism, are in a causal relationship, i.e., the weakening of the collective breeds a strengthening of the individual.

Rahat and Kenig (2018) propose three potential and often causes of personalization in the existing literature, namely: mediatization, party-change, specifically party

decline, and lastly, cultural changes. Mediatization focuses on changes linked to media personalization or the so-called occurrence of “audience democracy.” Political communication emphasizes this type of cause as common in democratic politics today because media are a common source of political information. Therefore, they are central to shaping political opinions and the trends that follow them – including personalization. Party-change focuses on weakening of intra-party dynamics, as well as the overall perceived decline of party importance within the society, which relates to the third and last cause, which is culture changes – emphasis moving from group to individual, i.e., individualization as a social process (Rahat & Kenig, From party politics to personalized politics? Party change and political personalization in democracies , 2018.). In the case of the second cause, the linkage between intra-party politics and the relationship to the society, a possibility in line with Dolenc’s (2013) study on democratization in the region that the parties in the case countries of this paper did not weaken but were relatively not strong, to begin with, in the moment and under the circumstances of regime transformation. An additional cause specific to centralized personalization or strengthening of the executive is common in instances where the state grows in functions and administration, which can be attributed in the case study countries to the apparent occurrence of regime transformation. Through gaining independence and transitioning to a democratic system, under strenuous conditions to say the very least, it was to be expected that an executive would take charge at the top. (Dolenc, 2013.).

Some effects of personalization have already been detected and refer primarily to the adverse impacts on party government. However, Katz argues that party government is hardly the only way effective and legitimate democratic governments can function; despite being commonly understood and combined with a juxtaposition of what Katz names “legitimizing myth” and “demonstrable practices,” personalization of politics is perceived as a threat to party democracy. The distrust towards parties is growing, and politicians are among the least trusted professions. Katz finds that personalization also points to a different problem altogether, which potentially contributes to the rise of populist competitors. By weakening parties and the present extent of personalization, the electorate focuses more on personal qualities. Combined with the overall distrust towards parties, the electorate is likely to vote in favor of charismatic personalities more than established political collectives (Cross, Katz, & Pruyers, 2018.). This, in turn, gives such leaders opportunities for further personalization of the system through institutional personalization. But, party decline is not necessarily a bottomless pit for democracies, and it is hard to reverse the declining importance of party membership in any foreseeable future. Rather than focusing on strengthening parties to balance a weak executive, in the situation where populist, personalized leadership is manifesting itself across the globe, more emphasis should be put on merits and moderation as necessary for democratic leadership (Poguntke & Webb, 2018.).



# LEGACIES OF THE PAST AND POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE PRESENT

An essential part of the supporting hypothesis in this overview rest with the notion that all three countries inherited certain practices from the previous common regime that inevitably shaped the political outcomes today, the most obvious being the political culture, especially the preference for strong, very individualized leadership. Remnants of the previous regime in post-communist countries have been tested and confirmed. In his paper on the "Survival of the Third Legal Tradition," Alan Uzelac (2010) writes about the survival of a specific legal tradition, in essence, instrumentalized law, that was characteristic to communist countries, taking Yugoslavia as a primary specimen. Danijela Dolenc (2013) writes similarly on the persistence of authoritarian party rule in post-communist countries. While her analysis deals mainly with the process of democratization itself, and regime change as such, she also proposes a critical argument, according to which the authoritarian party dominance during the regime change period, i.e., the 1990s, produced persistent obstacles to strengthening the rule of law in Southeast Europe through three primary ways: power concentration, power transformation, and power dispersion. One of the main reasons this was made possible is the circumstances of the crisis period themselves, including the dissolution of a former union and a violent one at that. Croatia and the then Union of Serbia and Montenegro (still under the name of Yugoslavia) nominally started building democracies and accompanying institutions. In addition, war provides cover for political repression and distracts the governing apparatus from a profound reform agenda. Second, it allows for centralization of power most prominently in the hands of the executive. Therefore, current challenges to the advancement of democracy in the former Yugoslavian countries are hooked to the regime transformation and the previous regime through the persistence of old practices and their exacerbation against the backdrop of conflicts.

In line with the general theory on personalization of politics, it is already pretty clear that such arbitrary centralization of power also prevented political parties from democratizing, be they the direct descendants of the Communist Unions, or new political parties, that were rarely wholly new. For example, Croatian Democratic Union

(HDZ) was founded in Croatia post-1974. Constitution, as political opposition to the authoritarian Communist Union. However, approximately 50 000 renowned Communist Union of Croatia members, including the then chief of the intelligence agency (Josip Perković), have transferred their political membership from the Communist Union of Croatia to the newly established HDZ a still dominant political party in Croatia. This indicates a slight chance for the political organizations to develop democratic practices within themselves (Manjkas, 2018.). The active parties in the three countries nowadays are either direct descendants from the dominant party of the previous regime, or their direct political opponents strengthened during times of conflict with virtually nonexistent restraints to their power. While these political parties are not necessarily directly in power today, the political elites that formed them or developed through them are. Even when they are not directly in power, the usual political party that replaces it in strength comes from the political echelon that was active in the dominant party (such is the case of Srpska Napredna Stranka in Serbia). As a final consequence, the authoritarianism within the party had a spillover effect on the general politics, resulting in centralized personalization. By inference, personalization, in this case, is a process complementary and even colinear to the weakening of authoritarian parties, making it indisputably linked by extension to autocratization of these countries, therefore, unquestionably harmful for democratic development.

On the other hand, the conflicts of the 1990s were preceded by a political crisis and the weakening of the Communist Union of Yugoslavia after the introduction of the 1974 Constitution, which had the paradoxical tendency to centralize and regulate the entire society of SFRY on a union level, while introducing a higher degree of autonomous action on republic level. In addition to the political, economic, and social crisis in the country, the continent-wide fall of communism aided the notion that political opposition should be built on national self-determination and national homogenization, but without adequate political reforms that would make such political structures democratic, ultimately replacing a communist autocracy with a nationalist one (Nicović, 2013.).

In addition to the weak political parties and political elites, the political culture of the former regime, at least to an extent, is certainly present through the generations that experience of living in Yugoslavian versus post-Yugoslavian societies. Political culture, as the total sum of all values, preferences, and behaviors exhibited by a population in a single polity, dictates the outcomes of democratic processes and the general demand for democratization, as well as the different narratives that are either more or less successful. However, as Inglehart (2003) empirically shows, political culture is not necessarily consistent within its expressions.

According to some authors, the inevitable dominance of Josip Broz Tito's charismatic leadership also proved to be a strong bonding element in SFRY's heterogeneous community. Yet, the economic crisis in which SFRY was progressively sinking and Tito's death in the 1980s contributed to a split within the society that shaped two distinct political cultures. One was committed to the Yugoslavian model of modernization and coming closer to what was associated as Western societal models. The other group reverted to the traditional understanding of values, which proved as a powerful platform for opposition organizing against the political leadership of SFRY (Cabada, 2009).

Yet, the last years of Yugoslavia were subject to a trend opposite to personalization. During an interview conducted with Florian Bieber, he described the post-Tito political culture in Yugoslavia as bureaucratized to an extent in which one did not really know or care who the succeeding Presidents of the Republics were (Bieber, Interview, 2021). The attempts to overcome the mounting political and economic crisis that Nicović (2013) also describes post-1974 constitutional update focused on further structuring SFRY beyond the political system, resulting in a bureaucratic and technocratic final decade of SFRY. The political culture was already split, and the position of a single, unifying leader was vacant. The solidifying point within the traditional political culture was the increasing sentiment of nationalism that became a platform for communist (turned nationalist) leaders and others to maintain or gain political influence. The personalization within the regimes in the post-SFRY area in the 1990s is not a product of the political culture but a product of the exacerbation of the existing political preference for specific values. The political leaders emerged in a depersonalized environment and influenced the growth of personalization of politics within the circumstances of the dissolution (Bieber, Interview, 2021).

The political culture of this area today has never gone through a complete political or societal change that would favor liberal democracy. The simple argument for a more democratic culture does not resonate with the post-Yugoslavian area because the understanding of democracy is not thorough enough (Džihic, et al., 2019). According to the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index and

the Political Culture Indicator over the course of 10 years, from 2010 to 2020, neither Montenegro, Serbia, or Croatia scored and maintained more than a median value on a 1 to 10 scale when it comes to the democratization of the political culture (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). If one were to make presumptions on the degree of political personalization based on political culture alone, then it would seem for now that Serbia and Montenegro have a higher degree of personalized politics. But, the political culture does not necessarily mean a demand for an overextension in influence from single political leadership. Rather, the personalization of politics can be observed as a consequence in a society where the demand for democracy, coming from the political culture, is not strong enough. Furthermore, young people's attitudes attest to the lack of experience in these societies with democratic practices and more experience with various types of autocracy and significant support for strong leadership (Lavrić, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019.). Therefore, it can be concluded that the real dangers of political culture are not that it requires political personalization, but that it does not seek accountability because it itself lacks the democratic maturity, to quote Gazela Pudar-Dražko (Pudar-Dražko, 2021). An additional danger is that in such societies, where knowledge and demand for democracy are not strong enough, political elites' personalization and unchecked behavior are more likely to have adverse effects on the political culture and the overall quality of democracy.

Personalization of politics is not necessarily a demand but can definitively be seen because of a non-democratic political culture. Here exists an overlap, or rather a question that overlaps several points: does the lack of democratic political culture that gives certain support for strong leadership necessarily equate to a desire for personalization of politics and unchecked executive dominance? I agree with what Jelena Vasiljević (2019) writes on political culture, which is the fact that political culture can no longer be singled out, as it is simply too interconnected with other complexities of the political systems, including the behavior of elites, foreign influences, economic interests, etc. (Vasiljević, 2019). Therefore, one can presume that political culture cannot be the only factor contributing to personalization. By extension, neither political culture nor personalization alone can undermine democratic development.

So what indeed does exist even due to the legacies from the past and the circumstances of regime transformation are weak political parties and a political culture that is not democratic enough, and until this point, paint a similar picture for Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro. In addition, and as previously mentioned, personalization of politics seems a trend for all three countries. But how does it manifest on a country-by-country level, and are there any substantial effects on democratization that could be singled out?

# PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICS IN SERBIA, CROATIA, AND MONTENEGRO

To give a broad overview of the state of arts regarding personalization, per country, I looked for quantitative data that relates to the two out of three causes for personalization mentioned previously by Rahat and Kenig (2018), namely party changes/strengthening of the individual, as well as mediaization. While cultural changes, or rather the political culture, was covered within the previous sections of the paper, to examine further the role of the individual within the political culture of the three countries, I took into account Varieties of Democracy Person of the Leader Index, which gives insight on the extent in which the Chief Executive is perceived to be extraordinary with either personal or leadership characteristics. Interestingly enough, this index considers the Chief Executive, either the head of state or the head of government, depending on which is clearly the leading figure and not by the constitutional provisions given to them. Again, a clear indication of political personalization will be the extent to which this perception exists, backed by examples from practice that will point to the key leadership figure in each country (Varieties of Democracy, 2021). With mediaization, I examine the incumbents' image in media through their own appearances in interviews and media statements. The first indicator covered is the Neopatrimonial Rule Index, as the closest quantifiable measure of personalization of politics on the institutional level within this research process (Varieties of Democracy, 2021). Focusing the evidence of personalization on incumbent Heads of State can directly relate overstepping of one's formal position to democratic backsliding since all three countries are parliamentary democracies; therefore, Heads of State have a limited scope of actual powers.

The quantitative data from relevant indices<sup>2</sup> and qualitative data from existing analysis and reviewing different media sources are also supported through three interviews conducted during this research process, with Vedran Džihčić, Florian Bieber, and Gazela Pudar Draško. Already

evident from the interviews were clear distinctions among the three: Croatia seems to show stable political pluralism, with relatively straightforward center-left and center-right positions of the major parties. In Serbia, the situation is quite the opposite, with a virtually nonexistent party system since the early 2000s and with very paradoxical positions in all major parties. Lastly, Montenegro's defining characteristic is the continuity of the DPS and the fact that de facto political pluralism only happened due to a split within the DPS.

## MONTENEGRO

In Montenegro, the values of the neo-patrimonial rule index from the 1990s until today point to Milo Đukanović's key influence in politics since 1998, with only a minor drop in the presence of neopatrimonialism in 2006, when he briefly stepped down from the position of Prime Minister. He himself has been both the Prime Minister and the President of the country several times since 1998. the President of the party. When talking personalization of politics in Montenegro, one expects it to be focusing on him (Varieties of Democracy, 2021). However, there seems to be a certain balancing act that prevents the evidence on personalization, namely values across all relevant indicators, to be higher, which is, again, consistent with certain political moves that Đukanović has made, such as strategically stepping down at the proclamation of independence in 2006, or the pro-Euro Atlantic path he introduced into his political platform, to preserve the continuity of his presence and influence. Florian Bieber also mentions this characteristic in the interview, where he states that this ability of the DPS to balance between democratic concessions and non-democratic backsliding has resulted in its perseverance (Bieber, Interview, 2021). This is also potentially the most significant distinction between Montenegro and the other two case countries, the continuity and consistency within the personalization of Montenegrin politics. Naturally, the second-biggest drop in the Neopatrimonial Rule Index for Montenegro is 2020, following the parliamentary elections in which DPS did not secure a majority in Parliament (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The quantitative data referred to are Neopatrimonial Rule Index (Varieties of Democracy Index), Person of the Leader Index (Varieties of Democracy). For all three case countries, the data observed was from 1990 to 2020 (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

However, Đukanović shows exceptional political instinct in his interview with Televizija Crne Gore (TV Montenegro). He says that he was expecting the change of government and that the victory secured in 2016 was challenging to achieve. An additional interesting moment in this interview is that while addressing the challenges that Montenegro faces now, becoming a hot-spot for issues in the Balkans overnight, that they (meaning the current government led by Krivokapić) should not underestimate the DPS. This could be translated as his understanding that he is very aware of the necessary support that the party gives him to maintain the power that he holds. Despite his influence and clear leadership position within it, he does know how to present himself as part of a larger collective, which is not necessarily something that could be said for, for example, Vučić's attitudes towards his party SNS (danas.rs, 2021).

The affairs present in media are linked to other non-democratic practices, such as corruption and clientelism. Still, they are not necessarily attributed to him alone, but rather the DPS and him as a synonym of three-decade rule in Montenegro. That is why the fullest extent of personalization in Montenegro seems to be concentrated in the DPS party and not as a general trend. It is, therefore, interesting to contrast these conclusions against the writing of Zlatko Vujović and Nikoleta Tomović, who write on the strong presidentialism in political parties. Furthermore, they emphasize that presidentialisation in Montenegro is occurring within a system that has a relatively weak President. The defining characteristic, according to them, is the, again, single-party dominance of a transformed Communist party until the latest elections. However, the most interesting conclusion they propose is that in Montenegro, the presidentialized political parties influence state institutions because they preceded the existence of modern political institutions (for example, Đukanović's DPS has existed since 1998, while Montenegro separated from the State Union with Serbia in 2006). They also claim that regardless of his position, the President has ultimate power, which would be arguably true, and confirmation of personalization of politics, no doubt. Still, it has to be taken into consideration that with the last elections in 2020, the monolith of DPS's rule in Montenegro has been broken. Nevertheless, Montenegro's case confirms that personalization of politics is being transmitted from the previous system into the new one because DPS has been to a large extent organized in the likes of the former League of Communists. Therefore, one can conclude that the findings of Tomović and Vujović to an extent confirm the other results in the sense that DPS and the influence of the political party shape the personalization of politics more than just its leader, but that Milo Đukanović as "the powerful and charismatic leader" is inevitably in the forefront (Vujović & Tomović, 2019).

When it comes to the person of the leader, the values in Montenegro follow the trend of other findings, indicating a strong and, more importantly, reasonably continuous importance of the leader within the perceptions of the general population. Indicative of the fact that personalization of the leader is indubitably tied to the leader of the DPS party and the incumbent President is that the only significant drop in the perceived persona of the leader is in 2019 and 2020 after the DPS lost the stable and long-running majority in the Parliament. The DPS election campaign was led under the slogan "Decisively for Montenegro DPS – Milo Đukanović" (Odlučno za Crnu Goru DPS – Milo Đukanović) even though the name of the President is not a part of the official party title, nor was the President in any way part of the election campaign as a candidate. Therefore, the clearly personalized party has lost, the perceived influence of Milo Đukanović leadership seems to be reflected among the population as well vis a vis the election result, but also in the sense of person of the leader. Whether or not the new government coalition majority, which is already yielding two distinct leadership figures, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić and Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, continue personalizing the politics in Montenegro is too soon to tell. Still, it seems more likely than not for the moment.

## CROATIA

Neopatrimonial rule in Croatia seems to be consistent with the notion of the importance of the transition to parliamentarianism and solidifying political pluralism and also points that Croatia appears to be performing better than Montenegro and Serbia in these aspects (Varieties of Democracy, 2021). Some reasons for Croatia's clear improvements maybe laying in the fact that Croatia transitioned from semi-presidentialism to a parliamentary system after Tuđman's death, and one of the reasons for that could have been the fact that there was no strong man to succeed him; therefore, it made sense to reduce the scope of President's power in favor of the government. Not only that, but so far, one of the critical points when it comes to Croatia, and this is something that was emphasized in my interviews with Vedran Džihic (Dzihic, Interview, 2021) and Florian Bieber (Bieber, Interview, 2021), is the distinct separation of ideological positions between the main parties, which solidified the political pluralism and competition in the system, thus inhibiting at the very least centralized personalization of politics. Furthermore, an often trend in Croatian politics is that the President and the Prime Minister do not come from the same party. Arguably, this is since HDZ mobilizes its voters much more efficiently to secure the position with the most extensive scope of power, the Prime Minister position. In addition, the President of the Republic is only a candidate

on behalf of the Party, by law. Still, once they are elected to the position, they are obliged to step down from all functions in the Party, including the very membership. This immediately would cut off a strong basis of support that the President could use for strengthening his or her's position. It also limits the possibility of pooling presidentialism into general politics since the President of the Republic cannot at the same time be the President of the party. This is not the case for the Prime Ministerial position; therefore, it is not as surprising that the personalization of politics in Croatia is moved more towards the Prime Minister; however, even that is to a limited extent (Ustav Republike Hrvatske, 2021). If we go back to 2004-2010, the Neopatrimonial Rule Index shows a slight backsliding in the overview, which is also roughly a period of Ivo Sanader's mandate as Prime Minister and Party President. Ivo Sanader, who was later on trial for corruption. This brings us to another point that makes personalization a less emphasized trend in Croatia: the democratic institutions seem to be functioning the best. The strength of democratic institutions is curbing any overextension of influence, and it used the case of Ivo Sanader to accomplish that. By all means, the institutions are not functioning perfectly. Still, they are performing efficiently enough to prevent the personalization of politics from being related to authoritarian-level executive dominance (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

That is why in Croatia, the personalization of politics, at least in the sense that it is defined for the purpose of this research, is arguably not that present, especially in the Head of State case. The President of the Republic of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, does gather a significant amount of attention as a public person, but this does not coincide with the tendency to overstretch his factual scope of power. For example, in a recent interview, he was asked to comment on how it is any different when he criticizes the media and public services compared to when the Prime Minister does that. He answered that he has no jurisdiction that would make that a threat; however, when the Prime Minister gives such criticism, there could be consequences for those public services, such as the loss of concessions. Furthermore, he emphasized that any minister is more powerful than him, at least in the jurisdiction. However, his power rests with the trust of the voters and his ability to convince them. Now, convincing the electoral to trust a politician is part of securing popular support and is not necessarily illegal or illegitimate. However, this does prove that personalization of politics can be easily confused with populism, presenting oneself as different from the elite. In the case of Croatia, I would state that populism is a much more present trend than personalization (De Vrgna, 2021). In addition, Zoran Milanović is inevitably a person that gathers a lot of attention in the public eye just by his sheer style of communication, often brass, and with a lot of

metaphors at the expense of his peers. In a single interview, he has managed to call politicians in the country pots (lonac), their ideas stupid („Yes, I have the right to mock those stupid titles, and I'm mocking them, it's stupid“), and is very well known for such statements that are even, to an extent perhaps, entertaining to some (De Vrgna, 2021). But they are not necessarily a danger to the checks and balances system.

With his style of communication and his awareness that the „ball is“ (by the Constitution) always in the Prime Ministers' „court, “Milanović often takes a moment to emphasize the inabilities or unwillingness of the government to act following the law. In his interview, he commented on recent events in Croatia, mentioning the arrests of several people in Croatia, some of whom are public persons, influential persons. Regarding this, he stated that the Prime Minister has said he knows nothing on some of the most critical investigations in the country, or rather that he is pretending not to know anything and that no one believes him. These are very direct accusations that the Prime Minister is directly involved in either covering up or washing his hands from illegal activities that he, at the very least, should have been aware of (Maretić-Žonja, 2020).

However, while Zoran Milanović does not necessarily overstep his influence regarding his position in Croatia, this does not mean that his mandate is entirely democratic or without any faults. He is often in the center of attention in regional politics for his attitudes vis a vis Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Croat population in that country, for statements that are not necessarily to be expected from a President that has been chosen from the center-left, i.e., they have strong nationalist sentiments related to the „protection of the Croat interest“ and that „Croatia will not relent any more when it comes to the rights of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. “ This is another indication that he has taken the fact that elected Presidents do not hold party affiliations and is boasting messages from both ends of the political spectrum. However, be that as it may, he is still acting under his scope of power, and he has no party to over-exert his influence there, either. In the case of Zoran Milanović, populism seems to take precedence over the personalization of politics (Jutarnji.hr, July).

Considering the aforementioned differences between the President and Prime Minister of the Republic, it seems that for personalization of politics in Croatia, presidentialism is a much more likely trend. Dario Nikić Čakar also refers to the development of party presidentialism in Croatia against the backdrop of constitutional reform in the early 2000s and the origins and political platforms of the main political parties. However, an interesting piece of information he introduces is the fact that presidentialism in Croatia is

similar in all parties because they organizationally function in very similar ways. This takes us back to the fact that both political elites, the ones making up social-democratic and the ones making up conservative parties in Croatia, have been „schooled“ by the same system – the communist one. Even if we take that out of the equation, the organizational structure of both parties functioned the same from the very beginning: SDP as a major party was leader-focused due to its communist heritage. At the same time, HDZ was dependent on the leadership of its founder, Franjo Tuđman. Čakar describes the parties as „cohesive, disciplined and centralized, “emphasizing the role of the party leader as „independent and autonomous from organizational restraints and internal mechanisms of accountability. “ And this today is much more visible in the example of HDZ by the simple fact that they are currently the strongest party in the country and are holding government majority, while on the other hand, SDP has suffered from internal disputes, and interestingly enough: from the inability to find a leader that would replace Milanović as party president, at the height of centralization in SDP (Nikić Čakar, 2019.).

Last but not least, showing that institutional change indeed matters, the Person of the leader in Croatia is since the 2000s becoming less and less present in the voters’ perceptions in Croatia, following the former conclusions that since Franjo Tuđman’s death, there has been significant depersonalization in Croatian politics, at least when it comes to the centralized kind. However, even with the risen person of the leader importance in that period, the scores are consistently improving, meaning that the perceived importance of a single leader is not as crucial on a general level. Due to the level of presidentialism in the parties, one could assume that party leadership plays a much more significant role in the voters’ preferences (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

## SERBIA

Neopatrimonial rule in Serbia was clearly at its height during the 90s, which is not surprising recalling what Danijela Dolenc writes on circumstances of regime change in the region and given that the rule of law was practically nonexistent. The apparent improvement was in the 2000s, following the overthrow of Milošević’s regime, that brought the democratization potential to Serbia. In this period, the neopatrimonial rule was far less present, worsening slowly but surely since 2008 (Varieties of Democracy, 2021). From 2008 to 2020, neopatrimonial rule in Serbia is again a dominant characteristic; while it does not seem to be as present as during Milošević, the upward trend discourages democratization. Furthermore, the circumstances in which Milošević’s regime operated were far from democratizing, unlike in present-day Serbia, where the circumstances for democratic development should be much more favorable.

This comparison of the situation in which neopatrimonial rule exists makes the upward trend of neopatrimonial rule more worrying in present-day Serbia (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

The slow but steady deterioration in Serbia seems to have begun since 2012-2013 and has been increasing over time. This coincides with Aleksandar Vučić’s “rise to power,” from Prime Minister to President of the Republic. By all indicators so far, Serbia seems to be the least democratic country among the three observed, with clear and distinct authoritarian rule. Authoritarian rule is by default centralized in a single person, which in Serbia’s case is clearly Aleksandar Vučić. Personalization of politics in Serbia is not only the most overt, but it is also most clearly directly related to democratic backsliding. However, unlike the two other countries, in Serbia, the personalization of politics does not become the most evident from observing necessarily Aleksandar Vučić and his statements, but from observing everything around him. The sheer extent to which personalization of politics in his case has expanded is the marginalization of the Prime Minister’s function, even though Serbia is a parliamentary democracy and there are no constitutional grounds for Vučić to take over such a prominent role in Serbian politics. Ana Brnabić has often been portrayed through different analyses and reporting as nothing more than Vučić’s prop in a democratic mirage. By the words of Dragan Popović, she is still trying to maintain the idea of her political independence, which is highly contested and practically impossible due to the year-long period of democratic backsliding of the entire system. He further goes on to say that the only element becoming stronger in Serbia is the power of Aleksandar Vučić and that Ana Brnabić is contributing to this enhancing of personal power (Popović, 2018).

Going back to the undisputed leader himself, Aleksandar Vučić is very specific about the interviews he gives. It is no surprise that he has no record of giving recent interviews to media that is considered independent or critical of the regime. However, looking at a trend of his general statements, the most blatant evidence of personalization of politics is the fact that he seems to be the only authority for any and all topics in the country, from EU integration and foreign politics of Serbia (which would be his mandate) to infrastructural and traffic reconstructions, police, municipal visits and handling municipal, local roads, highways, there are no ministers, public service directors or political representatives who are giving statements on these developments: it is by default always Vučić. With COVID19 developments, he has commented and given instructions to medical workers, most recently “to make up their mind if the third dose of vaccine is necessary, and if yes, that he would gladly receive it” (N1, 2021). In all of his addresses, however, he is never blatantly speaking

of himself as the ultimate leader; he always attributes all actions to “the state,” slowly building the impression that he, in fact, is the state. At the same time, a large amount of his political platform is built around his anti-criminal, anti-corruption, very populist rhetoric through which he also produces large amounts of popular support. As Bieber mentions, Vučić did not come to power as a personalized, authoritarian, or charismatic leader. He came to power as a technocrat, a populist that would handle the troubles of the Serbian people. Only after gaining power did he create the environment of personalized politics (Bieber, Interview, 2021).

Another recent example that embodies his attitudes towards political practices is a recent reporting by a national broadcaster in which the President is giving a press statement. After a question on travel direction, Golubac-Milanovac, he takes out his phone and calls the responsible minister, who seems to be on vacation at the moment. Vučić asks for nine million €, in case necessary, to build the route before the end of the year, to which he seemingly agrees. The President theatrically goes back to the awaiting crowd and states that it is handled, followed by applause. This situation, one of many, indicates to what extent his influence and leadership dictate how policies and political decisions are being made in Serbia today (Jovičević, 2021). One reason why this overexertion of individual influence is possible in Serbian politics is the fragile party system that never managed to depersonalize and strengthen democratic practices within the parties. It seems that parties in Serbia are definitely dependent on the President, and it is almost always a case of centralized power. One of the reasons for such lack of intra-party democratization is the fact that most of them were founded in non-democratic circumstances, perhaps, due to the fact that their only goal was to counter Milošević. Paradoxically, after 2000, the brief moment for democratization in Serbia, the institutional preconditions strengthened this party's presidentialism instead of weakening it. By internal design and party statute, the President can exercise absolute and unchallenged authority (Spasojević & Stojiljković, 2019).

In such circumstances, where there is weak competition and authoritarianism between key elements that are supposed to contribute to the reinforcement of democratic factors, such as pluralism and competition, it is to be expected that personalization of politics goes beyond the party and has a strong authoritarian pull once that party secures absolute executive power, as did the Serbian Progressive Party.

Expectedly, and similarly to Croatia, during the 90s in Serbia, the person of the leader indicator shows strong importance and influence of the singled-out leader to the voting population. However, with Milošević's decline in popularity due to several failures of his regime, the importance of the person of the leader seems to be faltering already in 1999 and continues in the 2000s. The significance of the leading figure as perceived by the people seems to be rising again with Vučić's rise across the ranks from 2012 onwards and recently reaches almost as high scores as it did during the 90s. Not only is the regime in Serbia authoritarian, but it is also clearly highly personalized. However, one important consideration to add is something that is evident both from the graph of the index but also mentioned during the interview with Florian Bieber. That is the fact that the perceptions on the importance of a leader were not a prerequisite for Vučić's rise in personalization and authoritarianism; the people did not necessarily want an authoritarian leader. But ever since gaining his first executive position as Prime Minister, Vučić has been creating a demand for himself as the single, most successful leader for Serbia and its people. In his election campaign and on the onset of his mandates, Vučić was not as charismatic nor as prominent of a leader as he is now. Personalization, in this regard, was a tool in his arsenal to maintain his political power and political influence. This is clear also from the political platform of the SNS in the latest parliamentary elections and the way Aleksandar Vučić is being increasingly perceived by the people – the future of Serbia (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

# IMPACTS OF PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICS ON DEMOCRATIZATION IN SERBIA, CROATIA, AND MONTENEGRO

The previous section of this paper explored in more detail the current state of arts when it comes to personalization of politics in the three case countries, and already there are certain effects of the personalization quite noticeable, in some instances more so by far. A common feature for all three cases is strong intra-party personalization or presidentialism, but the countries vary more among themselves on a general level. By definition, personalization of politics results in the expanded influence of certain individuals. This paper aimed to discover whether this type of illegitimate influence is present among the three heads of state. The head of state's behavior was purposefully accentuated to possibly summarize if and how is the personalization of politics linked to the autocratization of these three case countries. Therefore, to explore further the effects of personalization of politics in the general sense, the paper will in this section explore quantifiable data on the functionality of checks and balances, with a particular focus on the relationship of the executive to two other government branches. For each country, the paper explores indicators<sup>2</sup> most closely related to the balance of power in a political system. However, since none of these indices are intended to focus on personalization itself, the values shown are analyzed in the context of previously examined elements of personalization of politics in the three countries.

## MONTENEGRO

Something that is quite evident in Đukanović's leadership style, the sheer longevity of DPS' position as the ruling party in Montenegro, and something Florian Bieber mentioned during the interview on personalization: the defining characteristic that made that continuity possible is the

extreme adaptability and flexibility of the political platform (Bieber, Interview, 2021). In politics, one does always have a choice to make when it comes to shaping political messages, policies, electoral campaigns, and DPS seems to have been doing a good job at shaping their image, even at the cost of total control of the state, and the full extent of personalization. Naturally, the party itself following the 97/98 split is Milo Đukanović's party – quite literally, DPS has split into DPS of Montenegro and DPS Milo Đukanović – and of course, it would be impossible to expect that this presidentialism did not have a spill over effect during the period of DPS single-party dominance. However, this ability to balance and give the appearance of legitimacy to the institutions, as well as choosing a pro-reform, pro-Western, pro-integration, and ultimately, a pro-democracy, rhetoric has provided some improvements to the overall democratic development in Montenegro despite the almost absolute rule of Milo Đukanović, at least until the last elections.

According to Varieties of Democracy, the rule of law in Montenegro falls in the median area, but with a prominent tendency for the betterment from 1998 until 2017. Even with the drop in value in 2017, the rule of law seems to be functioning at least to an extent. This brings us back to the point of external democratization promoters since Montenegro has been obliged to enhance the rule of law like other countries applying for EU Membership. The quantitative data reflects the reforms aligned with this process that Montenegro has been conducting (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

Within the rule of law index, a particularly interesting indicator is the executive's respect for the constitution. In Montenegro, this indicator seems to give higher values than the rule of law itself, which would indicate that the executive's behavior towards the constitutional provisions is not necessarily a problem for the rule of law (Varieties of Democracy, 2021). The indicator shows even more significant improvements than the rule of law index, and unlike the rule of law index, it has no negative trends. Therefore, one can conclude that the executives

2 Indicators referred to in the section are „Executives respect for the constitution“, „Legislative constraints on the executive“, „Judicial constraints on the executive“, as well as the general assessment of the rule of law based on the Rule of Law Index given by Varieties of Democracy. For all three countries, the observed period was the same as within the evaluation of personalization of politics, from 1990 to 2020 (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).



in Montenegro, regardless of political personalization, are not overstepping the constitutional provisions given. However, this is not to say that the executives are not using their influence through their party and the government to circumvent direct breaches of the Constitution and still exercise their will (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

The separation of powers ensures a possibility of checks and balances among the different parts of the political system, which also provides the option of judicial and legislative branches constraining the executive's actions to prevent executive dominance. In Montenegro, it is evident that neither judicial nor legislative constraints are fully functional. Still, the judicial constraints are functioning better, in line with the previous graph that shows that the executive expresses respect for the constitution as part of the judicial system. However, the more interesting aspect is the executive's legislative constraints or lack thereof. The constraints on the executive seem to be at their height from the moment of gaining independence until 2013, after which they experience a significant drop. This would indicate a presence of executive dominance. However, the methodology previously noted that the indicators refer to the executive based on either Head of State or Head of Government, depending on where the political power is. Milo Đukanović, one of the longest-running politicians in Montenegro, who has since 1998 performed almost an executive function (HoS or HoG), is definitely where one would expect the personalization of politics to occur. And the interesting factor is that the legislative constraints on the executive, vested in the parliament, obviously change in the line of the function that he has performed. For example, the legislative restrictions on the executive are the best performing.

In contrast, Đukanović (with brief interruptions) performs the function of Head of Government (Prime Minister), while the legislative constraints on the executive lessen afterward (from 2013, circa, towards the end of his last mandate as Prime Minister and going into his first mandate as President, Head of State). This indicates that the executive power seems to be attached not only to his party because DPS preserved single-party dominance in the Parliament after Đukanović was no longer Prime Minister, but directly to him. The legislative constraints were presumably easier to impose when he himself was leading the government but are harder to impose when the executive power is not within the Parliament but is now actually moved to the Head of State. The legislative seems to be susceptible still to the influence of the executive, therefore, not in power to execute higher constraints over it (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

As Vujović and Tomović note, the DPS impact for such a long time impacts the relationship between the key

institutions within the political system. The presidentialism of the party has been spilling over time into general politics by the simple fact that up until the last parliamentary elections, that power was not contested. However, even though Montenegro clearly has its challenges for democratic development, the flexibility of the party to choose certain pro-democratic agenda to pursue shows that the personalization of politics was not necessarily and at all times focused on securing centralized power, but rather on other interests (Vujović & Tomović, 2019).

## CROATIA

The conclusions vis a vis Croatia at this point in the paper point out that opportune institutional changes make a necessary difference for democratic development. Not only that, but Croatia has managed to secure at least a certain amount of resilience for the democratization that it has achieved so far. Of course, other challenges remain, but it seems that the personalization of politics currently is not one of them. At least not, when there is cohabitation between the Head of State and Head of Government, and that the two are not necessarily in favor of each other's political platform. The analysis on political culture also showed that Croatia managed to achieve the most improvement in democratization, and quite possibly since the switch to parliamentary democracy has from the start minimized the person of the Head of State following the highly personalized regime of Franjo Tuđman. That, and a party system that was plural and ideologically varied strongly, has left little room for focus on personality. Instead, candidates and parties had to offer concrete political programs to get elected; a charismatic personality was not enough for that. However, presidentialism within the major parties does remain a challenge, but arguably not for the larger public and mainly for the parties themselves. As both Džihic (Dzihic, Interview, 2021) and Bieber (Bieber, Interview, 2021) pointed out in the interviews with them, the latest local elections in Croatia and Možemo!'s win in the capital is showing that the electorate is looking for something different from the established, major parties that have been dominating the public space for so long. Whether or not Možemo! or similar parties, coalitions, etc., manage to achieve more for democratic and overall improvement of the country is still too soon to tell; however, it does go in line with the fact of declining trust towards and importance of political parties. And at that point, the personalization of politics becomes irrelevant to an extent. Therefore, personalization of politics has had no dire impact on democratic development in Croatia because it was almost completely rooted out early enough on a general level. The rule of law index shows from the 2000s that there is a significant improvement, and it remains relatively consistent. However, the rule of law index also indicates another pattern in the mid-2000s

(circa 2004 to 2009) where the indicators obtained lower scores. Nevertheless, the rule of law has rebounded from the lower scores and continued to improve up until the present. The lower values of both the neopatrimonial rule index and the rule of law overlap with the Prime Minister mandate of Ivo Sanader (HDZ), who, as mentioned before, is currently under proceedings for bribery and corruption charges, so the values are not necessarily surprising, and could be related to possible centralized personalization of politics during Sanader. However, the fact that he is under proceedings at the moment also shows determination within the political system to challenge practices that are potentially endangering democracy, at least to a certain extent (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

Within the “executives respect for the constitution” indicator, the values scored are even higher than that for the rule of law. Unlike the rule of law index, there have been no regressive trends since the 2000s, following a stark improvement. Furthermore, the executive’s respect for the constitution continues to improve significantly in the most recent period as well. The incumbent President Zoran Milanović, a lawyer by background, is insistent on keeping all decisions consistent with the Constitution of the Republic. One of the reasons for this focus on “by the book” actions is not only his commitment to the Constitution, which should, of course, be present but also is the fact that a large portion of his presidential election campaign and the current modus operandi is based on strict scrutiny against the HDZ party and the Prime Minister, which he often calls out for corruption (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

In line with previous indicators, both the judicial and the legislative constraints on the executive in Croatia seem to be performing well, indicating a stable checks and balances system. Regardless of the potential for improvement elsewhere that would enhance the quality of democracy in Croatia, the institutions themselves seem to be functioning rather well. The system seems to be relatively resilient to extensive democratic backsliding and personalization of politics. While it may be present within the parties, some more than the others, and while it may exist in media, the institutions seem to be ridden of the personalized politics that existed during Tuđman (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

## SERBIA

The state of democracy in Serbia indicates clearly that challenges are more multifaceted and more deeply rooted than just the personalization of politics goes. In fact, the personalization of politics in Serbia is beyond a tool in the political arsenal that helped Aleksandar Vučić achieve almost absolute power. It is important to note that he has not led a personalized platform, to begin with. Rather, the

personalization in his case seems more as a consequence of the willingness to secure centralized, authoritarian power in the system, so much so that it has marginalized every other element of the political system, including the political party and virtually extinct political opposition. Personalization of politics is the outcome that we see today, after years of the slow deterioration of democracy. Therefore, the effect that seems plausible in Serbia is that personalization of politics creates a sense of legitimacy or righteousness in Vučić’s actions because of how he portrays himself to the general population: as the hardworking, self-sacrificing, just a regular humble man of Serbia that works for the better good. What remains invisible in such a portrayal is the authoritarian side of the coin. This allows for the perpetuation of autocratization because no accountability is being sought by the citizens, but rather the limited participatory space multiplies the lack of democratic interest, knowledge, and a general sense of apathy, in which a personalized autocrat can thrive (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

In Serbia, it is the most evident that personalization of politics actually depends on the interests and capacities of the leader and just how much it can impede democratic processes. To begin with, the rule of law index shows an overall improvement from the 90s; however, it is essential to emphasize that this improvement is far from showing that there is a stable and the strong rule of law in Serbia (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

The improvement from the 2000s only lifted the rule of law from minimum to median scores on the index, and even with such median value, the rule of law has been deteriorating approximately since 2008, with the most significant drop being in 2011-2012, roughly coinciding with the last year of the government’s mandate before Vučić’s first big win and first Prime Minister mandate. This is important because Vučić won the elections on a technocratic, anti-corruption, populist political platform. Meanwhile, the rule of law only deteriorated during his mandates in multiple executive positions. The most recent dip in 2019-2020 comes again with no surprise considering that in these couple of years alone, several media outlets in Serbia reported on different affairs, from Krušik (weapons-sales affair) to Jovanjica (cannabis crops), that tied to prominent and high-level officials in Serbia (SNS cadres), all of which seemed to be glossed over and soon forgotten (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

Executive’s respect for the constitution in Serbia follows the trend of the overall rule of law index in Serbia, with only minor deviations since 2012. Naturally, this could be due to other indicators that make up the rule of law index. Still, nevertheless, the executive’s respect for the constitution seems to be not only overall performing poorly

but also deteriorating recently. This could potentially be related to the often overstepping of jurisdiction, i.e., the authoritarianism that is most definitely present in Serbia, which is also shown in the overall quality of democracy (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

An interesting aspect of Serbia is also the checks and balances between the different parts of the political system. Namely, the legislative constraints on the executive seemed to have worked rather well from circa 2001 to 2010, with a severe regressive trend since then and another significant drop following the 2019 parliamentary elections. The latest parliamentary elections are not surprising, however, considering that the general awareness was that Ana Brnabić would be again the Prime Minister in Serbia due to her servility to the SNS party leadership. By approximation, the leadership of the country, which is at this point personified and personalized in Aleksandar Vučić. Unlike

the legislative constraints, the judicial constraints on the executive in Serbia never seemed to have functioned exceptionally well, but these two are deteriorating more recently. The fact that neither judiciary nor the legislature seems to hold any power over the executive indicates that all decision-making and political power in the country are pooling in the executive, which is again a characteristic of authoritarian regimes. It seems obsolete at this point to comment on the democratic aspects of the state of the arts in Serbia but considering that the country is still nominally a parliamentary democracy, the political system, at best, is clearly functioning as a presidential one, with significant marginalization of the Prime Minister and her function. With the deterioration of the checks and balances that should be characteristic of parliamentary democracy, it seems that the personalization of politics in Serbia is a consequence of the overall autocratization of the regime (Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparing Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia on personalization of politics gives a clear overview of three very different types of regimes when it comes to personalization of politics despite certain similarities. Perhaps, it would be better to start with what may be similar. For all three countries, the institutional legacy of what preceded democratization is more than evident. However, two distinct heritages go into all three of the political systems. One is the legacy of building political opposition on nationalist ideologies, most prominently during the last decade of SFRY. For all three countries, there is a solid nationalist platform that allowed the political elites active in the previous regime to maintain power in times of great political upheaval and uncertainty. More so, the conflicts in the region gave these nationalist leaders carte blanche to organize the system in a manner they would see fitting. The other legacy is the “institutional DNA” of the previous regime. Most of the politicians, including Vučić, Đukanović, and Milanović, are or were members of parties whose organizational origins can be traced to organizational structures of the Communist Party. Both of these institutional legacies drove towards the first similarity that remains visible even today, which is the strong presidentialism of leading parties in all three countries. Furthermore, all three countries are parliamentary democracies, at least on paper, and parliamentarianism is far less compatible with the personalization of politics when it comes to Heads of States because there is much more tension from the scope of power between the Head of State and Head of Government. This just makes the differences far more interesting today.

As a last similarity, I would again go back to political culture. While the post-Yugoslavian political culture does not necessarily demand a dictator, it certainly has trouble distinguishing between a democratic and an autocratic leader. This lack of a democratic political culture that seems to be still leader-focused fails to seek accountability from today's leaders. I have examined several possible angles that contribute to such a political culture throughout the paper. It always boils down to an argument of what came first, the chicken or the egg? It is relatively straightforward that there is a solid transgenerational impression of Tito's cult of personality; we see it today among the aspirations of the young generations to have a strong leader who

would act decisively for the common good, the benevolent portrayal of Tito's socialism is reasonably apparent in such a preference. But again, it is not a neglectable fact that this cannot be a natural heritage of SFRY since the bureaucratization of the political system following Tito's death was not that short-lived. What I would say is the most likely when one sums it all up is the lack of experience with democracy – the political culture is, in fact, lacking the experience, the maturity, and the knowledge that would allow it to distinguish democratic, depersonalized rule from the political style of the political elites that are present for decades now.

In that sense, I would agree with something that Florian Bieber also mentioned, which is the fact that in general, in the post-Yugoslavia space, personalization of politics is consolidated to an extent, in the sense that it is hard, almost impossible, to focus on the depersonalized perspective of politics (Bieber, Interview, 2021). And the conclusions in the book *Presidentialism of Political Parties in the Western Balkans* nudge in a similar direction, with analysis in certain countries that point out that the electorate rarely even focuses on the party, but almost always on the party leader (Passarelli, 2019.).

In that sense, yes, the three countries share a similar political culture, similar regime transformation paths, and definitely the institutional legacy of the Communist Union and political elites. However, the development of personalization of politics has differed by far. I would once again agree with Bieber in the sense that early-period of DPS and Đukanović in Montenegro and the current state of arts with SNS and Vučić in Serbia do share similarities. They do not seem that similar today because of the difference in the longevity of the two. DPS has been “running the show” for decades, and over time has managed to secure enough centralized power that flexibility and a certain amount of compliance were possible over that time, while SNS and Vučić are only now settling into their consolidated, centralized power. Will the similarities remain between the two? Only enough time will tell, but the last parliamentary elections in Montenegro prove that even such regimes might not last for good. I would say, however, that circumstances of the period 1998-2006 where DPS in Montenegro probably worked the most on

securing its political platform cannot be compared to the period 2012-2021 and Vučić's regime, by the simple fact that the international community, media, and civil society are at least seemingly seeking more accountability and tolerating less when it comes to non-democratic practices. With media and social media keeping track of everything at all times, all political affairs, instances of corruption, and even the slightest transgressions can be magnified.

Croatia, I would say, remains the most different from the two in the sense that I would argue that, currently, personalized politics in the general context are not an issue for Croatia. Yes, certain political persons are emphasized in the public space, but then again, some of them, like Milanović, demand that attention either by their position or their rhetoric. But it does not always equate to overstepping of influence. Patronage, clientelism, corruption – definitely are linked to specific weaknesses of the system but are not necessarily most directly related to the personalization of politics. I would say that they are dependent more on presidentialism or the agreement within the party that certain non-democratic, even illegal practices, favor the ruling. What makes Croatia more democratic than the other two countries is that one can count on strong political opposition to call out such practices and demand accountability for them.

The effects on democratization, in this sense, are, again, vastly different for the three. It depends on political pluralism, the resilience of institutions, and the leader's capacity. In Croatia, personalization of politics does not affect democracy in a general sense, especially now with a stronger alternative to strongly presidentialized political parties. In Montenegro, personalization of politics has definitely been present but is proven not to be detrimental to democratization. In any case, the latest elections have confirmed that the electoral system is functioning, and the new majority in government, which excludes the DPS altogether, managed to run their government with more or less no issues within the system. Furthermore, the stability that the DPS rule offered in Montenegro has contributed to a slightly paradoxical situation: a single-party and, by default, not necessarily democratic governance has brought certain democratic and pro-reform rhetoric to the overall development of the country. Last but not least, in Serbia, personalization of politics has the most detrimental effect on democratization because it is tied to a very authoritarian style of rule that does not, at least for the moment, offer any redeeming political activity that would balance itself out, but is rather continuously backsliding.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the personalization of politics is an ambivalent phenomenon, and its effects depend mostly on the individual's capacity that happens to be in its focus. This paper gave a broad overview, from SFRY to today, focusing on chronological preconditions for personalization and how this political process manifests itself today, if at all, in the three countries formerly a part of SFRY. Some similarities can definitely be linked back to the former regime. At the same time, the consequences and impact of personalization today show a variety of possible effects, from Croatia, where personalization is entirely marginalized and whose position is taken by populism, to Montenegro, where personalization is as consolidated as the party system, to Serbia, where it shows the most adverse impact on democratic development.

The hypothesis that was proposed at the beginning of this paper is confirmed not to be factual in all three countries. Whereas political personalization is definitely a challenge for democracy in Serbia, it is far less of a problem even in Montenegro and definitely in Croatia. The reasons, as listed previously, are multifaceted, from institutional challenges to the sheer willingness of the person in charge to compromise on absolute control.

Similarities in the democratic transition undoubtedly impacted several democratic (or rather non-democratic) practices that are present in the country, most prominently the presidentialism within the parties and the organizational logic within them. However, on a general level of personalization, all possible similarities between the three existed pretty much only until the 2000s, where Croatia made the most decisive step towards institutionally securing depersonalization of politics. The legacy of political culture shows a much more substantial impact today for all three countries, in the sense that indeed a preference for strong leadership does exist. This could be linked back to the communist experience and the cult of personality of Josip Broz Tito, which was perhaps even the most progressive among what is generally considered common for totalitarian regimes. Still, I would say that it goes even beyond that and is linked more to inexperience with democracy altogether or a somewhat incomplete understanding of what democracy should be. During SFRY, the people were at the same time both emancipated

towards self-management and kept in the dark from "real" politics handled among the chosen few. This, combined with all other elements, including a cult of personality, is only multiplied through the political socialization of younger generations that cannot also fully distinguish between democracy and authoritarianism.

The consequences, accordingly, vary as well between the three, Croatia being the most democratic. While certain challenges remain, nothing within the research showed that political leaders in Croatia are regularly overstepping their institutional competencies or that this is undermining the checks and balances system. Montenegro might fit this picture of overstepped influence much closer if not for the last parliamentary elections. Namely, the executive dominance was a fact during the single-party dominance of the DPS. Still, the victory of the political opposition in Montenegro shows that the political system does function. Consequently, there has been no overstepping of institutional competencies so far during the period since the last parliamentary elections. Even before that, the fact that there was little to no political pluralism for the most part in Montenegro makes it difficult to establish where and when the overstepping of competencies had taken place because DPS functioned like a single organism.

Last but not least, a case that does confirm all supporting hypotheses on the consequences of personalization of politics in Serbia. Vučić's overstepping of institutional competencies is both overt and frequent, and visible most from the fact that the role of the Prime Minister in a parliamentary democracy has been almost completely marginalized. In such a regressive system, one can hardly speak of any checks and balances, let alone functioning one.

In sum, it is important to note that personalization of politics is not something that can be taken entirely out of the equation even in the most democratic of countries by the sheer fact that there is always a hierarchy that gives certain functionality to the system and that there is always a person, more or less charismatic, performing these functions. Aside from the capacity of the actor to utilize personalization to secure progress, or progressive centralization of power, personalization of politics can

contribute to other potentially adverse outcomes. One is the fact that on a party level, it undermines democratization within the interest groups that are supposed to be one of the driving factors of democratic development, by extension of being the elected representatives of popular will. If political parties are autocratic within themselves, what is there to prevent them from expanding this authoritarianism beyond the parties? Well, from the example of Croatia, it should be at least other parties, even if they are presidential as well. But political pluralism nevertheless is an essential corrective factor. That, and a political culture that is emancipated and participatory, that is enabled and encouraged to seek accountability from the politicians. However, political culture can be neither if personalization of politics is so consolidated that it is being perceived as a functioning part

of the democratic system, as long as the leader shows some willingness, real or fake, to act for the public good. The actual dangers of political trends such as personalization of politics are the fact that it is often not that recognizable until the influence of the individual is too entrenched to be rooted out. That is why democratization cannot be only an institutional or societal, or political process; it has to be all of those simultaneously, to whatever extent possible. Most importantly, democratization takes time and takes generations to mature and become consolidated. Instead of being consistently surprised by the state of democracy in the region, one might not help but wonder, have we given them enough time and the right kind of effort to happen?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emma Džejna Smolo** holds a master's degree in political science with focus on International Relations and Diplomacy from Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo. For her under- and post-graduate studies, she has been awarded several awards on the level of University of Sarajevo and the Federal ministry for science and education in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She has authored several scientific articles on a variety of topics, from youth policies to climate and environment, from the political sciences perspective. The focus of her research and writing are the Western Balkan countries. She is currently working as a Communications/Public Relations Officer for Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Dialogue Southeast Europe  
Kupreška 20 | 71000 Sarajevo | Bosnia and Herzegovina

Responsible:

Dr Ralf Melzer | Director | Dialogue Southeast Europe  
Phone: +387 (33) 711 540 | Fax: +387 (33) 711 540 [www.fes-southeasteurope.org](http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org)

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