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Flaming Badger and Snotnose: The Infantilization of Political Communication in Croatia

Abstract

This article delves into the analysis of political communication between two Croatian political leaders, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and President Zoran Milanović, through the prism of the infantilization of politics as part of the broader context of the infantilization of society. To achieve this, the article introduces selected theoretical theses on the infantilization of society and on how the expression of infantile (political) disgust, as a speech act, contaminates and pollutes the community. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper aims to illustrate how, in the case of these two politicians, the infantilization of politics is characterized by the replacement of political discourse with personal insults, witticism, affectation, and emotions such as disgust, occasionally intertwined with elements of narcissism. Exploring how their political discourse tends to be personalized and even celebritized, the paper shows how it further contributes to the overall infantilization of society.[1]

Keywords: celebritization, infantilization of politics, infantilization of society, political communication

1. On Political Representation and Political Rhetoric in Croatia

In terms of political organization, Croatia is structured as a republic with a democratically elected parliament, the Croatian Parliament (Hrvatski sabor) as the supreme representative body of the people of Croatia, and the President as the chief of the state. The Parliament elects, i.e., appoints the government and the prime minister and is vested with the power to remove them from office if

necessary. The Croatian political system is based on the principle of separation of powers, meaning that the government is divided into three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. As far as the electoral system is concerned, it followed the proportional representation model for over two decades until 2015, when it was changed to preferential. Although the mentioned rules and regimes, and especially the apostrophized electoral system, are liable to expert criticism and scrutiny from different angles (Raos), from the lay perspective, Croatia has, at a formal level, a well-functioning high politics structure.

At the performance level, however, it leaves quite a different impression on citizens and gives them ample reasons for dissatisfaction and, eventually, mistrust. The dissatisfaction has, judging from the public narratives, evolved into aversion toward institutional politics primarily due to the involvement of high-ranking officeholders in criminal activities and corruption. The multitude and nature of shady affairs following one after another in rapid succession, each often surpassing the previous one in magnitude and severity, devalue both the reputation of politics as a profession and the credibility of politicians as major figures on the public scene.

Public opinion polls on these issues – too often reduced to nothing more than surveys on the (un)popularity of governmental bodies, political parties, or individual politicians – are routinely conducted by various professional polling agencies, with the results usually broadcast on the news programs of major Croatian television networks. Due to this practice, one can get a fairly reliable insight into the citizens' perception of political life in Croatia on a regular basis. However, although indicative, the raw data is not sufficient in itself to demonstrate the core of the problem, so the media make room for an array of political analysts and commentators to dissect the data from different angles and provide their interpretation.

In addition to the crime and corruption mentioned above, the low level of political communication, as evident from parliamentary discussions and politicians' appearances or debates on/in the media, is especially problematic. On the affective plane, this communication often elicits disgust and loathing in the interested audience. It also provides political communication experts with ample material for analysis and points, unwaveringly, to the degradation of basic standards of civilized political discourse, a process helped to a different degree by various actors from all segments of the political spectrum.

This material, on the other hand, may be analyzed from a cultural and political anthropological point of view, which leads to a different type of conclusion, i.e., problematizes the politicians' view of their own actions/communication and their position towards citizens/voters to whom they are answerable. As it is a reversible relationship, the next focus of analysis is, clearly, the reception of politicians or politics by the population/electorate. The discourse of high politics is informative not only of politics but also of social and cultural environment, civil interest, political and media literacy, and type of media engagement. With that in mind, cultural and political anthropology should first and foremost provide a critical review of the platitude that "the people get the government they deserve."

The discussion about what the politicians in Croatia primarily do, what their public activity looks like, and who they address and in what way, may be opened with a dispute about whether or not the "representatives owe citizens a duty of informed political judgment" (Street, "Celebrity Politicians" 440). Given that Street is the father of the celebrity politician concept and that, in many of his works (e.g. Street, "Bob"; Street, "Celebrity"; Street, "The Celebrity"), he explores the interweaving of the world of show business and the world of politics, the author's position on this dispute is predictable.

A long history of the transformation of political representation, currently condensed in the efforts of modern politicians to build their image through rhetoric rather than tangible achievements, has reached its indisputable pinnacle in the twenty-first century. The change that "homo politicus" has undergone in the last twenty years – a major shift from what political rhetoric looks like "in theory" to what it looks like "in practice" (Kišiček, "Homo politicus") – cannot simply be ascribed to the degradation of a serious profession that should have the care for common good incorporated in its core. However, the public and media performances of an ever-greater number of politicians point to a widespread trivialization and celebritization of politics, promoting/emphasizing/a triumph of style over substance. When it comes to substance, tackling issues of public importance is superseded by focusing on other people's or one's own privacy. Indeed, "spicy details" from the private lives of political opponents are readily served to public on a plate, if not ridiculed in public. Even lies are used to demonize others if needed (Nigam 12). It all bears more resemblance to childish poking and infantile approach to reality than to adult, assumingly mature, and responsible

communication, to put it mildly. Highlighting the patterns of such political exercises by using illustrative examples sharpens the image. And where media image is concerned, even at times of new media predominance, the phenomenon of politician-celebrity in Croatia lies primarily on television's favoritism of specific people and intriguing personalities. The television image inherits portraits and photographs and presents itself as an important factor in creating an impression on the audience. Hand in hand with the described (rhetoric) trends, there comes the popularization of personalized politics at the expense of party politics. The processes of personalization and restyling of politics have not bypassed Croatian society. Instead of political parties, individuals and their personalities have become the focus of the media and public/electorate alike, which consequently generates interest in their political as well as private lives (Pedersen and Rahat 6). Additionally, a specific form of the abovementioned politician-celebrity has crystalized in Croatia. Credibility and drawing attention are the two characteristics of the epistemic power of politician-celebrities; these features are not related to any special expertise or professional role but allow the politicians as persons with their own attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge to influence other people and their opinion (Archer and Cawston 33-36).

It is obvious that politicians learn their performance skills from celebrities (Marshall 91) and that these "mediatized personas" in politics are the response to the challenges of the times (Drake and Higgins 89-90). It is also obvious that, leaving the spirit of the times aside, there is a for-profit industry matrix behind the media spectacularization and celebritization of politics (Hromadžić 63, 72). What should be important to examine and discuss are the pedagogical effects of such politics and evolving situation that undermines democratic processes on the recipients, citizens, consumers, or, in short, the audience in the broadest sense of the word.

Specifically, we are interested in the consequences of the political rhetoric of Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, the respective President and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, on Croatian society,[2] as well as in the cultural and anthropological aspect of their exchange of insults. We rely on Critical Discourse Analysis, which we understand both as a (multi)method and as a (multi)theory we can use to examine how language (e.g., themes, speech acts, argumentation, and rhetoric) is employed to create the discourse as a social practice. Critical Discourse Analysis allows us to observe the verbal conflict between Milanović and Plenković as a socially shaped

phenomenon that, in turn, affects relationships within the community and constitutes society and relationships between people (Fairclough and Wodak 258). In our opinion, the relationship between the leading political figures in Croatia and the way they express themselves should be analyzed within the concepts of infantilization and celebritization, which are both closely related to consumerist culture and pop culture. In the following text, we additionally examine these phenomena and concepts to determine if and how the uncooperativeness and defamation between the Prime Minister and the President may be explained within the framework of these concepts. The period covered is from 2020, when Milanović became the fifth president of the Republic of Croatia, to the present day. We used the material containing their media statements published in selected newspapers or posted on news portals.

2. The Infantilization of Political Communication as Part of the Infantilization of Society

Although the criticism of the infantilization of society as set forth by the left and liberal authors is more pertinent for our argument than the right political standpoint due to the left/liberal focus on the capitalist, economic, and political dimensions of the production of social immaturity, it should be kept in mind that this syntagm has also been present in both conservative and/or right discourse for ten or so years. Moreover, the left and right discourses often coincide in their description of the material consequences of infantilization but substantially differ in their understanding of its causes and roots, which is the reason why our line of argument leans toward the left.[3]

In his book The True Life, addressed to young people, Alain Badiou says that today, “the spiritual cult of old age has reversed into a materialistic cult of eternal youth” (22). The tendency is to stay young at any cost for as long as possible. The disappearance of traditional initiation of the young into the world of adulthood and the rise of the cult of youth as a type of ideology subject young people to endless adolescence, which consequently leads to puerilization, i.e., infantilization of adults. Badiou also argues that the infantilization of adults is directly linked to the influence of the market “because life, in our society, is to some extent the possibility of buying” (23). Adults buy things they like or want in the same manner that children and teenagers do – the only difference is that they have more money to buy expensive toys.

Badiou's critical portrait of the consumer capitalism of the modern world is further compounded by the gender perspective of society's infantilization. While sons, without a symbolic foothold to become fathers, are condemned to eternal adolescence and perpetual childish yearning for new toys, daughters are pushed into premature womanliness, into adultness that "consumes their adolescence, or even their childhood itself" (81), as the line between daughters and mothers becomes ever more blurred. Therefore, there are differences in how boys and girls are subjected to the capitalist imperative of idealess life and the requirements globalized capitalism imposes on their developing subjectivity. Boys will live idealess lives because they have not experienced the maturing of thought, while girls have experienced it prematurely.

Other authors have also criticized the infantilization of society as the result of consumerism-oriented capitalism. In addition to gender-based criticism, there is, expectedly, a class-based criticism. A decade before Badiou, Benjamin R. Barber, in his book Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole, had defined infantilization as "enduring childishness," which is closely related to global consumerism, whose goal is to produce, advertise, and sell goods to the younger population, and "to imbue older consumers with the tastes of the young" (7). However, while the older population in the developed countries, according to Barber, gets chronologically older but behaves ever younger, young people in the developing countries "remain marginalized and in poverty, irrelevant as consumers despite their overwhelming needs and forced to grow up prematurely, becoming little soldiers, little prostitutes, and little garment-factory workers, giving some to the global market economy but gaining little from it" (10). Barber's point, along with Badiou's gender differences in his understanding of the infantilization of society, introduces the problem of class differences between those with purchasing power, whose needs are constantly inflated and whose spending is stimulated by infantilization, and those with real needs but without the means to meet them. Barber claims that business, educational, and governmental institutions of the developed world are "consciously and purposefully engaged in infantilization" (12) with a goal to suppress critical thinking and public citizenship as adult public goods "in favor of self-involved private choice and narcissistic personal gain" (15). By the same token, narcissistic self-absorption and promotion of the ideal of fulfilling one's own needs as the qualities of modern culture are discussed by Frank Furedi. He calls today's culture a "therapy

culture," characterized by emotion sharing and self-absorption, but with a downside of reduced public responsibility and neglected development of the public sphere (72). All that, according to Furedi, spills over on people, shaping their attitude toward the moral and political:

> *The idea that politics is about fulfilling yourself relegates wider public attachments to a secondary role. Feeling good becomes an end in itself – and the individual relationship to a wider moral or political framework threatens to become an insignificant side issue. (Furedi 73)*

Promoting emotionalism as a form of responsibility toward oneself at the expense of the responsibility toward the public, and general in political questions, is reflected in subjectivity that Félix Guattari calls "capitalist subjectivity." It is "an equalized subjectivity, with standardized fantasies and massive consumption of infantilizing reassurances," which "equally involves conscious ideological formations and collective unconscious emotions" (Guattari 202). Guattari's understanding of infantilization may be equalized with dumbing down in which mass media and mediatized content play a special role:

> *We are crushed under the weight of mass media, by images of power, by a manipulation of the imagination in the service of an oppressive social order, by the fabrication, whatever the cost, of a majority consensus, by the cult of security, by processes of intoxication that scare people about everything and nothing, infantilizing them to the point that they no longer ask themselves questions. (Guattari 46)*[4]

John Zerzan centers not only on media influence but also on today's popular culture, in a broad sense of the word, as yet another source of infantilization and dumbing down of society, especially of its younger members. He underscores casual dressing, insecurely uttered sentences intonated as questions rather than statements, use of ubiquitous qualifier "like" in speech, music that talks about fear, impotence, and confusion, and an increase in suicide rates and eating disorders. In his opinion, all these are "reaction[s] to the tremendous accumulation of lies that comprises modern culture and everyday life. Television, a passive, and in that respect childish form of mass media, has never been so widely consumed. Today's youth are not the first TV generation, but are more and more subject to what is often even stupider than before" (Zerzan 1).

It seems quite obvious that television has largely been replaced by social networks and smartphones as a technology that has, according to Simon Gottschalk, accelerated and normalized the infantile tendencies of Western culture![5] In any case, infantilization of the population is mostly carried out through various cultural practices ranging from everyday speech characterized by utterly impoverished vocabulary to short sentences infesting modern fiction, to political rhetoric that conspicuously lacks sophistication, to cable television that resorts to sensationalistic reporting. The attitude toward the elderly, teenagers, and students, for example, has changed – they are supervised and protected as children. Individual emotional, social, or cognitive immaturity cannot be explained as resulting from individual shortcomings. Quite the opposite, it should be understood as socially produced (Gottschalk). He specifically warns against possible detrimental effects that infantilization may have on democracy:

> *Democratic policymaking requires debate, demands compromise and involves critical thinking. It entails considering different viewpoints, anticipating the future, and composing thoughtful legislation. What's a fast, easy and simple alternative to this political process? It's not difficult to imagine an infantile society being attracted to authoritarian rule. Unfortunately, our social institutions and technological devices seem to erode hallmarks of maturity: patience, empathy, solidarity, humility and commitment to a project greater than oneself. All are qualities that have traditionally been considered essential for both healthy adulthood and for the proper functioning of democracy. (Gottschalk)*

On his blog, Cliffski, a British game developer behind the simulation game Democracy, expressed his concerns about the phenomenon he called "the infantilization of politics." He believes that political argumentation and discussion are "based entirely around personalities, appearances, memes, and humour," and adds that political discourse has been reduced through Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and similar sites to "shortform (on Twitter alarmingly so) one-liner jabs and jokes, rather than actual analysis of any topic" (Cliffski). On the other hand, Barber, who we already cited in the context of criticism of corrupted democracy and privatized public goods, described the language of politics as "contentious, argumentative, and simplistic" (20), and politicians as those who are "merchandized and sold as commodities to a public," whereby a public is perceived by the politicians as a mass of clients rather than "a body of public citizens" (157).

Jacopo Bernardini also describes the language of politics in times of the infantilization of the postmodern adult as being “simplified, depleted, dogmatized and has lost the complexity of a typically adult morality” (41).

We used all these theses, i.e., their synergistic effect, to create a specific framework for our analysis of the public relationship between Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković and to provide a critical assessment of their and any other similar politics and political communication in public spaces that are considered democratic.

3. Mutual Disgust and Disgusted Community

When Prime Minister Andrej Plenković commented on Zoran Milanović’s victory in the presidential elections in 2020, he said he expected a “hard cohabitation[6] between the newly elected President and the Government. These congratulatory words, which sounded unusually harsh in the context of political communication, did not really take the Croatian public aback, as the relationship between these two politicians, often marked by antagonism, was commonplace. If we look at the time when Milanović held the office of Prime Minister, from December 2011 to January 2016, a period often highlighted in political analyses as exemplary of conflictual political communication inappropriate for the position he held and marked by aggression, ridicule, ad hominem arguments, and use of vulgar and “badass” speaking style in combination with elitist language,[7] the escalation of verbal conflict between Milanović and Plenković was not at all surprising. However, two years after Milanović has stepped into the presidential shoes, two years of discord, naming and shaming, and even boycotting each other’s decisions, a survey, carried out in May 2022 by the public opinion polling agency Promocija Plus for the RTL television, showed that 35% of participants (N=1300) saw both of them as equally responsible for that situation, 29% thought that Milanović was absolutely right or that he was at least more right than Plenković, and 21% thought the same for Plenković. According to the survey, the main reasons for the conflict between the two politicians were character incompatibility and mutual intolerance (36.1%) and a power struggle for dominance in the country (15%).[8]

Milanović's rhetoric teems with the so-called "zoranisms," quoted in many media articles (Bartolović). "Zoranisms" are Milanović's statements containing illogical arguments, clumsy Latin phrases, and occasional incomprehensible quips. Conversely, Plenković employs a rhetoric that may be described as more balanced, but he often uses foreign words and vocabulary that is not adapted to his audience; also, "he speaks, but says nothing" (Kišiček, "Retorika" 138). Plenković is criticized for his patronizing style, unwillingness to accept a dialogue, and strategy of diverting the attention away from the problem. In addition, one cannot but notice that Plenković, after having spent years in power, increasingly uses populist platitudes about two Croatias, aimed at dividing the country/society into two camps: those in favor of the ruling party and the opposition.[9] During his second mandate, Prime Minister Plenković, like Milanović, does not hold back from ad hominem arguments and insults either.[10] Their mutual accusations, garnished by an array of personal insults, were satirically combined in the text written by journalist and columnist Viktor Ivančić. The excerpt reads as follows:

… [T]he Prime Minister accused the President of inciting terrorist attacks against the Government so the Pres. fired back that the PM was a shameless liar and a flaming badger and then the PM called him an immature snotnose so the Pres. called him a runt and a crybaby and then the PM told him he was sabotaging the fight against COVID-19 so the Pres. said well it wasn't my grandma that was shaking hands with the virus-shedding Đoković and then the PM said that the Pres. was systematically spreading hate speech so the Pres. called him an arrogant brat with delusions of grandeur and then they started insulting each other's mamas and promptly moved on to insulting each other's papas and then the PM called the Pres. a member of the red bourgeoisie and the regime's favorite son so the Pres. replied that the PM was a walking mass of complexes and clearly shaking in his boots over the JANAF affair and then the PM called him a bully and added that he used to protect his basketball teammates from people like him so the Pres. told him that he could take him in basketball anytime and added that the PM avoided military service on the strength of the fake medical exemption written by his own mother and then the PM insinuated that the Pres. likes to snort cocaine so the Pres. insinuated that the PM dislikes bathing and then the PM called him a frustrated pathological liar who prevaricates as easily as he breathes so the Pres. accused him of covertly mocking Tuđman in Brussels and then the PM replied that at least he never twiddled his thumbs in Brussels at the Croatian tax payers' expense so the Pres. told him that he was surrounded by Yutel cadres and then the PM called him a ventriloquist of the radical

right and a pyromaniac masquerading as a firefighter, and then the Pres. called a press conference to trash him and the PM called a press conference to annihilate him. (Ivančić)

The described conflict is part of an affective culture characterized by "disgust" fostered in their discourses, which then overspills into the community. Sara Ahmed explains performative disgust as a speech act of disgust producing that which is labeled as disgusting. This act equally involves the object intended to be presented as disgusting so as to make us move away from it, and the subject created by this moving away who is disgusted and keeps repeating the statement, and, finally, the community addressed by the subject and expected to witness the disgusting thing, repeat the condemnation, and confirm the disgust (Ahmed 92-94). Denial, use of derogative expressions, negative allusions expressed in the language of popular culture, and disparaging humor, are only some of the rhetorical figures and genres used by both the Prime Minister and the President to show mutual disgust. By repeating defamation metaphors, each plays on the emotional distancing of the addressed public from his political opponent. The political content becomes less important, and the crux of the political matter is pushed into the background, giving way to negative emotions and personalized affectations. Both of them, as subjects and objects of disgust, use communication with the public to create a community that is either theirs or their opponent's. At the same time, the community is also expected to identify with one of them and distance from the other.

A conversation between the President and the Prime Minister is usually held indirectly and under controlled conditions: at press conferences, at the lectern in the Parliament Hall, during their visits to various local events or political actors abroad, via institutional social network profiles, or through official announcements. They also address the public or any public figure in this way. Their communication, mediated by various media, provides both sides with enough time to prepare their response and allows journalists, political analysts, media experts, communicologists, and the broader public to scrutinize their words more thoroughly and intensely. Some are appalled by the rhetorical styles used by the two leading politicians, others try to penetrate the meaning of what they said, while the rest take a "cheerleading" stance and observe the whole thing as mass entertainment.

Ivančić sees the exchange of insults between Milanović and Plenković as a "testosterone massacre," and from the point of view of an "emissary of modest women citizens of this country," he offers the following solution:

> *When the President and the Prime Minister finally managed to meet in person after months of bloodthirsty power struggle, they should have taken that historical opportunity to … bravely open their flies, pull out their genitalia, and display them on the conference table to be measured by the members of a neutral jury. … The purpose of such an act would be to express the sorrow and pity of Croatian politics in centimeters as well. (Ivančić)*

This provocative "female solution" to the conflict between Plenković and Milanović introduces another aspect of understanding their communication – a masculine aspect belonging to hegemonic masculinity, or, more precisely, toxic masculinity.[11] Milanović, more often than not, uses a discourse that insists on mutual competition and humiliates another man as unrealized, incomplete, childish, womanish, or cowardly![12] Plenković, on the other hand, puts maximum effort into exposing Milanović's political incompetence as a result of his laziness, primitiveness and "conduct of a complex-ridden loser," even alluding to Milanović's possible drug abuse![13] Plenković accentuates his own assumed ability to make rational decisions and run the country with a firm hand, that is, without showing too much emotion – all within the norms of the imagined hegemonic masculinity. While this text will not delve into non-verbal communication, it should be noted that body posture and facial expressions also play a role, albeit in different ways, in the creation of hegemonic masculinity that both use to assert their political power.

Furthermore, they both frequently indulge in self-praise, showcasing their successes or firm political positions, which they underscore by pointing out their international contacts and relations or their prime-ministerial achievements. Such a discourse, often aimed at infantilizing the other while paradoxically being infantile itself, may be understood as an integral part of the modern narcissistic culture. The President's and Prime Minister's obsession with their accomplishments, which they take as a warranty of their political credibility, is usually reflected in their statements like "I am the President of the country, why should I be afraid of a bum who has no authority over me" [14] or "[y]ou have the Prime Minister who is one of the most experienced and most influential

members of the European Council, to put it mildly.[15] Finally, their hegemonic masculinity is also manifested through a strong leader's position that counts on a specific emotional attachment of the people who support them. As explained by a psychiatrist asked to comment on the Milanović-Plenković relationship and the repercussions of this relationship on the community:

> *So if our leader said something to the enemy, we'd agree that he was right and we'd be proud of him. Say that he also personally insulted the enemy. We'd think: "Oh, our leader is so clever … After all, the opponent started it first." Just like in a kindergarten*![16]

The media tug-of-war between the President and the Prime Minister brims with insults, accusations, and threats. Thomas Zeitzoff believes that this sort of political communication is a hallmark of "nasty politics," dominated by aggressive rhetoric against political opponents. Its purpose is not only to draw attention but also to signalize toughness to the voters who feel threatened (Zeitzoff). In the case of the two most prominent Croatian politicians, it seems that the aggressive rhetoric is not so much about achieving some specific political aim as it is about delivering personal humiliation and the game of one-upmanship between the two, in fact, career-oriented politicians. Still, the President's announcement that he would candidate for the Prime Minister with the leading opposition party in the upcoming parliamentary elections, especially how he announced his candidacy, indicates necessary toughness and readiness to make a sacrifice that needs to be made to save the country. With or without toughness, the manner of their mutual communication, eagerly spurred on and closely covered by the media, resembles a quarrel between two teenagers who run roughshod over all norms of political decency. Hereby, it should be emphasized that the "norm-breaking language" as a "political strategy" has been cultivated under the aegis of populist and right-wing discourse because the "right-wing populists needed to differentiate themselves from the customs and traditions of the political status quo" in order to be perceived as fighting against the alleged elite and establishment (Winberg 3). Taking Donald Trump as an example, Oscar Winberg tried to show how the celebrity status Trump gained before he entered politics allowed him, despite numerous indictments, to capitalize politically on insulting rhetoric:

The other candidates who adopted Trump's rhetoric encountered the same condemnations, but did not benefit in the same way from flouting political customs and basic decency. The reality TV celebrity was uniquely positioned within the traditions of right-wing populism and conservative media to benefit from an unabashed variety of insult politics. (Winberg 10)

The Croatian counterpart to the former rightist celebrity populist US president, albeit not by aggressive rhetoric, is a Croatian musician with a long political career, Miroslav Škoro.[17] Although Škoro is an undisputed populistic champion among celebrity politicians in Croatia, in the category of those who derive their celebrity status from the entertainment business and capitalize it in politics;[18] the President of the Republic remains the unmatched political celebrity – a professional politician who draws attention by copying the behavior of famous people from the world of entertainment. By the extent of media exposure, the Prime Minister closely follows suit.

Both Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, as the most powerful political celebrity figures in Croatia, are granted amnesty by a portion of the public for the way in which they address each other and those who do not share their opinions. Their affective contention is more powerful than anything else when it comes to instigating negative emotions and polarizing the community. The exchange of insults at the top of political hierarchy shapes the public discourse and normalizes not only verbal but also potential physical aggression. Yet, Milanović and Plenković do not derive their political power from language but use language to display power and assert authority (Wodak and Meyer 11). In doing so, they abundantly use recontextualization, "a movement from one context to another, entailing particular transformations consequent upon how the material that is moved, recontextualized, figures within that new context" (Fairclough 51).

4. Conclusion

Milanović and Plenković are, therefore, perfect subjects for analysis of the celebritization of politics in Croatia and closer examination of the related phenomenon – the infantilization of politics. Such an analysis necessarily requires scrutinizing their communication as a source of political pollution. The President and Prime Minister's mutual disgust eventually pollutes the community and creates

a toxic climate of mutual distrust and irreconcilable separation, which leaves little room for the development of mature democracy.

Clearly, the personalization and celebritization of politics with the related emphasis on the personal and private, style, and entertainment, leading to the consequent lack of care for public interest and general good, tears down the democratic structure of the Croatian society. However, we took our line of argument a step further – toward the complex interweave of infantilized politics and infantilized society and their respective modes of functioning with regard to consumeristic and popular culture and, finally, narcissistic culture. In line with the theoretical contributions of critics of capitalism, we highlighted the social climate that fosters no-questions-asked policy as a prerequisite for modern politics, which not only relies on dumbing people/citizens/consumers/electorate down but also contributes to it. Politics in times of neoliberal capitalism, much like various other social institutions and actors, functions as a sale of goods and, in this sense, determines the nature and position of the public. By dissecting the political communication between Milanović and Plenković, the political celebrity champions in Croatia, we also highlighted the gender- and class-related aspects of their discourse that contribute to the infantilization of the population they address and the society they help shape. For that purpose, we analyzed the statements that reveal their hegemonic masculinity and flagged the aspects of elitism in their public appearances and communications. All these moments are warning signs, and, taken as a whole, they almost preclude critical thinking.

The political activity of the Prime Minister and the President of Croatia, their political rhetoric, and mutual communication mark the local political scene and social reality; however, a scientifically challenging element for cultural and political anthropology is the fact that it cannot be reduced to their characters and that the inevitable end of their political career will not necessarily lead to the change in political (communication) practices. These practices reflect the wider political and cultural paradigms we tried to delineate in our analysis.

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[2] As we were finishing this text, Zoran Milanović, fulfilling his presidential duty, announced that parliamentary elections in Croatia, which usually take place on Sunday, would be held on the 17th of April 2024, on Wednesday, which consequently automatically became a holiday. A few hours later, he showed up at a media conference of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia, where he was presented as the head of their list in the first constituency and candidate for prime minister. Milanović said he would resign as the President of the Republic of Croatia after winning the parliamentary elections. Both decisions caused an avalanche of reactions, especially the latter – that he would run for prime minister without resigning from his current position, which was perceived as a problem and a threat to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia.

[3] An American right-oriented blog, The Imaginative Conservative, suggested that the cause of modern immature American society, as described by one of the bloggers, was an excess of democracy, lack of self-confidence, and comprehensive unawareness of history and Christian religion (theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/10/infantile-america-chilton-williamson.html). The phrase “infantilization” also appears in both political spectra in Croatia, occasionally directly related to the relationship between Plenković and Milanović (See www.hkv.hr/vijesti/komentari/29910-i-sola-postherojsko-drustvo-i-thompson.html, www.jutarnji.hr/naslovnica/kardinal-bozanic-hrvatski-politicari-su-infantilni-3874899, www.hrvatski-fokus.hr/2020/09/26555/, h-alter.org/izdvojeno/taoci-nezrelosti/.

[4] Barber’s suppression of critical thinking and Guattari’s infantilization of people to such an extent that they stop asking questions are evocative of Erich Fromm’s thoughts written in the context of the “tempting of totalitarianism” in the early 1940s. For Fromm, a modern function of culture is to obscure problematic issues. Asking questions, as well as answering them, is left to experts, whereas facts, especially those mediated by the media, lose the characteristic of a structured whole and carry only abstract, quantitative meaning – they become just another fact (Fromm 276).

[5] In his debate on the age of Twitter, Donald Trump, and the politics of depreciation, in which he observes the importance of social networks from the media ecology viewpoint, Brian Ott (2017)

refers to Neil Postman and his compelling arguments on the influence of television on public discourse at the age of show business. Ott's article and Postman's book were published about thirty years apart.

[6]See www.nacional.hr/plenkovic-bit-ce-tvrda-kohabitacija-u-skladu-s-ustavom-i-zakonom/, www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/plenkovic-milanovic-ce-doznati-sto-to-znaci-tvrda-kohabitacija/, www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/plenkovic-objasnio-pojam-tvrde-kohabitacije-s-milanovicem-ovaj-put-je-vecina-biraca-odlucila-ovako-ne-mozemo-tu-nista-9856132.

[7] See Kišiček 2018, Lalić 2013, Grbeša-Zenzerović 2014.

[8]See net.hr/danas/vijesti/ekskluzivno-istrazivanje-odnos-milanovica-i-plenkovica-na-najnizim-granama-otkrivamo-kako-gradani-vide-njihov-sukob-a28909d2-cfa3-11ec-ac53-6ee961d9c84a.

[9]See vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/premijer-za-htv-imamo-dvije-hrvatske-vladu-koja-kontinuirano-radi-i-nemocnu-oporbu/39035.

[10]See net.hr/danas/vijesti/tvrda-kohabitacija-buran-odnos-andreja-plenkovica-i-zorana-milanovica-u-2021-5b53729a-6ae6-11ec-9d7d-6262c1c7a3a8.

[11] Toxic masculinity is characterized by different types of misogynous and homophobic speech and behavior. In the present case, it may be applied to Zoran Milanović's statement when he said that he was not interested in the testimonies of sexually abused actresses "who don't get out of bed for less than five million dollars" (dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/zoran-milanovic-odgovorio-na-reakcije-nakon-njegove-izjave-o-zlostavljanim-zenama---639074.html) or to Plenković's vague answer to the question why no women are heading the list for the Croatian Democratic Party at 2024 parliamentary elections: "I'm sorry there aren't more women. We opted for the winning lists" (www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/plenkovic-zao-mi-je-sto-nema-vise-zena-odlucili-smo-se-za-pobjednicke-liste-sto-sa-zenama-bi-izgubili/).

[12] See www.nacional.hr/milanovic-drukcije-se-ponasaj-pa-ces-imat-drukciji-tretman-nema-tu-cmizdrenja-mama-tata-to-ne-postoji/, www.maxportal.hr/premium-sadrzaj/milanovic-turudic-je-propalica-a-plenkovic-anemicni-dva-skleka-ne-moze-napraviti/, www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2851243321808033, net.hr/danas/vijesti/milanovic-ponovno-

raspalio-po-plenkovicu-zvao-sam-da-polozimo-vijence-zbrisao-je-ko-zadnja-vjeverica-je-l-tak-1b164942-b33e-11eb-abcf-0242ac120017.

[13] See e.g. slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/politika/milanovic-je-notorni-i-patoloski-lazljivac-a-ponasa-se-kao-iskompleksirani-luzer-1365652, www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-predsjednik-je-niskoristi-i-lijen-poklonit-cu-mu-tintu-i-nalivpero-1714807, www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ovo-je-klasicni-pokusaj-drzavnog-udara-ustavni-sud-mora-hitno-smijeniti-milanovica-15439747, www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/plenkovic-da-sam-sklon-uvredama-rekao-bih-da-je-predsjednik-54-godisnji-smrkavac-ali-ja-to-necu-reci-foto-20201017.

[14] www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/milanovic-hdz-je-sekta-a-plenkovic-plenkusenko-ovo-je-pornografija/2537520.aspx

[15] www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/plenkovic-u-saboru-imate-predsjednika-vlade-koji-je-necu-reci-previse-jedan-od-utjecajnijih-clanova-europskog-vijeca-20231108

[16] www.24sata.hr/news/psihijatri-zelja-da-si-uvijek-ti-u-pravu-i-da-tvoje-misli-spasavaju-narod-to-se-zove-narcizam-724171

[17] For additional information on the criteria that make Škoro a celebrity populist and the conceptualization and typology of celebrity politicians and populists, see Šalaj and Grbeša 2022.

[18] For more information on Škoro's use of his celebrity capital in his political activities, see Vuković 2022.

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