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## Miscellaneous

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## Fictional populists running for the office and parodying elections: Qualitative analysis of the three case studies' social media communication

### Abstract

This article introduces the novel concept of fictional populism, describing the phenomenon of made-up characters created and performed by real individuals. These imaginary political candidates typically employ fiction, humour (in the forms of parody and satire), and self-scandalization to accentuate their (populist) messages.

Building on the concept of celebrity populism that explores the mixture of populism with celebrity culture, this study examines the features of fictional populism. It focuses on two case studies from Croatia and one from Serbia.

Qualitative content analysis of case studies' communication on Facebook during election campaigns is conducted with the aim to understand how they blended elements of celebrity and popular culture to emphasize their populist messages. Moreover, the study explores how these fictional candidates addressed real political issues during campaigns.

By employing an iterative approach between theory and

analysis, the article offers rich portrayals of each candidate's performances, illuminating their strategic use of fiction, humour, and self-scandalization to emphasize the populist messages and appeal to the people. The study outlines the broader dimensions and elements that characterize specific communication features of fictional populists.

### Keywords

**Fictional populism, celebrity populism, fictionalization of politics, political parody, Ljubiša Preletačević – Beli, Ričard, Juričan aka Bandić.**

## 1. Introduction

Populist politicians and features of their communication have garnered extensive attention in academic research (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rowira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pappas, 2019; Taggart, 2000; Vázquez-Barrio, 2021; Zuilianello, Albertini & Ceccobelli, 2018). Recently, a phenomenon conceptualized as “celebrity populism” has been recognized, offering a fresh perspective on specific types of populists who skillfully use elements from celebrity and popular culture (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023; Šalaj & Grbeša, 2022; Vuković, 2022). This mixture explains

the successful communication of many contemporary politicians. At the same time, this concept sets ground for understanding fictional populism<sup>1</sup>, which is the focus of this article.

Fictional populist candidates are “fictional” because they are made-up characters created and embodied by real individuals. They are “populist” because of their strong anti-establishment position and appeal to the people. Although fictional characters often start as a joke, they can later be used by their creators to run in political elections. They run highly performative campaigns and utilize humour in the form of parody, satire, or self-scandalization (Haller, 2015) to send their political message. Because of the fictional nature of their identity, which is more typical for popular culture, and their performances, they quickly attract media attention, ensuring visibility and popularity.

Notable examples of fictional characters running for political office include Lord Buckethead, a satirical figure who has participated in multiple British general elections since 1987, and Vermin Supreme, a performer who has run in various elections in the United States. Additionally, there are so-called joke political parties, such as Germany's Die Partei and Austria's The Beer Party. They employ mockery and satire as part of their communication strategy. In a recent example, the newly elected Argentinian president, Javier Milei, performed in 2019 as his alter ego “General AnCap” representing anarcho-capitalist beliefs (Lankes, 2023). The idea of a fictional character running as a political candidate was showcased in an episode of the Black Mirror, titled “The Waldo Moment.” This episode delves into the widespread distrust of politicians, exploring the idea of fictional character voiced by a real person emerging as a political candidate. The real-world mirrors fiction, as fictional populist candidates use similar strategies.

Performance is crucial for fictional populists, encompassing the embodiment of imaginary personas and performative acts that serve as satirical exposes of real-world issues. This aligns with the idea put forth by John Corner and Dick Pels (2003, p. 7), who argue that traditional partisan allegiances have evolved into post-ideological lifestyle choices, emphasizing aesthetics and style as the important aspects of political communication. Moreover, Street (2003, p. 25) suggests that “the study of politics requires study of the way in which performances are constructed and styles are articulated.” This research acknowledges that politics in contemporary, mediatized democracies, involves the construction of political relationships through media performance (Street, 2003, p. 25), especially with the focus on social media as the main stage for populists (Enli, 2018), and celebrity populist politicians (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023).

Leaning on the conceptualization of celebrity populism, this article introduces fictional populism as its distinct, rather bizarre subtype. Moreover, it introduces and elaborates on the dimensions and elements of fictional populists' communication by structuring existing theoretical concepts and combining them with qualitative-empirical evidence. Therefore, this paper introduces communicative dimensions of fiction, humour, and (populist) dimensions of anti-elitism and relationship with the people, but it also explores their articulation through different elements. The paper focuses on one case study from Serbia and two from Croatia, where fictional populist candidates gained a significant attention and number of votes in the elections, with one of them ultimately becoming a vice-president of the city council. Namely, the paper examines the communication of the fictional populists Ljubiša Preletačević Beli, embodied by Luka Maksimović, who ran in the 2016 local and 2017 presidential elections in Serbia; Dario Juričan, who parodied Milan Bandić –a major of Croatian capital Zagreb, by taking his name and running in the presidential elections 2019–2020; and Ričard who ran in the 2021 local elections in Croatian city of Zadar, personified by Enio Meštrović.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of fictional populism has already been briefly introduced in the book chapter “The Power of Performance: Celebrity Populism, Fictional Populists, and Implications for Liberal Democracy” (Grbeša, Vuković & Šalaj, 2024).

Qualitative content analysis is used to analyse how fictional populists performed, how they combined celebrity and popular elements to emphasize populist messages to gain attention, and how they used their characters to bring real-world political issues into the limelight during campaigns on Facebook. While the contribution of this paper lies in the elaboration and examination of the subtype of celebrity populism, it also contributes by appreciating and examining the role of fiction and political satire in election communication.

## 2. Celebrity populism

While both populism (Hawkins *et al.*, 2019; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004) and celebrity politics (Marsh, 't Hart & Tindall, 2010; Street, 2004; Wheeler, 2013) have been of a great academic interest, only recently has their successful blend been recognized and conceptualized as *celebrity populism* (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023; Šalaj & Grbeša, 2022). The main idea is that celebrity populism is a distinct type of populism because of its particular style of the celebrity (politics). Celebrity populists rely on their communication peculiarities, which distinguish them from celebrity politicians (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023). While the latter is conceptualized through different combinations of the celebrity sphere with the sphere of (not necessary populist) politics (Marsh, 't Hart & Tindall, 2010; Street, 2004; van Zoonen, 2004), celebrity populism focuses on the combination of the celebrity sphere with populist politics, making it particularly instrumental for studying the particularities of communication and phenomenon of some of the world's most influential politicians and leaders. Prominent examples include politicians from across the political spectrum such as Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky, Beppe Grillo, Mateo Salvini, Georgia Meloni and Javier Milei.

Populism has been studied from various angles, categorized by Moffitt (2020, pp. 10–29) into three main approaches: populism as an ideology, populism as a strategy, and populism as a discourse/performance. The unifying point is the very core notion that populism divides society into two antagonistic groups: the people (who are good) and the elite (who betrayed the people and are bad) (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015, p. 2). This is well explained in one of the most cited definitions that sees populism as an ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Grbeša and Šalaj (2023) ground celebrity populism with the idea that populism is a meta-ideology juxtaposed against the meta-ideology of pluralism. Nevertheless, both the ideas and performances are relevant for comprehending celebrity populism, with the style of the *celebrity* representing the main point of its performative dimension (Vuković, 2022).

Celebrity populism recognizes specific performative elements of populism, connecting populism with the concept of celebrity politics. Celebrity politics leans on the Driessens (2013) argument that all aspects of contemporary life are celebritized or, in other words, increasingly characterized by elements of celebrity and popular culture. Celebrity politics is discussed when talking about contemporary governance (Marsh, 't Hart & Tindall, 2010, p. 337), as well as political communication (Davis, 2010; Street, 2003; Street, 2004). It manifests when celebrities become politically active or when politicians adopt various techniques previously reserved for the field of entertainment, usually through the personalization or popularization of politics (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Street, 2016; van Zoonen, 2006). Although it is important to emphasize that not all populists are celebrity politicians, and not every celebrity politician is a populist, there are several traits that are common to both (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023). First of all, ordinariness is a prominent feature of contemporary celebrity culture. It is present in the concept of “everyday celebrity politicians” (Wood, Corbett & Flinders, 2016), and it serves as evidence of the populist's affiliation with and understanding of the people. At the same time, (celebrity) populists are trying to show their uniqueness as a qualification for getting elected in the political office, which aligns with the contemporary construction of

political leadership (Vuković & Carpentier, 2023). To prove their ordinariness, both celebrity politicians and populists emotionally appeal to the citizens (Street, 2018; Wirz, 2018). Given that both phenomena, along with celebrity populism, draw heavily on performativity and style (Corner & Pels, 2003; Moffitt, 2016; Street, 2004), social media platforms assume a pivotal role in facilitating their communication with the electorate (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023). Moreover, social media serves as a platform through which (populist) politicians can influence the public, as well as the mainstream news agenda, as shown by Pérez-Curiel and Limón Naharro (2019) in their analysis of Trump's Twitter communication.

Leaning on the celebrity-populist mix, fictional populism is introduced as its subtype that has its logic of combining populism with the celebrity sphere, mainly through fiction and humour.

### **3. Fictional populist candidates and features of their communication**

Fictional populists are a particular and eccentric manifestation of celebrity populism. They are created and embodied by real individuals to run for political office with the aim to parody politicians and the broader political and social reality. These candidates communicate populist ideas and messages while running performance-driven campaigns. Performance is an elementary part of the contemporary political communication (Corner & Pels, 2003), where politicians' performances are analogous to those of celebrities (Street, 2004; van Zoonen, 2004; van Zoonen, 2005). Street (2018, p. 10) observes that "the art of politics becomes the art of performance, the art of being a celebrity." Performance-driven campaigns run by fictional populists are here understood in a wider context than just theatrical acts, following Moffitt's (2016) suggestion that performance includes both communicative and stylistic elements. This paper argues that the performance of fictional populists relies on three main strategies that intersect with populism: the fictionalization of politics (Wodak, 2011), the employment of satire and parody, and self-scandalization (Haller, 2015). By maintaining a consistent and compelling performance, fictional populists continuously capture media and public's attention, ultimately leading to the successful (self-) construction of their personas as celebrities.

Fictionalization of politics has been recognized in literature as a form of entertainment intersecting with politics (see van Zoonen, 2004). Fiction can blur with the political reality, to the point that the line between the two becomes nonexistent. Wodak (2011, p. 167) noted that "fiction suddenly influences reality or even acquires the status of reality." This was particularly visible in Volodymyr Zelensky's 2019 Ukrainian presidential campaign, when he used ideas and symbols from a fictional television series show in which he portrayed a teacher, who unexpectedly becomes a president of the country. In an incredible series of events, the fictional narrative transfers into reality, and Zelensky becomes the president of a nation on the brink of war. The relevance of fiction in real life politics increases with the emergence of fictional populist candidates. While Zelensky incorporated elements from a fictional show into his campaign, fictional populist candidates are themselves fictional constructs - they do not exist. The performance of their personas rests upon the fictionalization of political candidates, where these characters portray one of the two groups from the populist idea of a divided society: either the identity of the elite, or the identity of an ordinary person. In both cases, they advocate anti-mainstream and anti-elite positions, aiming to expose traditional political elites. Moreover, they cultivate the image of being ordinary citizens who demonstrate the sentiments of "the people," creating the impression that they speak and perform in the name of "the people."

Moreover, to emphasize their position, fictional populists employ satire and parody. The characters are parodies of politicians, sometimes directly mimicking real-life politicians (as in the case of Dario Juričan), and their performances are satirical. Satire, parody, and humour have traditionally been associated with the popular and private spheres but have, over centuries, been used to speak up about political and social problems, or to expose and oppose

politics and politicians (Bal *et al.*, 2009, p. 229; Young, 2016). Political satire is usually studied in context of news satire and parody shows (Leicht, 2023), and it is a part of the infotainment (Street, 2001). It allows citizens to talk about “serious” politics in a more fun way, providing a sort of escape and relief through laughter (Young, 2008, p. 134), and it has been proven to be successful in enhancing public discussion (Nitsch & Lichtenstein, 2019). It has a potential to influence perception of a politician (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), increase political knowledge (Bode & Becker, 2018), and to affect political participation in different ways (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; McClennen & Maisel, 2014; Street, 2001). Political satire relies on the intensity of the emotional connection between the audience and the satirized subject/object (Botha, 2014), fostering an affective bond between candidates and their followers, which is typical for populist politicians (Wirz, 2018). Fictional characters inherently embody a dimension of humour, as they are already parodies themselves, and they further employ satire in their communication to provoke politicians, push their own agenda, or to entertain. Through satire, they can target both the elite and the people, and they may also target specific groups that they wish to exclude.

Fictionalization of candidates, coupled with satire and parody, ensures the creation of scandal. Particularly, through the performative aspects of their personas, fictional populists create a scandal of themselves, a phenomenon recognized in the literature as intentional self-scandalization which “always arises from transgressions of moral standards” (Haller, 2015, p. 439). This strategy enables politicians to purposefully follow media logic that appreciates spectacle and scandal (Mazzoleni, 2008), thus ensuring them visibility, attracting media and public attention, and stimulating discussions on specific topics (Haller, 2015, p. 439). It is important to emphasize that the strategies of fictionalization, satire and parody, along with self-scandalization, intersect and complement one another in the pursuit to gain votes.

#### **4. Contextual background**

This research examines two distinguished cases from Croatia, Dario Juričan aka ‘Milan Bandić’, and Enio Meštrović aka ‘Ričard’, and a case from Serbia, Luka Maksimović aka ‘Ljubiša Preletačević – Beli’. They all used elections to parody establishment politics, which not only gave them high visibility but also, in some cases, led to significant electoral results. This part of the paper briefly explains the social-political context of both countries and the candidates.

Croatia separated from Yugoslavia in 1991, followed by the War for Independence, which has left some serious economic and political consequences, even to this day (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2019). For the first twenty-five years, political power mainly alternated between two major political parties: The Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica – HDZ*) and The Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija – SDP*). However, in 2016, this duopoly was disrupted by anti-establishment populist parties such as Human Wall (*Živi zid*) and The Bridge (*Most*). Therefore, the 2016 elections are seen as a turning point in which space for other anti-establishment and populist parties opened up (Henjak, 2018). The country has been a member of NATO since 2008 and the European Union since 2013. Low trust in the government, politicians, and political and democratic institutions in Croatia makes it fertile ground for anti-establishment politicians.

Serbia became the successor to Yugoslavia after its dissolution in the 1990s and restored its independence in 2006 after breaking the union with Montenegro. While Croatia has always tended to become part of the European Union and adopt a Western European identity, Serbia, although being a candidate for European Union membership, still maintains a strong relationship with its traditional partner, Russia. Aleksandar Vučić has served as the president since 2017. Before that, he served as prime minister, and after changing political office, he retained the same power and even secured himself a role with the strongest decision-making authority. Vučić dominates the political and media landscape with his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (European Commission, 2022). For these reasons, he is sometimes associated with

authoritarianism (Bieber, 2018). Similar to Croatia, Serbia provides fertile ground for populist politicians (Stojiljković & Spasojević, 2018), with citizens showing distrust in democratic processes, media, political parties, and politicians, and expressing preferences for non-democratic forms of leadership (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2020).

In this context, the emergence of (fictional) populists in both countries is unsurprising. Luka Maksimović was the first of the three cases to appear. He ran in the 2016 local elections in the municipality of Mladenovac, Serbia, as the leader of a satirical political party called "*Sarmu proba nisi*" (You haven't tasted sarma yet). His list won 13 seats out of 55. He then ran in the 2017 presidential election as the made-up character Ljubiša Preletačević – Beli, finishing third with 9.44% of the votes. Dario Juričan is a Croatian film director and political activist. He ran in the 2019–2020 presidential election as Milan Bandić. Milan Bandić was the actual name of the mayor of Zagreb at that time, a long-standing establishment politician accused of corruption, who governed Zagreb for eighteen years until his death in 2021. One of Juričan's main messages was "Corruption for everybody, not just for them." This message already contained populist parody, as he claimed that not only should the "they," referring to the political elite, be allowed to be corrupt, but also the "us," the ordinary people, should be included in corrupt activities and benefit from them. He received 4.61% of the votes, finishing fifth out of eleven candidates.

Enio Meštrović is a local entertainer and political activist from Zadar, Croatia. In the 2021 local election, he ran for the mayor of Zadar, embodying the identity of Ričard, a rough and vulgar person from the countryside. He finished third in the race, and his list won seven seats in the city council, giving them strong influence. He later became and currently serves as the vice-president of the city council.

## **5. Methodology and methods**

The main goal of this paper is to get a deeper understanding of fictional populists and their communication features. Since the aim is to explore how they combine populist, celebrity, and popular cues, as well as to see how fictional characters were used to talk about real political issues, the research was done by examining case studies' Facebook communication during the distinctive campaign periods. Social media was chosen because of its role as a primary communication channel for celebrity populists (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023), mostly because of its logic that appreciates direct, emotional, and authentic communication (Enli, 2017; Manucci, 2017; Wood, Corbett & Flinders, 2016). Particularly, Facebook was (one of) the case studies' main social media channels.

To analyse Facebook posts, qualitative content analysis has been conducted with a combination of concept-driven and data-driven approaches to the analysis, including the iteration between theory and analysis typical for qualitative research. The analysis respected multimodality (Kress, 2010) of posts, often including written text, emojis, photos, videos, memes, or links to other web places. The data were collected for each campaign period. For the case of Ljubiša Preletačević Beli, that was also the name of the Facebook page in 2017, today *Ljubi Čika* (Uncle's Kisses), data was collected for period of March 20–30, 2017, during the presidential campaign in Serbia. In total, there were 67 posts. Data for the case of Dario Juričan aka Milan Badić includes 67 Facebook posts in the period of December 9–22, 2019, during the first-round campaign for the presidential elections 2019/2020 in Croatia. The name of page was *Želim biti Milan Bandić predsjednik RH* (I want to be Milan Bandić, the president of Croatia), today *Gradonačelnik svemira* (The mayor of the universe). Data for the case of Ričard was collected from the Facebook page *KUD Bleke I Konji* (The Folklore Society "Fools and Horses") during the local election campaign period, May 3–16, 2021. There were only 18 posts, and the data was mostly in the form of video and photography which made the coding process richer. The reason for lower number of posts in this case is possibly because it was local elections.

The data for each case were coded separately, following Saldaña's (2013) coding manual, focusing on two key themes: populism (with elements of anti-elitism, appeal to the people, and us versus them discourse), and the celebrity/popular theme (with elements of fiction, humour, and self-scandalization). The first cycle coding used in vivo, descriptive, and eclectic codes. During the coding process, saturation was relatively quickly reached. Following the initial coding phase, a second cycle of analysis was conducted to refine the codes. After that, the focus was put on the relation between the elements of the two main themes (populism and celebrity) in order to create descriptive categories to effectively characterize each fictional populist candidate. Therefore, each case is represented through two main descriptive categories: the first category focuses on the fictional persona of a candidate, and the second one describes the candidate's relation with the people. Each category, with its elements, is presented in the findings section, with the rich explanations of each candidate's communication (parts 6 - 8). Afterward, the relation between the themes of populism and celebrity/popular was further explored in the analysed data, resulting in the creation of the main dimensions of fictional populism with different elements that can combine and overlap in the construction of types of fictional populists. The elaboration on the general dimensions of fictional populism and their elements is presented in the last part of the findings section, accompanied with the summary table (part 9).

## **6. Ljubiša Preletačević Beli –The loving father figure**

Qualitative analysis of Beli's Facebook posts resulted with two main categories ("The true leader" and "People as beloved family") describing his fictional populist persona of "The loving father figure." Beli performs as a charismatic and empathetic leader who positions himself as the saviour of the people and criticizes the political elite for their failures. His usage of humour and satire serves to highlight the shortcomings of the elite and emphasize his commitment to working with and for the people.

### **6.1. *The true leader***

Through his performance, Luka Maksimović constructed Beli as the leader whom people had longed for. He was represented as magnificent, charismatic, strong, serious, and saviour of the people. His magnificence was represented, for instance, by a photography posted on March 25, 2017, depicting him with a laurel wreath, accompanied by the caption "Ave Beli," reminding of Caesar. Furthermore, his consistent choice of a white suit reminds of Josip Broz Tito's style, contributing to the construction of his leader identity. His magnificence is also visible in the photos in which he consistently directs gaze upwards, creating an impression of his strength and charisma.

Regarding the populist dimensions of his performance, the true leader was represented in opposition to the current political elite in the typical "us versus them" populist discourse. By using fictional character of Beli, Maksimović frequently criticized the political leadership of Serbia, distinguishing between those responsible for problems (elite) and Beli, who positioned himself as a leader who would work for the benefit of the people. He appealed to the people presenting himself as their saviour, while accusing the ruling elite of greediness, resulting with the poverty of citizens. The people were represented as poor, and suffering, yet also creative, capable, and honest. In contrast, the members of the elite were represented as incapable thieves. Beli targeted his criticism towards the most powerful Serbian politician, Aleksandar Vučić, and his Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka - SNS), as well as other Serbian politicians and political parties. In a post from March 21, 2017, he referred to Serbian politics as a circus, further distancing himself from the political establishment: "They say that politics has become a circus since the uncle has entered the scene, but politics has already been like that for 25 years. That's why they belong to history. It is clear who Aco is with, and who the people are with."

Nevertheless, Luka Maksimović also used the character of Beli to criticize the elite by employing parody and self-scandalization. For instance, in a post from March 22, 2017, Beli stated: "I don't read anything –I'm not good at it, and I'm not interested in it. The only thing that matters to me is the victory on April 2," portraying himself as an uneducated and single-minded individual whose sole objective was to gain power. Identifying Beli as a typical Serbian politician served as a parody of the political elite, emphasizing that Beli, as a candidate, stood on the side of the people and, through humour, highlighted the negative behaviour of the elite. Despite the absence of a detailed political program, Beli underscored what he saw as one of Serbia's most significant problems—the incompetence of the elite.

## **6.2. People as beloved family**

Besides being "the true leader," Beli communicates to his followers as to his beloved family, representing himself as their father, and creating affective relation with the people, typical for celebrity populist politicians (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2023). This is visible through emotional appeals to the people, family references, and sharing of advices. Beli shows his soft, human side by using informal and colloquial language, and by sharing photographs and videos of himself with his supporters. He emotionally appeals to them, concluding his posts with phrases such as "good night" and "I love you," as well as praising his followers for being creative and smart. He represents himself as one of "the poor people" who will "fight back." The same was visible in his campaign slogan, which often occurs at the end of Facebook posts with the hashtags #GOSTRONG (#SAMOJAKO) and #poorpeoplefightback (#sirotinjauzvračaudarac).

In his Facebook posts, he refers to his followers as "sons and daughters," calling himself "the uncle." Reminding of an influencer, he expresses gratitude to his followers for their support, outlining the fact that he has more followers than Serbian president Vučić (post from March 27, 2017). Furthermore, he shares practical advices, for instance, asking people to be careful when driving, or sharing video with the directions towards his rally.

While Beli was the main character of Facebook posts, there was a mention of Luka Maksimović (the real persona). Beli forwarded Luka's message in the post from March 27, 2017, representing Luka as an ordinary individual who is "charismatic and has empathy towards all the people" and is "a child that grew up on the markets and streets."

The balance between what Vuković and Carpentier (2023) identify as the horizontal and vertical dimensions of leadership within the contemporary era of celebrity politics and populism mirrors Beli's objective, as he is simultaneously portrayed as special and great, while also being perceived as part of the people's family. His humour and fictional persona serves as a reminder of the enduring political problems in Serbia.

## **7. Dario Juričan aka Milan Bandić - The most corrupted of all the elite**

Dario Juričan's Facebook posts included photos, memes, and most often, long intellectual satirical texts, in which he was directly exposing Croatian elite members, often by calling out their names. His posts were vigorously anti-elitist. By employing an impersonation of Milan Bandić, Juričan effectively used parody to expose corruption in Croatia. Embodying Bandić, Juričan humorously performed the character of "the most corrupted of all the elite." This is described with two categories that emerged from analysis: "A typical elitist" and "The people as corrupted."

### **7.1. A typical elitist**

Juričan performed Bandić as a typical elitist, employing parody to reveal the corruption of not only Bandić (the real politician), but also of other members of the elite. Typical elitist is represented through several elements of Bandić's fictional character: corrupt tendencies, criminal inclinations, uncivilized, admirer of the elite, and shameful. Juričan used his fictional

persona and parody to critically highlight the actions and political dilemmas of elite members, with corruption standing as a central theme.

It is exemplified with Juričan's satirical promise to become the most corrupt politician, articulated through the slogan indicative of a populist sentiment: "Corruption for everybody, not just for them." The slogan is centred on the notion that ordinary people should gain access to the exclusive circle of the corrupt elite. Furthermore, on December 16, 2019, Juričan, as Bandić, facetiously pledged to become "the biggest criminal," while a post on December 10, 2019, humorously revealed his intention to serve as the spokesperson for criminals once he ascended to the presidency. These parodic expressions were skilfully employed to draw attention to various issues, including corruption, nepotism, and inadequate public transportation in Zagreb, all while humorously promising to extend these issues to the entirety of Croatia once he assumed the presidency.

Juričan aka Bandić was satirically admiring elite members, directly calling out on some of those who he saw as the most corrupted. Among the politicians mentioned in his posts was the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman. Under the guise of Bandić, Juričan ironically praised Tuđman, hailing him as not only the father of the homeland, but also "the father of the corruption" in the post from December 14, 2019.

The example that shows how Juričan ingeniously mixed the problem of corruption, satire, and his fictional character is visible in his statement on December 10, 2019: "Today, I am the only true public advocate of the path founded by Tuđman, the path of national unity and cooperation in which corruption is the main value on which the Croatian state is based." Another interesting example from the post on December 9, 2019, shows Juričan aka Bandić in performative action, sharing a photograph of himself participating in a protest against corruption, holding a traffic sign "STOP." In this post, he maintained that his intention was to obstruct the protest, emphasizing his belief that corruption should not be the subject of such public demonstrations.

### *7.2. The people as corrupted (Juričan performing in the name of those who are not)*

Contrary to typical populist, Juričan aka Bandić refrained from employing emotional appeals, instead portraying the people as engaged in corruption. Satirically referring to his supporters as "corrupted people," susceptible to bribery, he implicitly linked corrupt politicians with citizens who voted for them based on self-interest. In the post from December 20, 2019, he connected this theme to his alter-ego, parodying the elite by referring to himself poetically writing "by the grace of a corrupt regiment." This reveals that Juričan mainly aimed to spotlight the elite and existing political issues. Although direct appeals to the people were rare, the character he portrayed effectively centred a segment of the population within the overarching problem, casting them as integral components of the systemic issues.

While one group of the people was shown as part of the problem, there was another appeal to the people visible in his posts. Namely, Juričan, through parody and his fictional character, represents voters who share his concerns and positions himself as a spokesperson for a particular subset of citizens. In some of his posts, distinctions were visible between Juričan and his character portrayal, with Juričan presenting himself as fair and transparent. Similar to Beli's characterization of Serbian politics as "a circus," Juričan, in a post from December 17, 2019, referred to the TV election debate as "the biggest show in the country." In a playful tone, he wrote "popcorns should be ready." Moreover, in a post from December 18, 2019, he humorously characterized the Croatian elite as an "animal kingdom." In this manner, Juričan not only critiqued the elite, but also directly illuminated his own position.

## **8. Ričard – The simple, unsophisticated man**

Enio Meštrović's fictional character Ričard emerged as the main character in Facebook posts during the analysed period. He was constructed as the stereotypical countryside man,

characterized as unsophisticated. Simultaneously, Ričard was portrayed as a simple man who would not forget ordinary people if granted power, offering simple solutions to enhance citizens' satisfaction. Facebook posts predominately featured photos and videos, accompanied by concise written text. While negative references to the elite were not dominating in the analysed period, Meštrović's performance of Ričard satirically exposed the Croatian elite and ruling politicians. Categories "uncivilized hedonist" and "servant of the people" describe how celebrity, popular, and populist cues were merged to create "the simple, unsophisticated man" fictional populist.

### **8.1. *Uncivilized hedonist***

The category "uncivilized hedonist" exemplifies Enio's performance of Ričard who is a simple man, but akin to the ruling elite. He is corruptive, a hedonist, has bad manners, and is illiterate. This self-scandalization points out the uncivilized nature of the elite.

Firstly, the element of corruption is visible as Ričard openly admits that he would steal when he comes to power (like current elite). Moreover, he engages in bribery, but in a more simplistic way. In the post from May 11, 2021, Ričard invites his followers to meet him because he has good quality fish and, as an uncivilized countryside man who only enjoys eating meat, he wants to get rid of this fish. In the following Facebook post from May 12, 2021, he invites people to retain the coupons they received from him and exchange them for money after he becomes mayor.

The element of hedonism is visible in posts in which Ričard enjoys excessive consumption of food and wine. Moreover, his uncivilized nature is seen through the element of bad mannerism, as Ričard is vulgar and abundantly uses bad words and swears. His illiterate language and frequent employment of caps lock amplify his bad mannerism. By playing the role of an uncivilized, simple man who only wants to gain power to steal and enjoy his lifestyle, Meštrović satirically represents the elite as small uncivilized individuals who happen to have political power. At the same time, he makes fun of rural people by playing with the stereotype of them being less civilized and devoid of urban manners.

### **8.2. *Servant of the people*<sup>2</sup>**

The category "servant of the people" represents Ričard as a candidate who, despite being uncivilized and morally compromised, cares about people's well-being. This becomes evident through his acts of care, entertainment, as well as understanding common people's problems, fostering an emotional bond with his followers. This category can also be references to "bread and circuses" philosophy.

Ričard shows he cares about people when he shares food (fish). His commitment to serving the people extends to caring for their appearance. For instance, one Facebook post announced Ričard's invitation for citizens to clean their shoes, subsequently sharing a video of him sitting on a small bench, cleaning one person's shoes (posts from May 3 and 4, 2021).

Ričard entertains people not only by being satirical, but also by organizing events such as a karaoke rally. On May 8, 2021, he shares a poster with the sign "Ričard is looking for the star," announcing his rally, which was later also depicted with a photo in another Facebook post. This highlights his dedication to entertaining and engaging with the people.

Furthermore, Ričard forges an emotional connection with his citizens by demonstrating empathy and understanding of their problems. For example, on May 6, 2021, he shared a satirical YouTube video addressing social issues. In the video, Ričard is walking with a friend. When they encounter a beggar, Ričard generously gives him money while simultaneously

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<sup>2</sup> This category can be seen as a reference to the celebrity populist campaign of Volodymyr Zelensky.

encouraging him to seek employment, all by using his bad manners. The emotional connection is further established when Ričard thanks people for their support and for following him, as in post from May 8, 2021, that represents him in the manner of a local influencer.

### 9. Comparison and typology of fictional populists

The most corrupted of all the elite, Beloved father, and The simple, unsophisticated man represent distinct fictional populist characters, delineating Juričan aka Bandić, Ljubiša Preletačević Beli, and Ričard, respectively. These three cases share common traits that represent dimensions of fictional populism. Firstly, they are fictional characters, secondly, they are populist figures with dimensions of relationship towards the elite and relationship towards the people, and thirdly, they employ humour in form of parody, satire, or self-scandalization in their campaigns to talk about political reality. However, analysis also reveals differences between them, offering insights of different elements that can possibly be present in each dimension. These elements can overlap and combine in various ways, constructing different types of fictional populists. Table 1 is a table that summarizes the dimensions of fictional populism with their possible elements.

**Table 1.** Dimensions of fictional populism and accompanying elements.

DIMENSIONS	ELEMENTS
Fictional character performs as	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Elitist</li> <li>● One of us –ordinary</li> <li>● One of us –special</li> </ul>
Position towards the elite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positive (satire)</li> <li>● Directly negative</li> <li>● Self-scandalization (parody or satire –imitates an elitist)</li> </ul>
Position towards the people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positive appeal to the people</li> <li>● Positive appeal to the people who are involved in corruption</li> <li>● Self-scandalization (parody of ordinary person)</li> </ul>
Utilization of humour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To entertain</li> <li>● To expose political issues</li> <li>● To connect with the people</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration.

Firstly, all fictional populists share the common trait of being fictional characters, but their identities are diverse. A notable distinction arises when examining the performance of The most corrupted of all the elite, and The simple, unsophisticated man. The most corrupted of all the elite adopts the role of an elitist, while The simple, unsophisticated man represents an ordinary person, thus embodying identities from opposite ends of the populist vision of the society. Still, in the case of Beloved father, a unique type emerges. He is neither a typical elitist nor the typical ordinary person. He positions himself as a saviour of the people, akin to a godlike figure. He stands apart from the elite, as he advocates against them, but simultaneously projects an image worthy of a leadership position. While he familiarizes himself with the common people, Beloved father maintains a unique and special role, that of a fatherly figure.

Despite their different identities, all three are populists who articulate their anti-elitist stance differently. The dimension of position towards the elite manifests when one directly refers to the elite negatively, as in the case of Beli, who took a direct anti-elitist stance, positioning himself as the true, authentic leader distinct from the elite. In contrast, The most corrupted of all the elite employs satire and parody to convey an ironically positive sentiment towards the elite, effectively self-scandalizing his character to expose their wrongdoings. The most corrupted of all the elite's performance extends to the extent of impersonating a real-world politician. The simple, unsophisticated man opposes the elite directly, but he aspires to

attain their status. His dimension concerning the position towards the elite combines self-scandalization and direct opposition.

The third dimension is the position towards the people. It is evident that all three maintain relationships with their followers. Beloved father predominantly appeals to the people in a traditional populist manner, uniting them under the banner of shared impoverishment and presenting himself as their saviour, deeply concerned for their well-being. The elitist initially appears indifferent to the general population, primarily aiming to gain their votes to secure power, often through (satirical) promises to perpetuate existing practices. The simple, unsophisticated man appeals to the people, pledging to fulfil their needs, while offering simple solutions. He highlights the corruptive nature of the people (he claims he would still steal once in power), while promising to provide a better life for citizens.

The role of humour, particularly in the form of parody and satire, serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a unifying factor, uniting the populace. However, humour is often employed to expose political issues, as seen in the case of The most corrupted of all the elite, primarily through self-scandalization.

The three cases that this paper has focused on are the examples of some of the possible versions of the combination of elements. Table 2 shows each type's characteristics by dimensions and elements.

**Table 2.** Fictional populist case studies and dimensions and elements of their communication.

	<b>The most corrupted of all the elite (Juričan aka Bandić)</b>	<b>Beloved Father (Ljubiša Preletačević Beli)</b>	<b>The simple, unsophisticated man (Ričard)</b>
Fictional character performs as	An elitist	One of us –ordinary	One of us –special
Position towards the elite	Positive (satire); Directly negative; Self-scandalization	Directly negative; Self-scandalization	Directly negative; Self-scandalization
Position towards the people	Positive appeal to the people who are involved in corruption	Positive appeal to the people	Positive appeal to the people; Self-scandalization

## 10. Conclusion

Political communication environment is brimming with performance, style, image, and emotions (Corner & Pels, 2003; Rúas & Capdevila, 2017). In this environment, politicians who adopt populist or celebrity style easily appeal to citizens, especially in the post-truth era that capitalizes on personality and emotionality (van Zoonen, 2012). These communication strategies prove to be even more successful in the context of crisis and dissatisfaction with political system.

To better understand contemporary communication of political candidates, this research focused on fictional populism presenting it as a particular subtype of celebrity populism. Fictional populist candidates are made-up characters personified by their creators to run in elections. They rely on performance in their campaigns, utilizing fiction and humour, particularly parody and satire, to emphasize their populist message and make fun of traditional politics and politicians. Focusing on these theoretical points and analysing the Facebook communication of three fictional populists, Luka Maksimović aka Ljubiša Preletačević – Beli, Dario Juričan aka Milan Bandić, and Enio Meštrović aka Ričard, this article dives into the phenomenon, qualitatively studying their communication during the election campaigns.

The methodology employed in this paper precludes generalization. Still, the results of the study prove the potency of the celebrity-populist mix. Populist messages of anti-elitism and appeal to people are emphasized with the celebrity style of communication. In this case,

popular forms of fiction and humour conveyed populist messages and created the stronger connection between the people and the imaginary candidates. The analysis shows how case studies used fiction and humour, as well as self-scandalization, to appeal to the people and advocate against the elite. Moreover, scandal, entertainment and popular culture proved to be relevant factors in informing and engaging citizens (Riegert, 2007).

The similarities between the three examined cases helped in modelling the dimensions mutual to all fictional populists. On the other hand, the differences between their performances pointed to various elements of each dimension that can overlap or be used interchangeably in construction of fictional populists. These dimensions and elements of fictional populism help understand communication strategies employed by these candidates to connect with voters. For instance, while Juričan aka Bandić (The most corrupted of all the elite) exposed the elite members by impersonating and parodying one of the existing politicians, Meštović aka Ričard (The simple, unsophisticated man) used the character of an ordinary, impolite and uncivilized person, who just wants to steal money, while advocating for the everyday people at the same time. Their fictional characters represented two poles of populist idea of divided society: an elite member, and an ordinary man, which points to the fictional-populist combination of their political personas.

At the same time, entertainment helped to highlight relevant political issues. Despite being fictional, these candidates raised important questions during campaigns and influenced discussions to the extent that Duhaček (2020) labelled Juričan as “the most serious candidate” in the elections. This confirms the power of satire in engaging citizens (Bruhn & Doona, 2022), but also indicates the positive side of celebrity populist and imaginary candidates in the elections.

Various layers of the phenomenon were encountered during the research process that were beyond the scope of this study. While the study focused on social media communication, crucial aspect of the success of fictional populists lies in the role of journalists and mainstream media. It could be hypothesized that the media provides space for fictional candidates because of their entertainment value. It would be interesting to study how do journalists represent these fictional but legitimate candidates in elections?

Another question that arises is whether only fictional characters are populists, or if the real candidates who embody them are populists too. This is connected to the question of ideological positions or values that typically help citizens in evaluating political candidates. However, this does not seem to have been the relevant factor in supporting fictional populists. Identification with these candidates likely originates from the ideas they share through humour, accusations against the elite and mainstream politicians, and the creation of an affective bond with the people.

Finally, while the paper focuses on the communication features of fictional populists, it does not address how citizens responded or reacted to these candidates or why they voted for them. These are pertinent issues to explore in future research. Were citizens disillusioned with mainstream politics? Were they protest voters expressing their discontent, or did they genuinely support the ideas these fictional populists represented?

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