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CAPITALISM, MERITOCRACY AND LEGITIMACY: CROATIAN SOCIETY THIRTY YEARS AFTER

ABSTRACT

Starting from the System Justification Theory, the aim of this paper is to explore levels of general system legitimation, inequality perception and meritocracy perception among Croatian citizens, as well as to determine whether there is a difference between social groups of lower and higher social standing in this regard. Survey research on a sample of the Croatian general population (N = 353) revealed that on balance the respondents do not perceive the Croatian social system as legitimate, equal and meritocratic. Regression analyses showed that retired persons express a substantially higher level of system legitimation and meritocracy perception when compared to employed persons, while higher religiosity was also a significant predictor in this regard. When it comes to the inequality perception, only female gender was a significant predictor. The results are discussed within the framework of the contemporary theories of meritocracy and system legitimation, as well as with reference to specific social and economic characteristics of the Croatian society, such as the Croatian War of Independence, transition to capitalism, welfare state development and labour market situation. Overall, the study results provide only a partial confirmation of the System Justification Theory.

Keywords: Meritocracy, legitimacy, social inequality, crony capitalism, Croatia, system justification theory

1. Introduction – two waves of discontent in the Croatian society

The last decade of the twentieth century in Europe was marked by the decline of socialism and new opportunities for the countries behind “the iron curtain”. The Croatian society at the time found itself in very specific circumstances. Already in the first years of transition, many companies were collapsing and unemployment was rising. The state was consequently expected to have effective social justice and social sensitivity mechanisms. The stratification of society into the narrow strata of the rich and the majority population of the poor had acti-

vated many vulnerable social groups in seeking the right to a decent life. According to Haramija and Njavro (2016), dissatisfaction with the transition was the result of unsatisfactory circumstances resulting from five factors: poor economic structures inherited from socialism, the institutional legacy of socialism, hasty privatization, the failed policies of the market shock therapy, and finally, the underdeveloped nature of investments that went mainly to the financial sector. It is no wonder, therefore, that the results of a research project in the late 1990s showed widespread dissatisfaction with the social consequences, efficiency and fairness of privatization (Peračković, 1999).

In a nutshell, Croatian society has been living in a state of permanent dissatisfaction since the independence, which was rooted in dissatisfaction with the reforms in the socialist society. The first wave of dissatisfaction - dissatisfaction with the transition and its effects - can be dated from the mid-1990s until the start of the Great Recession, whose intensity in Croatia began to be felt in 2008, when the second major wave of discontent began. From the onset of the crisis to the present, the discontent with political governance and the inefficient public sector has begun to dominate, and to slowly counteract the dissatisfaction with the social effects of capitalism. Croatia, either intentionally or unintentionally, has chosen the middle road between liberal market economies (such as those of the Baltic countries) and coordinated market economies (such as Slovenia). However, such choices have led to double unfavourable outcomes - lagging behind in economic growth while increasing poverty risks comparable to those of the countries that have chosen more consistent and thus socially insensitive market reforms (Lučev, Babić, 2012).

The developmental problems of the Croatian society in these two waves of dissatisfaction can be linked to the social deficiencies highlighted by Franičević (2002), which arise from specific social ties that have had a pronounced impact on economic processes. Thus, in the period of political capitalism as Županov called it (1995), it is noted that the influence of kinship, political, ethnic and regional ties impeded economic and social development. In the context of clear and effective social norms, such relationships can act as a generator of social capital and promote trust leading to lower transaction costs. But in the opposite situation, the impact is less positive. On the other hand, strong social ties in the Croatian context were manifested through pronounced national-political identification, which can also have double effects. On the one hand, such identification can increase the level of generalized trust and consensus around a socioeconomic development strategy. On the other hand, the strong identification and image of the cohesive community can block the changes and necessary sacrifices that any reform effort must require. The growing discourse on the need for reform and the "weakening" of the state may be precisely the result of the weakening national identification. From a socio-anthropological perspective, it could be claimed that in the Croatian society the processes

described by Dinko Tomašić in the 1930s have continued to exist. Tomašić writes that cities were conquered by villages whose population significantly influenced the change in the social structure of cities. Something similar happened to the Croatian society in the early years of independence. A large population (mostly rural) came to Croatian cities, and from such heterogeneous population the new management elite was recruited. Kinship, regional and political ties became a common criterion for social advancement. The rapid enrichment of individuals, accompanied by an increasing number of the unemployed, had become a frequent media topic. As Šundalić (2010: 54) pointed out, "cities, as administrative-political centres, had become hubs of the *homo novus* with unnatural mix of socially responsible functions and socially insensitive behaviour, ...". The accelerated social stratification generated social discontent and existential insecurity, which was also confirmed by the growing distrust of institutions. The experience of the past years of transition has caused scepticism among the citizens when it comes to the state and prospects for the economy, democracy, civic values, and the like".

2. Theoretical framework and research questions

It could be expected that the aforementioned social circumstances reflect differently on various social groups. It would also be very intuitive to posit that beliefs of social groups correspond to their real social circumstances and interests. For example, in a study from the late 1990s, Magdalenić (1998) found that the perception of social justice fulfilment in Croatia was lower for those workers who were less satisfied with their current circumstances and estimated their standard of living being lower than before the war. However, the system justification theory (SJT; Jost, Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2013; Jost et al., 2004) holds that people oscillate between ego-justification, group-justification and system-justification. In other words, in some cases people will espouse beliefs that promote their real material interests or the feeling of self-worth. In other cases, group justification will be more pronounced. As proposed by the social identification theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1978, 1981), people tend to have negative out-groups beliefs and positive in-group beliefs in order to maintain the sense of self-worth or to promote group interests. However, SJT proponents argue that there are epistemological rea-

sons, primarily related to reducing of anxiety and uncertainty, which lead individuals to justify the existing social system. In some cases, especially when there are strong ideological legitimizing belief systems, social beliefs will mirror and legitimate the real positions of the social group. Sometimes, especially when measured with implicit measures, low status social classes (or groups in general) will hold negative in-group beliefs and tend to hold the system as just and legitimate, mainly because of the cognitive dissonance process. It is natural to think that persons in disadvantaged social position would hold negative beliefs about the contemporary Croatian society, but the aforementioned mechanism of cognitive dissonance might counteract such beliefs. Additionally, according to SJT, such justification beliefs are more often to be found when lower classes have no strong group interests in a particular case (Owuamalam et al., 2017), which is surely the case when holding beliefs about the contemporary Croatian society and its characteristics. In sum, as Brandt (2013) noted, SJT can be distinguished from the competing theories, such as the aforementioned social identity theory and social dominance theory (Sidanius, Prato, 1999), precisely by the assertion that lower status persons provide more legitimacy to the system due to cognitive dissonance (the so-called status-legitimacy hypothesis).

Empirical confirmation of SJT is relatively scarce, and almost exclusively found with regard to differences between ethnic and racial groups (Henry, Saul, 2006; Sengupta et al., 2015). On the other hand, Brandt (2013) tested the system justification theory in three multi-year studies with large and representative samples and found no confirmation for the status-legitimacy hypothesis. Using various measures of low status (class, education, gender, race) and different measures of legitimacy (mainly trust and confidence in the system and social institutions), he also found no support for the contention that the status-legitimacy takes place only in specific circumstances such as high inequality and high opportunities for social protest. In other words, even such social circumstances did not produce cognitive dissonance that would lead to the status-legitimacy. Chang and Kang (2018) analysed the data from the World Values Survey (WVS) 2005-2007 and found that as a person's income level rises, the preference for redistribution becomes weaker, albeit with moderating impact of national identification. These results were fully confirmed

by Caricati (2016) using the data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). He found that lower status individuals, measured by social class, income, and self-position in social hierarchy, were more likely to perceive the income differences as too large. This relation is even stronger in more democratic countries, which is contrary to the predictions of the SJT.

Therefore, contrary to SJT, it seems that the research evidence is in line with the real-conflict thesis which posits that persons in lower social positions, in accordance with in-group interests, tend to show lower levels of willingness to legitimize the social system in which they live, as well as the fact that they are more critical about inequalities and lack of meritocracy. This position is often labelled as the "realistic group conflict theory". Having this in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore levels of general system legitimation, inequality perception and meritocracy perception among Croatian citizens, and to determine whether there is a difference between social groups of lower and higher social standings in this regard. With this in mind, in the research three research questions were proposed:

RQ1. Do Croatian citizens perceive the social system as legitimate, equal and meritocratic?

RQ2. Are the aforementioned constructs similar or distinct?

RQ3. Are there any differences between social groups with higher and lower social standing when it comes to legitimacy, inequality and meritocracy perception?

3. Methods

3.1 Measurements

The inequality perception was measured by a scale consisting of two items whereby respondents should indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert type response format. Similar, albeit one-item measures of inequality, were used in Larsen (2016) and Roex, Huijts and Sieben (2019). The results on the items were summed in order to obtain the summary measure of inequality perception (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$).

The items were as follows:

Croatian society is polarized – there is a gap between the rich and the poor

Croatian society is insensitive towards the less fortunate – some social groups are struggling (unemployed, retired persons, disabled persons, etc.).

The perception of meritocracy was measured by means of an item/statement, whereby respondents also indicated their level of agreement on a five-point Likert type response format. The statement was as follows:

Croatian society is meritocratic – people get ahead by hard work, knowledge and ability.

Economic and political legitimacy perception was measured by a four-item scale consisting of two items which measured the level of economic development and two statements which measured the level of political development of Croatian society. Here as well the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements on a five-point Likert type response format. The statements were as follows:

Croatian society is economically developed

Croatian society is economically rich

Croatian society is fully democratic

In Croatian society there is a high level of awareness about citizens' political rights

The results on the items were also summed in order to obtain a summary measure of general system legitimisation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.66$).

Gender was measured with participants' self-reported gender (coded 0 = women and 1 = men). Level of education was measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (elementary school or less) to 5 (graduate or postgraduate degree). Place of residence was measured as a binary variable, with rural = 0; urban = 1. Religiosity was measured on a five-point scale (1 – not religious at all, 5 – fully religious). Veteran status was measured by asking the respondents whether they or at least one of their parents had participated in the Croatian War of Independence (Yes = 1; No = 0).

3.2 Sampling

In the study, a non-random sample of the Croatian population was used ($N = 353$). Namely, undergraduate students from the Faculty of Economics, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek (Croatia), collected the data by F2F interviewing in their place of residence by means of a snowball sampling procedure. Having that in mind, it can be assumed

that most of the respondents are residents of Slavonia and Baranja region. The data were collected in January 2019.

In the sample, there were 54.0% of female and 46.0% of male respondents.¹ The average age was 39.66 years ($SD = 17.20$). About 65.63 % of the respondents live in urban areas and the remaining 34.38 % in rural settlements. When it comes to employment status, the data are as follows: employed – 46.02%, unemployed – 15.34%, retired – 13.92%, and students – 24.72%. Regarding the war veteran status, 48.58% of the respondents personally participated in the Croatian War of Independence or at least one of their parents was a participant. The average religiosity on 1 to 5 scale amounted to 3.46. Only 5.97% of the respondents were people with elementary school or less. Almost a half of the respondents (45.17%) completed a four-year secondary school, while a three-year secondary school was completed by 7.67% of the respondents. The share of respondents with undergraduate degree was 26.99%, while the remaining 14.20% had graduate or postgraduate degree.

4. Results

Our analysis plan included descriptive statistics (RQ1), correlational analyses (RQ2), and hierarchical multiple regression analyses (RQ3). As noted in measurements section, we measured economic and political legitimacy perception with four items and summed up the results in order to obtain a total score of legitimacy. Such a score had a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 20. The average result was 11.45 ($SD = 2.86$). The least accepted statement was the one concerning the awareness about citizens' political rights ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.01$), followed by the statement about economic development ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.92$), the statement about the economic richness of Croatian society ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.08$), and the level of democracy in Croatian society ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.06$). When it comes to inequality perception, the average result on the two-item scale (the minimum was 2 and maximum 10) was 7.84 ($SD = 1.60$). Both statements had similar levels of agreement – the polarisation statement with the average of 3.99 ($SD = 0.88$) and the insensitivity statement with 3.85 ($SD = 0.94$). The average meritocracy perception on a 1 to 5 scale was 2.43 ($SD = 0.98$). The intercorrelations (Pearson's r) were as follows:

Table 1 Intercorrelation matrix

| Items | Economic and political legitimacy | Meritocracy | Inequality |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Economic and political legitimacy | 1 | 0.37 | - 0.20 |
| Meritocracy | 0.37 | 1 | - 0.20 |
| Inequality | - 0.20 | - 0.20 | 1 |

Source: Authors

As the first criterion in the regression analyses the system legitimization was entered. Before the analysis, we checked that all the requirements of the multiple linear regression were satisfied. Namely, there was no autocorrelation (Durbin-Watson statistics was 1.52), residuals were approximately normally distributed with no apparent heteroscedasticity, and there were no multicollinearity issues (all the variance inflation factors were between 1 and 2).

From Table 2, we can note that only religiosity and employment status (retired vs. employed persons) proved to be significant predictors. More precisely, a one point rise in religiosity leads to the 0.58 rise in the political and economic legitimization scale ($\beta = 0.24$) when all other predictors are held constant. Retired persons had 1.18 points higher result on the scale. It could be also noted that education is close to the significance level of .05 ($p = 0.09$).

Table 2 Hierarchical linear regression with system legitimization as a criterion variable

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|---------|------|---------|
| | b | SE B | β | b | SE B | β |
| Gender | 0.02 | 0.31 | 0.01 | 0.18 | 0.32 | 0.03 |
| Age (in years) | -0.00 | 0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.04 |
| Residence | 0.44 | 0.32 | 0.07 | 0.36 | 0.33 | 0.07 |
| Religiosity | 0.59 | 0.13 | 0.25** | 0.58 | 0.13 | 0.24** |
| Empl. status – unemployed | | | | -0.05 | 0.45 | -0.01 |
| Empl. status – retired | | | | 1.18 | 0.56 | 0.14* |
| Empl. status – student | | | | 0.03 | 0.46 | 0,01 |
| War veteran | | | | 0.30 | 0.32 | 0.05 |
| Education | | | | -0.29 | 0.17 | -0,10 |
| R ² | | 0,06 | | | 0,08 | |
| Adjusted R ² | | 0,05 | | | 0,06 | |
| R ² - change | | 0,06 | | | 0,02 | |
| F for change in R ² | | 5.54** | | | 1.58 | |

Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1; Employment status: employed as the reference category; War veteran status: Yes = 1; No = 0; Residence: Rural = 0; Urban = 1.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Source: Authors

In the second analysis, meritocracy perception was entered as the criterion variable. In this case as well all the requirements of the multiple regression were satisfied. Durbin Watson statistics was 1.52, the residuals were normally distributed, there was no heteroscedasticity judging from the residuals distributions, and there were no multicollinearity suspicions (VIFs ranged from 0 to 1).

The data show that religiosity and employment status (retired persons and students when compared to employed persons) led to higher meritocracy perception. Religiosity was not as strong a predictor as in the case of economic and political legitimization ($b = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.12$). Retired persons had 0.53 points higher meritocracy perception than employed persons, while students' results was 0.37 points higher.

Table 3 Hierarchical linear regression with meritocracy perception as a criterion variable

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|---------|--------|---------|
| | b | SE B | β | b | SE B | β |
| Gender | 0.12 | 0.11 | 0.06 | 0.14 | 0.11 | 0.07 |
| Age (in years) | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.03 |
| Residence | 0.10 | 0.11 | 0.05 | 0.10 | 0.11 | 0.05 |
| Religiosity | 0.11 | 0.05 | 0.13* | 0.10 | 0.05 | 0.12* |
| Empl. status – unemployed | | | | 0.16 | 0.16 | 0.06 |
| Empl. status – retired | | | | 0.53 | 0.20 | 0.19** |
| Empl. status – student | | | | 0.37 | 0.16 | 0.17* |
| War veteran | | | | 0.12 | 0.11 | 0.06 |
| Education | | | | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.05 |
| R ² | | 0.02 | | | 0.07 | |
| Adjusted R ² | | 0.01 | | | 0.05 | |
| R ² – change | | 0.02 | | | 0.05 | |
| F for change in R ² | | 2.14* | | | 3.34** | |

Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1; Employment status: employed as the reference category; War veteran status: Yes = 1; No = 2; Residence: Rural = 1; Urban = 2.

*p < .05, **p < .01

Source: Authors

In the end, we also conducted a hierarchical linear regression with the perception of inequality as the criterion variable. In this case, only gender happened to be

a significant predictor. Namely, women had 0.42 points higher results than men ($\beta = 0.13$), i.e. they more often see Croatian society as polarised and insensitive.

Table 4 Hierarchical linear regression with inequality perception as a criterion variable

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|---------|------|---------|
| | B | SE B | β | B | SE B | β |
| Gender | 0.47 | 0.18 | 0.15** | 0.42 | 0.19 | 0.13** |
| Age (in years) | 0.10 | 0.01 | 0.10 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.06 |
| Residence | -0.20 | 0.18 | -0.06 | -0.21 | 0.19 | -0.06 |
| Religiosity | -0.03 | 0.08 | -0.02 | -0.02 | 0.08 | -0.02 |
| Empl. status – unemployed | | | | -0.01 | 0.26 | -0.01 |
| Empl. status – retired | | | | -0.21 | 0.33 | -0.05 |
| Empl. status – student | | | | -0.33 | 0.27 | -0.09 |
| War veteran | | | | -0.27 | 0.18 | -0.08 |
| Education | | | | 0.02 | 0.10 | 0.01 |
| R ² | | 0.04 | | | 0.05 | |
| Adjusted R ² | | 0.03 | | | 0.03 | |
| R ² – change | | 0.04 | | | 0.01 | |
| F for change in R ² | | 3.20* | | | 1.03 | |

Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1; Employment status: employed as the reference category; War veteran status: Yes = 1; No = 2; Residence: Rural = 1; Urban = 2.

*p < .05, **p < .01

Source: Authors

5. Discussion

From the descriptive results it can be concluded that the respondents do not perceive the social system as legitimate, equal and meritocratic, thus giving the answer to the RQ1 posed in this study. First, the respondents judge the current level of economic inequality in Croatian society as unacceptable, as the average result on a 2 to 10 scale was 7.84. This does not come as a surprise, having in mind that the citizens of former socialist East-European countries are very critical towards inequality in their societies (e.g., Kelley, Zagorski, 2004) and hold a non-meritocratic perception of their societies (e.g., Redmond et al., 2002). It is interesting to note that the income inequality rose in Croatia in comparison to the socialist times, but not at levels that are observable in some other transition countries. Namely, the Gini coefficient rose dramatically in the Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union, as well as in the Baltics. For instance, the Gini for Lithuania rose from 23 in the period 1987-1988 to 37 in the period 1993-1995 (Milanović, 1998: 42-43). As Nestić (2003) showed, in Croatia the rise was almost negligible, from 0.286 in 1988 to 0.297 in 1998. Nestić attributed this to the slow economic development that was not conducive to significant wage differentials and property earnings, as well as to early retirement schemes and other indirect social and capital transfers. The first point is very interesting since the perception of social differentiation was very widespread because of the property redistribution and the crony capitalism at the time. However, the share of property income was probably still very low in the entire income distribution (Nestić, 2003: 15). In the last ten years, Gini has even shown a slightly decreasing trend, from 31.6 in 2010 to 29.7 in 2018.²

From the results it can also be inferred that the respondents judge Croatian society to be slightly non-meritocratic since the average results on a 1 to 5 scale was 2.43. Meritocracy is usually defined as a system where social positions are awarded by a transparent and impartial system that rewards merit – a combination of capabilities and effort – rather than social class origin or other ascriptive characteristics (for different approaches to defining meritocracy, see Kim, Choi, 2017). Coupled with a just distribution of wealth, this can be seen as a necessary constituent of a just society. However, all contemporary societies represent a mix of meritocratic (education, ability, effort, etc.) and non-meritocratic (corruption, family wealth, politi-

cal influences, random life circumstances, etc.) elements. It is no wonder that a large number of recent studies show that citizens often do not see societies in which they live as meritocratic. Reynolds and Xian (2014) found that Americans more often hold meritocratic than non-meritocratic beliefs. However, almost a quarter of them simultaneously hold both meritocratic and non-meritocratic beliefs. In Bubak's (2019) study based on the WVS data, even in the Confucianism-permeated Chinese culture the statement that personal success is determined by forces outside of one's control (luck determines success) had the average of 3.7 on a 1 to 10 scale. A similar mix of meritocratic and non-meritocratic perceptions was also found in a study conducted on a sample of Croatian student population (Šundalić, Pavić, 2011). Non-meritocratic elements are more often to be found in times where old institutional arrangements are abandoned, i.e. when individual aspirations are boundless and not integrated into legitimate social goals. In classical sociological theories, this situation is often labelled as *anomy* (Durkheim, 1997). In other words, the transition from one system to another always carries the uncertainty of the unknown. At first, the "misinterpretations" of the new system are happening. They can be intentional and sometimes due to the circumstances in which the transition occurs. The transition of Croatian society began in the circumstances of the Croatian War of Independence that destabilized life throughout Croatia. In addition, the experience of the legacy of socialist economic policy and socialist culture of collectivism and egalitarianism represented an unfavourable climate for the takeover of civic culture and market economy.

The level of system legitimisation is also quite low – the average of 11.45 on a 4 to 20 point scale. This finding is not a surprise, given the developmental and political problems described in the introduction, as well as the results of previous research that indicated very low and declining trust in the main institutions of Croatian society (Baloban, Rimac, 1999; Sekulić, Šporer, 2010). As an illustration, according to the public opinion research of Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences (the so-called Pilar's barometer of Croatian society) conducted in 2016, only 3 of the 11 listed institutions were rated with an average higher than 5.0 on a 1 to 10 point scale. As can be noted in the intercorrelational matrix, the three constructs are interrelated, especially when it comes to economic and political legitimisation and

perception of meritocracy. In consequence, our answer to the RQ3 would be that Croatian citizens see lack of meritocracy as one of the important reasons for the current problems related to political and economic development.

In order to provide an answer to the RQ2, we conducted three regression analyses, which revealed some differences between social groups with regard to the outcome variables. The most striking finding is that retired persons perceived the system as more legitimate and meritocratic as compared to the employed persons. As a possible explanation, we can note that Croatia fits nicely into the group of societies with high elderly-biased welfare spending focus. Welfare systems in those societies, of which Southern European countries such as Italy, Greece and Spain are good examples, are focused on maintaining social services for the elderly (mainly generous retirement schemes) as opposed to provision of services for younger cohorts such as child care or youth-targeted employment programs (Henjak, 2008). Even though pension allowances in Croatia are not high, early retirement schemes and special pensions provisions (war veterans, etc.) probably create some complacency among older generations and divert resources from possible social programs for the youth. This further translates into high levels of youth unemployment and dependence on families for housing provision and income. For instance, in 2018, youth unemployment rate in Croatia amounted to 23.8%, putting Croatia in the fourth place in the EU.³ In addition, the estimated average age of leaving the parental home was over 31 years, the second highest in the EU.⁴ Greater satisfaction of retired persons can also be interpreted through relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966; Townsend, 1979), according to which pensioners no longer have such a critical attitude to the existing social situation since they have resolved their life priorities. However, an important theoretical note should be made. Specifically, there is a growing body of evidence showing that citizens are also oriented towards supranational criteria in assessing their status (Watson et al., 2010; Berthoud, 2012). In other words, in this case, the unfavourable assessment of Croatia might have drawn down the satisfaction, hiding the possible differences that arise from the different position within the Croatian society. Thus, relative deprivation is a term that operates at different levels of analysis, whereas groups with which individuals and groups are compared are manifold

and variable, with different comparison criteria being included in different contexts (Fahey, 2010). In the context of our research, given the accession to the European Union and the increasing prominence of European issues in Croatian society, it can be assumed that all categories of citizens compare Croatia to other, primarily developed, European countries. For example, an analysis conducted by Berthoud (2012) shows that one third of perceptions of poverty can be explained by income relative to the country average and two-thirds by income relative to average income in the European Union. This implies that the overall assessment of the situation may affect different estimates of intra-national deprivation.

Also unexpected is the finding that there is no greater dissatisfaction among unemployed persons when compared to employed persons. Namely, the polarisation in the perception of inequality could be affected by the general level of meritocratic perceptions in a country. La Roex et al. (2019) found that a country level of meritocratic perceptions is connected to higher polarisation between lower and higher socioeconomic strata with regard to income inequality. Having in mind low meritocratic perceptions in the current study, therefore, we would expect that employment status and education significantly impacted the perception of inequality in Croatian society. However, it can be assumed that in the situation of intensive emigration a large number of individuals who were unemployed and dissatisfied with this fact either left the country or found employment. Furthermore, it is possible that employee dissatisfaction also prevails with the existing situation, that is, the mere fact of employment does not significantly reduce it due to insufficient salaries and inadequate working conditions.

Older age in previous research was often connected to less meritocratic perceptions (Barnes, 2002; Reynolds, Xian, 2014). The usual explanation is the so-called exposure thesis, which posits that experiences of unfair treatment and other non-meritocratic experiences accumulate over time and produce cynicism about meritocracy. However, the age effect was not found in the current study. The probable explanation is that the age-effect in this case was not linear, but curvilinear. Namely, the aforementioned higher perception of economic and political legitimacy and meritocracy among retired persons has surely affected the relationship between age and these outcome measures.

The lack of differences in attitudes with relation to the war veteran status can be explained in two ways. One relates to the proportion of measurement error that we agreed to when designing the question in such a way that it included not only veterans but also veterans in the family. Such a decision was conditional on a relatively small planned sample, but it led to the stated measurement error resulting from differences in attitudes between the veterans themselves and their family members, since in some cases these views would not coincide. The second interpretation may refer to the very ambivalence of attitudes that may stem from veterans' experience and from warfare in general. On the one hand, suffering can lead to greater dissatisfaction regarding the social situation. But on the other hand, the same experience can lead to the activation of cognitive dissonance, which entails a selective perception that focuses more on the more positive aspects of the achieved state, especially on the attainment of state independence. Thus, for example, in a study of the perception of privatization Peračković (2000) found that war victims had a somewhat more positive perception of the privatization process than other citizens.

With regard to gender, the direction of the possible theoretical hypothesis is not clear. On the one hand, exclusion from the labour market could lead to "acquired helplessness" and the attitudes that social positions are gained through forces beyond one's control, which was confirmed in a research based on the WVS data (Fisman, O'Neill, 2009), but also disconfirmed in a study based on the USA General Social Survey data (Reynolds, Xian, 2014) wherein the correlation ran in the opposite direction. On the other hand, in the Croatian socioeconomic context, precisely the same factor can lead to unfavourable experiences and resentment due to unemployment, low pay, substandard working conditions, etc. In other words, increased participation in the labour market could lead to the perception of a lack of meritocracy and disappointment with the current social and economic development.

With regard to religiosity and meritocratic beliefs, our results confirm research indicating that religious persons tend to espouse individualistic beliefs about individual success (Hunt, 2002) and that atheists hold meritocratic perceptions about their society less often than religious persons (Reynolds, Xian, 2014). In other words, religiosity might foster the feeling of personal responsibility that translates into higher levels of legitimacy and meritocracy perceptions. In the Croatian society there is also an additional contextual factor related to the right-wing political orientation and religiosity. Namely, in Croatia, higher religiosity is connected to the right-wing political values and attitudes (e.g., Labus, 2005; Sekulić, Šporer, 2006), with affirmative views about the Croatian statehood and negative views about the Yugoslav state being an important part of such attitudes. Consequently, holding affirmative views about the Croatian statehood and negative views about contemporary Croatian society at the same time would represent a dissonant state of mind, thus leading to higher legitimacy and meritocracy perceptions.

6. Conclusion

As expected, the results of our pilot study showed a low level of meritocratic beliefs and political and economic legitimisation, as well as high intolerance to the current level of inequalities in Croatian society. When it comes to group differences in perception, we did not find consistent support for the social justification theory, the only exemption being more legitimacy and meritocratic perceptions of the retired persons. However, we believe that such, somewhat surprising, finding might be explained by evoking the peculiarities of the Croatian labour market, such as early retirement and war pensions. Given the multitude of possible measures of the aforementioned constructs, future studies with different measures should check the robustness of our findings when it comes to Croatian society. In addition, since our study was conducted on a non-random sample, future studies with random samples are warranted.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Gender data for two respondents were missing.
- 2 For a comprehensive review of evidence on both points, see Janmatt (2013).
- 3 Eurostat, (2019b), "Unemployment statistics", available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics (Accessed on: June 5, 2019)
- 4 Eurostat, (2019c), "Being young in Europe today - family and society", available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_family_and_society#Family_composition_and_household_structure (Accessed on: June 4, 2019)

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KAPITALIZAM, MERITOKRACIJA I LEGITIMACIJA: HRVATSKO DRUŠTVO TRIDESET GODINA POSLIJE

SAŽETAK

Polazeći od teorije opravdanja sustava, cilj je ovog rada istražiti razinu opće legitimacije sustava, percepciju nejednakosti i percepciju meritokracije među hrvatskim građanima, kao i utvrditi postoji li razlika između socijalnih skupina nižeg i višeg društvenog položaja u ovome smislu. Anketno istraživanje na uzorku opće populacije Hrvatske (N = 353) pokazalo je da ispitanici hrvatski društveni sustav ne smatraju legitimnim, jednakim i meritokratskim. Regresijske analize pokazale su da umirovljenici iskazuju znatno viši stupanj legitimacije sustava i veću percepciju meritokracije u usporedbi sa zaposlenima, a veća je religioznost također značajan prediktor u tom pogledu. Kad je u pitanju percepcija nejednakosti, samo je ženski spol bio značajan prediktor. Rezultati se u radu stavljaju u okvir suvremenih teorija meritokracije i legitimacije sustava, a objašnjavaju se i specifičnim socijalnim i ekonomskim karakteristikama hrvatskog društva, kao što su Domovinski rat, tranzicija u kapitalizam, razvoj socijalne države i stanje na tržištu rada. Ukupno gledajući, rezultati studije pružaju samo djelomičnu potvrdu teorije opravdanja sustava.

Ključne riječi: meritokracija, legitimacija, društvene nejednakosti, kapitalizam, Hrvatska, teorija opravdanja sustava