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Political Leadership and the Perception of Well-Being: How Leaders Shape Reality in Serbia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of political leaders in shaping perceptions of subjective well-being in Serbia, challenging traditional explanations that emphasize the influence of economic conditions or media. Using data from a representative survey of 1,500 respondents, we employ regression models to demonstrate that identification with political leaders is the strongest predictor of well-being perceptions. The analysis shows that individuals who identify with ruling party leaders (SNS/SPS) report significantly higher well-being, while those aligned with opposition leaders express dissatisfaction. These findings support the hypothesis that political leaders construct social reality, using symbolic power and framing to influence how citizens perceive their lives and the political environment. In contrast, objective economic status and media consumption have limited explanatory power. This study contributes to the

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broader understanding of political behavior in semi-authoritarian regimes, where leaders dominate public discourse and shape perceptions of well-being to maintain political support. The findings highlight the importance of symbolic politics in maintaining regime stability and influencing voter behavior.

KEYWORDS: subjective well-being, political leadership, symbolic power, framing, political behavior

MEASURING THE PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

The concept of well-being has long been studied in various fields, including psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. Well-being typically refers to the quality of an individual's life and encompasses both objective and subjective components. Objective well-being involves tangible indicators such as income, education, and health, while subjective well-being refers to an individual's self-assessment of life satisfaction and emotional experiences (Diener 1984). In political science, subjective well-being is increasingly recognized as an essential predictor of voting behavior and political preferences, particularly in contexts where political leaders can influence perceptions of life satisfaction and governance quality. This review focuses on the conceptual foundations and methods used to measure perceptions of political and social well-being, exploring how these dimensions are operationalized and applied in research on political behavior.

Political well-being can be understood as an individual's satisfaction with the political system, government performance, democracy, and their ability to participate in political processes (Inglehart 1990). It reflects the extent to which citizens feel their government is effective, legitimate, and representative. Social well-being, on the other hand, refers to individuals' perceptions of their quality of life in relation to societal factors such as economic stability, social services, community relations, and social cohesion (Keyes 1998). While both dimensions of well-being are deeply interconnected, political well-being specifically relates to governance structures and democratic processes, whereas social well-being addresses broader societal issues such as economic and social conditions.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that subjective well-being – how satisfied individuals are with their lives – can influence political attitudes and behaviors. Research by Frey and Stutzer (2002) emphasized the role of subjective well-being in shaping voter preferences and electoral outcomes. Individuals who perceive themselves to be satisfied with their lives are more likely to support the incumbent government, while dissatisfaction often drives demand for political change. This relationship is particularly strong

in countries where political leaders are perceived as responsible for broader societal outcomes, such as economic prosperity or social security.

Subjective well-being is typically measured using surveys that ask respondents to assess their satisfaction with various life domains. The most commonly used measure is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985), which evaluates global life satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 7. However, recent research has developed more sophisticated measures to capture specific domains of well-being, such as satisfaction with political governance or the state of democracy. These measures help disentangle the broader concept of subjective well-being from its political and social components, which are crucial in understanding voting behavior and political engagement (Veenhoven 2008).

In recent years, scholars have increasingly explored how subjective well-being is shaped not only by personal and economic conditions but also by regime type and political identification, especially in contexts marked by autocratization or democratic decline. Orviska, Caplanova, and Hudson (2014) show that democratic institutions tend to have a positive effect on subjective well-being, particularly through trust in institutions and perceived government responsiveness. Prati (2023), analyzing 78 countries, demonstrates that the relationship between regime type and life satisfaction is significantly moderated by political trust, underscoring the importance of perceived legitimacy in shaping well-being. Meanwhile, Onraet et al. (2017) argue that the association between right-wing ideological attitudes and subjective well-being varies by context – specifically, they find that in high-threat countries, individuals with conservative or authoritarian values report significantly higher well-being, while this effect disappears or reverses in low-threat environments. Their findings suggest that ideological alignment with dominant political narratives can provide psychological comfort amid insecurity. This line of reasoning aligns with our core hypothesis: in semi-authoritarian settings such as Serbia, where political leaders monopolize the symbolic and institutional framing of reality, perceptions of well-being are closely tied to identification with ruling elites. Finally, while still forthcoming, Ponarin and Afanasyeva (2025) are expected to further contribute to this field by examining well-being under hybrid regimes in post-Soviet contexts. Our study builds upon this growing literature by empirically demonstrating how political leadership, rather than economic status or media exposure, predicts well-being perceptions in a semi-authoritarian regime.

MEASURING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL WELL-BEING

The measurement of political well-being presents unique challenges due to the subjective nature of political satisfaction and the diversity of political systems across countries. Studies have often operationalized political well-being through

variables such as satisfaction with democracy, government performance, and political trust (Norris 2011). For example, Inglehart and Norris (2000) employed these measures in their World Values Survey, examining the extent to which political satisfaction shapes democratic support and electoral behavior. One key measure is political trust, defined as the belief that political institutions and actors act in the public's best interest (Miller & Listhaug 1990). Political trust is often linked to support for ruling parties and leaders, as individuals with higher trust in government are more likely to perceive positive changes in their well-being as a result of governmental policies (Newton 2001). Political efficacy, which refers to citizens' beliefs about their influence over political processes, is another essential dimension of political well-being (Easton 1975). Individuals who feel more politically efficacious are generally more engaged and satisfied with their political system, which can also affect their voting behavior.

On the other hand, social well-being is a multidimensional concept, encompassing both the individual's perceived quality of life and their satisfaction with broader social systems. Keyes (1998) proposed a theoretical model of social well-being that includes five dimensions: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence. These dimensions capture individuals' sense of belonging and their perceptions of societal progress and functionality. Research on social well-being often uses subjective measures similar to those employed for political well-being. For instance, measures of social cohesion ask individuals about their sense of community belonging and trust in others, while measures of economic well-being assess satisfaction with personal and national economic conditions (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2012). Perceptions of economic security and access to public services also play a crucial role in shaping social well-being, as demonstrated by studies on welfare systems and inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010).

The relationship between political leaders and citizens' well-being perceptions is mediated by media and communication strategies. Research on political framing has shown that political elites use media to shape citizens' perceptions of reality, influencing both political and social well-being (Entman 1993). Leaders frame political and economic conditions in ways that align with their policy agendas, often emphasizing success stories and downplaying failures. In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, media control can amplify this effect by limiting access to alternative narratives (Levitsky & Way 2010). The concept of "reality construction", where political leaders frame public discourse to construct positive perceptions of well-being, is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary Serbia, where the ruling party under President Aleksandar Vučić exercises significant control over the media. This has allowed the government to present a narrative of economic success and political stability, which aligns with citizens' perceptions of improved well-being. Studies on media framing and political communication underscore

the importance of this dynamic in influencing public perceptions and voting behavior (Iyengar 1991).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The central argument of this study is that perceptions of well-being are not primarily shaped by objective economic conditions or media influence but are instead largely constructed by political leaders. Our main hypothesis is that *identification with and evaluation (grading) of political leaders* is the most significant predictor of subjective well-being. Political leaders, particularly in contexts like Serbia, where they wield substantial control over political narratives and public discourse, actively construct a version of reality that influences voters' perceptions of their social and political conditions. This paper explores the idea that political leadership, more than media framing or objective social and economic factors, plays a dominant role in shaping individuals' perceptions of well-being, especially in semi-authoritarian or populist regimes.

An essential component of our argument is that in semi-authoritarian regimes such as Serbia, political leaders do not merely respond to public sentiment – they actively shape it through symbolic discourse. Wagner and Enyedi (2024) note that while populist authoritarians often exploit negative emotions like fear and anger, they also integrate optimistic messaging to generate loyalty and a sense of pride. Their analysis of Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński shows that leaders frequently promote narratives of strength, progress, and national destiny alongside crisis rhetoric. A similar dual strategy is evident in Serbia.

President Aleksandar Vučić frequently emphasizes Serbia's economic achievements, stability, and international importance. In 2023, he launched the "People's Movement for the State" under the slogan "*Serbia dreams and its dreams come true*," reinforcing a narrative of visionary leadership and fulfilled aspirations. He regularly points to GDP growth, low debt, and regional leadership as proof of national progress – a discourse that positions Serbia as a success story under his rule. These narratives contribute to a political environment in which well-being is constructed less through material outcomes and more through symbolic alignment with leadership.

This symbolic framing is strongly amplified by regime-aligned media. As Jovanović (2018) demonstrates in a content analysis of the tabloids *Alo!* and *Informer*, Vučić is portrayed simultaneously as a heroic leader and a perpetual victim of conspiracies and foreign plots. Media discourses combine hyperbole, national pride, and emotional appeals to present him as both irreplaceable and under siege – fostering an affective bond with citizens. In such a setting, loyalty to the leader becomes a source of perceived well-being.

The concept of subjective well-being refers to an individual's evaluation of their life, including satisfaction with various life domains (Diener 1984). In

this paper, we operationalize subjective well-being as a composite score that includes satisfaction with the quality of life, satisfaction with the political system, perceptions of government performance, and optimism about the country's future. The core premise of this framework is that political leaders possess the symbolic and discursive power to shape these perceptions, creating a favorable image of well-being among their supporters, even when economic realities may not fully support such perceptions.

Our primary hypothesis is that identification with and evaluation of political leaders (through subjective grading) serves as the best predictor of well-being perceptions. This hypothesis stems from the understanding that in contexts where political leaders hold significant sway over both public discourse and the media, they can effectively "construct" reality. We posit that it is not the objective economic status, nor the influence of media alone, that drives the public's perception of well-being, but rather the political leaders' ability to shape these perceptions through strategic communication and symbolic representation. This hypothesis aligns with existing research on the role of populist leadership and authoritarianism in shaping public opinion. Leaders in such regimes frequently use rhetoric and control of public narratives to construct a version of reality that emphasizes stability, prosperity, and progress, irrespective of objective economic or social challenges (Levitsky & Way 2010). In Serbia, for instance, President Aleksandar Vučić has been described as adept at using media and public appearances to construct an image of Serbia as a country on the path to prosperity, which plays a central role in maintaining public support for the ruling party.

The idea that political leaders actively construct reality is grounded in several theoretical perspectives, most notably framing theory. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communication, thereby shaping how the public interprets events and conditions. Leaders, especially those in positions of significant power, have the ability to control the framing of issues through both their discourse and their influence over media channels. They can emphasize positive aspects of governance – such as economic growth, infrastructural development, or national security – while downplaying or ignoring more negative realities like unemployment, corruption, or inequality.

In Serbia, where political leaders like Vučić have substantial control over state-run and affiliated media outlets, the power to frame public perceptions of well-being is even more pronounced. The government can present an optimistic narrative that highlights successes and future promises, thereby fostering a sense of well-being among citizens, particularly those who identify with the ruling party. This form of symbolic power – a concept rooted in Bourdieu's (1991) work – allows political elites to define and shape social reality in a way that supports their political objectives. Through repeated messaging and symbolic representations of progress, leaders can effectively construct a narrative of national success, even when objective economic data may not fully support such claims.

The political construction of reality contrasts with the more traditional media effects theories, which suggest that media alone plays a dominant role in shaping public opinion. While agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw 1972) emphasizes the media's ability to influence what issues people think about, it is the framing by political elites that ultimately shapes how these issues are interpreted. In semi-authoritarian contexts like Serbia, where political leaders maintain close control over both the media and public discourse, it is often the leaders themselves, rather than media outlets, who drive the framing of social and political issues.

The role of media in shaping public perceptions of well-being is significant but, in our analysis, secondary to the role played by political leaders. Media effects theories argue that mass media sets the agenda for public discourse and influences individuals' perceptions by controlling the flow of information (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Iyengar 1991). However, in environments where political leaders dominate media narratives, the content and framing of information are often aligned with the political objectives of the ruling elite. This alignment between political leadership and media reduces the independent effect of media on public perceptions. The media, in such cases, becomes a tool through which political leaders disseminate their constructed narratives, further reinforcing the idea that leadership framing plays a more central role than media in shaping perceptions of well-being.

Objective economic conditions, on the other hand, might logically seem to play a major role in shaping perceptions of well-being. Yet research shows that perceived well-being does not always correlate with objective indicators of economic performance (Deaton 2010). This phenomenon, often referred to as the Easterlin Paradox, demonstrates that rising income levels or improvements in economic indicators do not necessarily lead to proportional increases in subjective well-being (Easterlin 1974). In politically controlled environments, the gap between objective economic conditions and perceived well-being can be explained by the narrative **control** exercised by political leaders. For instance, by focusing public attention on select economic successes, political leaders can frame their governance as effective and beneficial, even when broader economic issues like inequality or inflation persist.

Leaders with populist or authoritarian tendencies are particularly adept at constructing perceptions of well-being. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue that populist leaders frame themselves as the sole protectors of "the people," presenting their leadership as a bulwark against external threats (such as globalization, political elites, or foreign interference) and internal challenges (like corruption or inefficiency). This leadership style often relies on the construction of a personalized narrative, where the leader is seen as directly responsible for national achievements and citizens' well-being. In Serbia, Vučić's leadership is an example of this phenomenon. By presenting himself as the architect of Serbia's modernization and economic progress, he constructs a narrative that ties national well-being to his leadership. This

allows his supporters to experience a sense of well-being even in the face of economic or social challenges, as their perceptions are more strongly tied to their identification with his leadership than to the objective conditions of their lives. This dynamic is central to our hypothesis that the evaluation and identification with political leaders is the best predictor of subjective well-being, and that these perceptions are constructed more by political leadership than by media or economic status.

Our argument contributes to the expanding body of research that reconsiders traditional retrospective voting models by highlighting the subjective nature of political and economic perceptions. As recent work by De Vries (2018), Hobolt and Tilley (2014), and others has shown, perceptions of government performance are not neutral reflections of objective conditions, but are shaped by prior political loyalties and motivated reasoning. In such frameworks, citizens interpret economic or social realities through partisan lenses, often aligning their evaluations of national conditions with their identification with incumbent parties. This literature challenges the assumption of an informed and evaluative voter and instead suggests that perception itself is politically constructed. Our study extends this reasoning to a semi-authoritarian context, where media control and leader-centric narratives further amplify this dynamic, shaping not just retrospective performance evaluations, but also perceptions of subjective well-being. By doing so, we bridge the gap between the literatures on political cognition, well-being, and electoral behavior.

DATA AND MEASUREMENT OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

The research was conducted for the European Delegation by the Center for Social Research and Center for the Scientific and Applied Research, Faculty of Political Sciences – Belgrade. Data collection process has been realized in February 2024 and it was slightly postponed to avoid overlap with the 'noise' that occurred due to the elections taking place in December 2023. The sampling procedure was three level stratified sampling, based on Probability Proportional to Size, with two levels of stratification: region and the size of the primary sampling units (polling station), for the PSU, and random sampling for the SSU (household) and FSU (respondent). Overall, we collect the data based on representative sample of 1500 respondents. The instrument was rather complex consisting of 57 questions, while we used much smaller number of variables for the purpose of this research.

The main dependent variable in our study is subjective well-being, which we operationalized through a composite score constructed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). This composite variable is designed to capture individuals' overall perceptions of

their personal quality of life, as well as their satisfaction with the political and social environment in Serbia. The construction of this composite variable allows us to quantify subjective well-being in a way that reflects multiple dimensions of individual satisfaction.

To measure subjective well-being, as the dependent variable, we selected five key indicators that capture different aspects of well-being in the Serbian context (Table 1). These indicators were standardized (using z-scores) and reflect respondents' evaluations of both political and social conditions. We employed Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to reduce these five subjective well-being indicators into a single factor. The results of the PCA indicated that all five items loaded strongly onto one component, with loadings ranging from .810 to .930. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .884, which indicates that the data were well-suited for PCA. The analysis yielded a solution that explained 77.34% of the variance, demonstrating that the composite score effectively captures a substantial portion of the variation in subjective well-being across respondents. The high percentage of explained variance and strong factor loadings suggest that these five indicators cohesively represent a single underlying construct of subjective well-being. This approach allows us to reduce the complexity of multiple subjective assessments into one comprehensive measure, which can then be used in further analyses.

Before conducting the PCA, we tested for the standard assumptions to ensure the adequacy of the procedure. All variables were sufficiently correlated (as indicated by the correlation matrix), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.60. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis. We did not encounter any major violations regarding linearity or multicollinearity, and no transformations or exclusions were necessary.

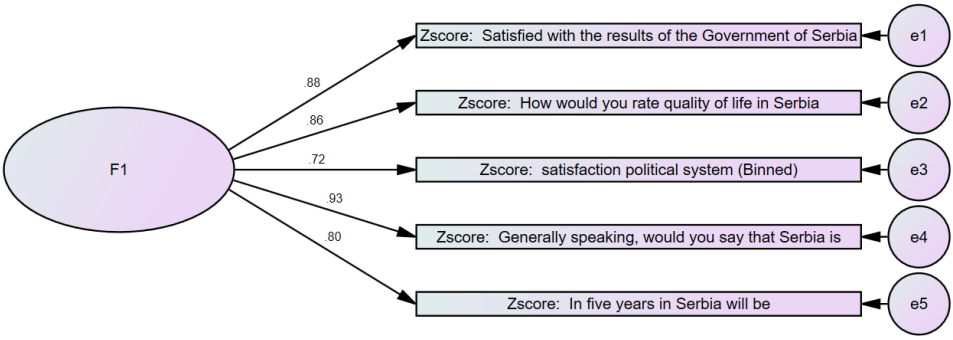
The selection of the five variables was theoretically informed by the dual concept of subjective well-being as encompassing both political and social perceptions. The items were chosen to reflect not only personal satisfaction with political institutions (e.g., government, democracy, system), but also perceptions of broader societal conditions. For example, the question "In five years, Serbia will be..." captures an individual's future-oriented optimism or pessimism about the country's direction – a recognized component of cognitive well-being in contexts of political instability or democratic erosion. By combining present satisfaction with future expectations, the index reflects a comprehensive measure of perceived well-being in a semi-authoritarian environment.

Table 1. Subjective Well-being indicators: PCA loadings

	Factor loadings
Zscore: Right/Wrong direction	.930
Zscore: Satisfied with the results of the Government	.905
Zscore: How would you rate quality of life in Serbia	.898
Zscore: In five years in Serbia will be	.849
Zscore: Satisfaction political system	.810
Percent of explained variation	77.34
KMO	.884

To validate the structure of the composite variable, we conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The CFA confirmed that the five selected indicators reliably contribute to a single latent variable of subjective well-being. This step ensures that the composite score provides a coherent and robust measure of individuals' perceptions of well-being in Serbia's political and social context (Scheme 1). We report goodness of fit of the latent construct as follows: GFI=.971, AGFI=.912, NFI=.981, CFI=.982, SRMR=.0194.

Scheme 1. Subjective Well-being – Confirmatory Factor Analysis



The composite score of subjective well-being is therefore calculated based on the factor loadings from the PCA and serves as our primary dependent variable. This score reflects an individual's overall assessment of their well-being, encompassing both their quality of life and satisfaction with political and governance-related factors.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE WELL-BEING COMPOSITE SCORE

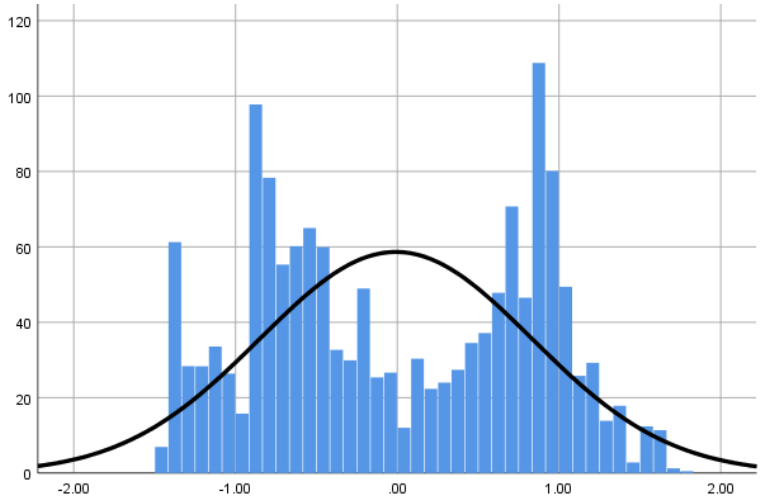
In Table 2 and in Graph 1 we present statistics for the dependent variable. The distribution of well-being scores illustrates that most respondents cluster around the mean, with a balanced spread of individuals reporting both positive and negative well-being. The skewness near zero indicates that the distribution is relatively even, without a strong bias toward either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In other words we have very clear 'two pick' distribution, suggesting that variable in question possibly covers two different type of population, indicating that the very perception of the subjective well-being could be strong 'cleavage issue'.

Due to this 'two pick' distribution, it was necessary to transform the dependent onto new variables with only two values, i.e. dividing the whole variation onto those who have high and low level of perception of subjective-well-being. In other words, instead of use numeric score based on PCA, we used in the analysis DV as the dummy variable, with the values 1 for the high and 0 for the values indicating low level of subjective well-being perception. The distribution of the two values were almost equal: 50.2 percent for the low level of SWB, and 49.8% for the high level of the SWB.

Table 2. Subjective Well-being composite score statistics

Statistics	Values
Mean	-0.009
Std. Error	0.022
5% Trimmed Mean	-0.010
Median	-0.128
Variance	0.710
Std. Deviation	0.843
Minimum	-1.490
Maximum	1.770
Range	3.260
Interquartile Range	1.560
Skewness	0.036
Kurtosis	-1.302

Graph 1. Well-being – Distribution of factor score



The main independent variable in our analysis is a factor score based on a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Promax rotation, which captures respondents' identification with political leaders (Table 3). Rating leaders in the research was based on five-level ordinal scale (grades from 1 to 5). The factor score was derived from ratings of political leaders across three distinct components, each representing different political alignments in Serbia: Component 1 (Left Opposition Leaders), Component 2 (Ruling Party Leaders – SNS/SPS), and Component 3 (Right Opposition Leaders). The PCA explains 72.92% of the total variance, indicating that these three components adequately capture the diversity of political identification among Serbian voters. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .950, demonstrating that the data are well-suited for this analysis. The factor scores generated from this PCA are used as independent variables in our regression models to assess the relationship between political identification and perceived well-being. Each factor reflects how strongly respondents identify with leaders from one of these political groups, allowing us to examine how different political alignments shape perceptions of well-being.

Table 3. Political Leaders: PCA with Promax rotation

	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Zdravko Ponoš	.985		
Marinika Tepić	.901		
Dragan Đilas	.852		

Pavle Grbović	.848		
Dobrica Veselinović	.839		
Savo Manojlović	.819		
Radomir Lazović	.818		
Nebojša Zelenović	.801		
Aleksandar Jovanović Ćuta	.775		
Boris Tadić	.572		
Ana Brnabić		.949	
Siniša Mali		.947	
Miloš Vučević		.939	
Aleksandar Vučić		.903	
Aleksandar Šapić		.890	
Ivica Dačić		.777	
Branko Ružić		.657	
Branimir Nestorović			.881
Boško Obradović			.819
Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski			.791
Miloš Jovanović			.512
Explained variance	72.92 %		
KMO	.950		

Finally, we used demographic controls in traditional manner. For gender we used male as dummy variable. Education and income is divided on 33% of variation criteria, and in the regression analysis we used medium and high level as opposed to low level for both, education and income. We add a regional belonging by dividing the sample on four regions, and consequently Belgrade region is used as referent value. Finally, we used urban vs rural as dummy variable, as well as unemployed as opposed to employed, also as dummy variable.

As an important predictor to control the effect of political leaders onto subjective well-being we used consumption of media. In the research for the different media nine-level measurement of frequency is used (from everyday more than once to never). We introduced PCA with promax rotation and Kaiser normalization procedure (Table 4). Two components are identified,

i.e. traditional and internet media consumption. The distinction between traditional and digital media is especially relevant in semi-authoritarian regimes, where state control over television and print is often more consolidated than over online platforms. Traditional media in Serbia — particularly national broadcasters and pro-government tabloids — are known to promote state-aligned narratives and limit critical perspectives. In contrast, digital media offer greater access to alternative voices, independent journalism, and user-driven content. Although digital spaces are not immune to manipulation, they represent a more pluralistic and fragmented information environment. This difference in information exposure is crucial for understanding how media consumption shapes citizens' perceptions of political reality and well-being.

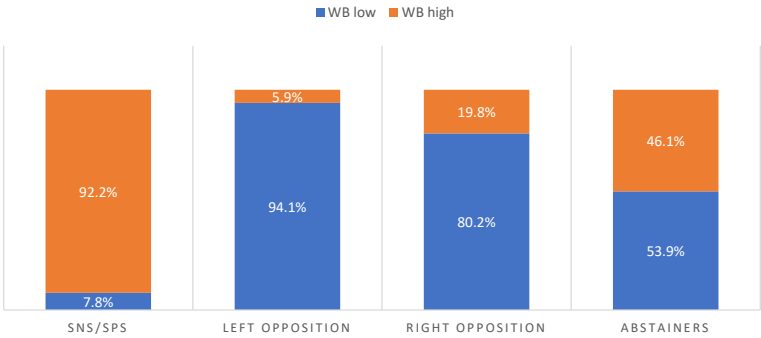
Table 4. PCA: Media consumption

	Component 1	Component 2
TikTok	.910	
Instagram	.895	
Viber	.862	
YouTube	.839	
Twitter	.826	
Facebook	.813	
Internet portals	.474	
News on TV		.964
Political TV shows		.911
Daily newspapers		.540
Explained variance	70.4%	
KMO	.900	

MAIN ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

First we note in the Graph 2 that respondents who vote for ruling parties predominantly belong to the group of high level Subjective Well-being, while the oppositional mainly have negative perception of subjective well-being. This is just descriptive evidence showing that party preferential can be also used as strong predictor of the subjective well-being. But, since the party preferential is mainly based on the grading of leaders, we used leaders as the main independent in this analysis.

Graph 2. Subjective Well-being and party blocs



Our main findings is based on binomial regression analysis where the high vs low level of Subjective Well-being is used as the dependent, and described controls and main IV as predictors (Table 5). We developed three regression models. In the first Model we included several demographic control variables to assess their impact on subjective well-being. The results show statistically significant effects for gender, age, education, and region, while some other demographic variables had weaker or non-significant effects. The findings of the analysis reveal several key insights regarding demographic factors and their influence on subjective well-being. Gender consistently shows a negative effect on well-being, with men reporting lower levels of well-being compared to women. In Model 1, the effect is statistically significant, with men showing notably lower well-being. This effect persists in Model 2 but slightly decreases in magnitude. By Model 3, however, the effect of gender becomes statistically insignificant, suggesting that political leaders may play a mediating role in how gender differences influence well-being perceptions. Age also emerges as a significant predictor, with older individuals reporting higher well-being in both Models 1 and 2. This positive association indicates that as people age, they tend to perceive their well-being more positively. However, this effect diminishes in Model 3, likely due to the introduction of political leader identification, which appears to mediate the relationship between age and well-being. In terms of education, lower levels of education are associated with significantly reduced well-being. Respondents with secondary education report notably lower well-being across both Models 1 and 2. This trend is even stronger among those with higher education, who exhibit an even more pronounced negative association with well-being. However, as political leaders are introduced into the analysis in Model 3, the effect of education weakens, indicating that political attitudes and identification with leaders might interact with education to shape well-being perceptions. Regional differences are also significant. Respondents from West Serbia and Šumadija report higher well-being in both Models 1 and 2, while those from East and South Serbia also show a positive association with well-being in these models, though this effect is weaker in Model 2. In Model

3, however, a shift occurs as respondents from East and South Serbia report a strong negative association with well-being, suggesting that political dynamics in these regions may contribute to dissatisfaction with well-being, likely reflecting regional political discontent.

In Model 2, we introduced media consumption variables to assess whether media predicts perceptions of well-being. The coefficient for traditional media consumption is negative but not statistically significant (-0.056, $p = 0.87$). This suggests that the consumption of traditional media (e.g., television, radio) has a minimal or neutral impact on well-being perceptions in the Serbian context, at least in this model. In contrast, consumption of portals and social media has a significant negative effect on well-being (-0.246, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that individuals who consume more information from online sources and social media report lower subjective well-being. This finding aligns with research suggesting that social media can expose individuals to negative political and social content, thereby reducing perceived well-being (Hampton et al. 2014). However, this negative effect diminishes in Model 3 (0.102, not significant), likely due to the introduction of political leader variables that account for much of the variance in well-being perception.

The most important finding comes from the third model (Model 3), which introduces identification with political leaders as predictors of subjective well-being. We included three main political leader groupings: Left Opposition Leaders, SNS/SPS Ruling Party Leaders, and Right Opposition Leaders. The results strongly support the hypothesis that identification with political leaders is the primary factor affecting perceptions of well-being.

- The coefficient for identification with left opposition leaders is -0.935 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents who identify with or support left opposition leaders report significantly lower well-being. The large negative coefficient suggests that these individuals are dissatisfied with the current political system and its outcomes, which is reflected in their lower well-being scores.
- Identification with leaders from the ruling parties (SNS and SPS) has the largest positive effect on well-being. The coefficient is 2.807 ($p < 0.001$), meaning that individuals who identify with the ruling party leaders report significantly higher well-being. The magnitude of this coefficient suggests that the political construction of reality is highly effective; by aligning themselves with leaders such as Aleksandar Vučić, individuals perceive a more favorable social and political environment, regardless of objective conditions.
- Identification with right opposition leaders also has a negative effect on well-being (-0.559, $p < 0.001$). Like left opposition supporters, these respondents perceive the current political and social environment more negatively. However, the effect is somewhat smaller than for left opposition supporters, possibly reflecting nuanced differences in the political narratives of right-leaning opposition parties.

These findings reinforce the central thesis of our study: identification with political leaders is the strongest predictor of subjective well-being. Individuals who align with the ruling party leaders perceive their well-being much more positively than those who support opposition leaders, regardless of economic realities or media consumption. This supports the idea that political leaders actively construct a favorable perception of reality, particularly through their symbolic and discursive power (Bourdieu 1991). In Serbia's political context, the strong association between well-being and identification with ruling party leaders highlights the importance of leadership in shaping public perceptions.

Table 5. Logit Coefficients – Predictors of Subjective Well-Being

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-.242 (.333)	-0.054 (.354)	0.267 (.607)	-0.471 (.427)
Male	-.329** (.131)	-0.266* (.133)	-0.369 (.250)	-0.160 (.175)
Age	.013*** (.004)	0.012** (.005)	0.008 (.009)	-0.002 (.006)
Education medium	-.747*** (.150)	-0.708*** (.152)	-0.564** (.284)	-0.300 (.202)
Education high	-.877*** (.178)	-0.791*** (.181)	-0.486 (.331)	-0.337 (.241)
Urban	-.067 (.137)	-0.060 (.138)	-0.343 (.258)	0.109 (.189)
Vojvodina	.451** (.189)	0.201 (.200)	0.190 (.355)	0.879*** (.250)
West Serbia and Šumadija	.641*** (.195)	0.439** (.202)	0.284 (.371)	0.825*** (.255)
East and South Serbia	.407** (.201)	0.273 (.206)	-0.760** (.348)	0.338 (.266)
Unemployed	-.242 (.190)	-0.284 (.192)	-0.262 (.353)	-0.012 (.241)
Income medium	.190	0.179 (.155)	0.757** (.300)	0.560*** (.212)
Income high	.082	0.034 (.191)	0.535 (.348)	0.377 (.255)
Traditional media consumption		-0.056 (.087)	0.059 (.154)	

Portals and Social media consumption		-0.246*** (.076)	0.102 (.131)	
LEADERS: left opposition			-0.935*** (.190)	
LEADERS SNS/SPS			2.807*** (.232)	
LEADERS right opposition			-0.559*** (.189)	
SNS/SPS				2.721*** (.266)
Left opposition				-2.858*** (.302)
Right opposition				-1.561*** (.258)
Nagelkerke Pseudo R square	.081	.101	.639	.572

To be more descriptive in interpretation of the main findings, we calculate Average Marginal Effect of three main predictors (identification of the three group of leaders) controlled by demography and media consumption (Graph 3). The marginal effects from the analysis provide insight into how identification with different political leaders influences the perception of well-being. The marginal effects reflect how a one standard deviation increase in identification with different political leader groups affects the likelihood of reporting higher well-being.

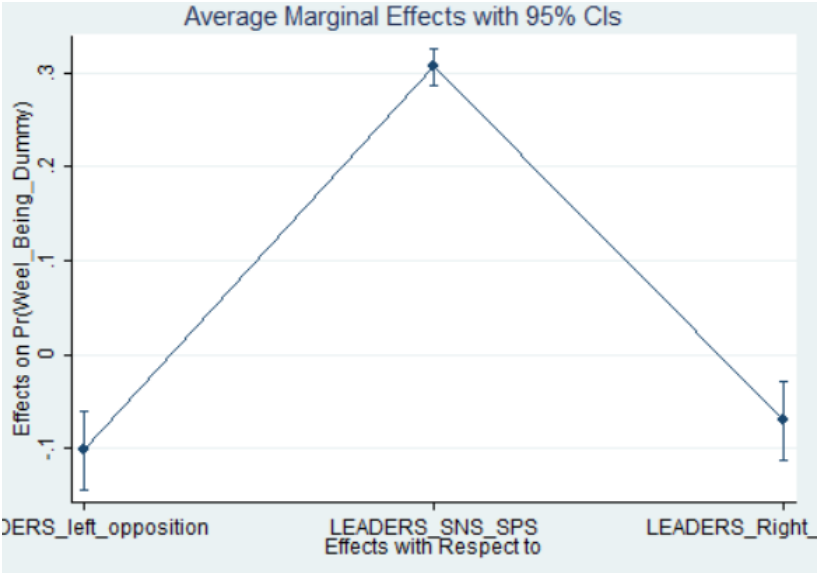
For left opposition leaders, the marginal effect is -0.102, meaning that for each one standard deviation increase in identification with left opposition leaders, the probability of reporting higher well-being decreases by 10.2 percentage points. This negative effect, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicates that stronger alignment with left opposition leaders is associated with lower well-being, likely reflecting dissatisfaction with the ruling government and the broader political environment.

For SNS/SPS (ruling party) leaders, the marginal effect is 0.306, indicating that a one standard deviation increase in identification with the ruling party leaders raises the probability of reporting higher well-being by 30.6 percentage points. This positive and highly significant effect ($p < 0.001$) suggests that stronger identification with the ruling party, particularly leaders such as Aleksandar Vučić, significantly boosts perceived well-being. This supports the view that the ruling party effectively shapes a favorable perception of social and political conditions among its supporters.

For right opposition leaders, the marginal effect is -0.070, implying that a one standard deviation increase in identification with right-wing opposition

leaders reduces the likelihood of reporting higher well-being by 7 percentage points. This effect, though smaller than the one for left opposition leaders, is still statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). It reflects the dissatisfaction among right opposition supporters with the current state of well-being under the ruling government.

Graph 3. Average Marginal Effect of the party leaders on Subjective well-being



Note: each AME is controlled by demography and media consumption

FINAL REMARKS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that, in the Serbian political context, it is political leaders – and not objective economic conditions or media influence – that play the central role in shaping citizens' perceptions of well-being. Our results, grounded in the analysis of subjective well-being as a composite measure, demonstrate that identification with political leaders is the most significant predictor of perceived well-being. This conclusion not only supports our central hypothesis but also aligns with broader theoretical frameworks that emphasize the role of leadership in the construction of social reality (Bourdieu 1991; Entman 1993).

The main hypothesis posited that political leaders, through their symbolic and communicative power, construct a version of reality that influences voters' perceptions of their social and political environment, thereby shaping their sense of well-being. This hypothesis has been confirmed by the data, which shows that identification with and grading of political leaders is the

most important factor driving subjective well-being in Serbia. This finding is especially pertinent in a political landscape where leaders like Aleksandar Vučić exercise significant control over the public narrative and maintain a high level of influence over public perceptions.

The theoretical foundation for this conclusion lies in the concept of symbolic power and political framing. According to Bourdieu (1991), symbolic power is the ability to impose meanings and construct reality through discourse. Political leaders, especially in semi-authoritarian regimes, utilize this power to frame the public's understanding of social and political issues. In the case of Serbia, Vučić and the SNS/SPS coalition have been able to construct a positive narrative about the country's progress, irrespective of objective economic indicators or social conditions. This aligns, also, with framing theory as outlined by Entman (1993), who argued that political elites use framing to highlight specific aspects of reality, thereby shaping public interpretation. In Serbia, the framing of economic successes and political stability by the ruling party has had a profound effect on how citizens perceive their well-being. Even in the face of social and economic challenges, the public's identification with political leaders – particularly those in power – creates a perception of well-being that is largely detached from objective conditions.

While media and economic conditions are traditionally seen as important drivers of public opinion and well-being, our study reveals that their influence is secondary to that of political leadership. The role of media consumption – whether traditional or digital – is nuanced in Serbia's political environment. As our analysis shows, traditional media consumption had a negligible effect on well-being perceptions, and while portals and social media consumption had a significant negative effect, this influence was mediated by political leadership. This finding suggests that while digital media may expose citizens to a broader range of critical content, it is political leaders who ultimately shape the narrative that dominates public discourse. In Serbia, where media is often aligned with the ruling government, political elites maintain control over the framing of reality, ensuring that their version of events is most influential (Levitsky & Way 2010). This reinforces the argument that in semi-authoritarian contexts, media functions as an extension of political power, rather than an independent force shaping perceptions.

Similarly, the objective economic status of respondents had a weaker-than-expected impact on their perception of well-being. The coefficients for income were not consistently significant across models, indicating that economic conditions – while important – are less decisive in shaping well-being perceptions than political identification. This aligns with the findings of the Easterlin Paradox, which posits that rising income levels or objective economic growth do not always lead to increased subjective well-being (Easterlin 1974). In the Serbian context, political leaders appear to fill this gap by constructing a narrative of progress that resonates more with the public than objective indicators of economic performance.

Our empirical analysis supports the notion that subjective well-being is not simply a downstream effect of objective economic conditions. Rather, it appears to be driven primarily by political identification – an endogenous, partisan factor. While we control for income and employment status, these have no significant predictive value compared to support for President Vučić or his party. In this sense, our findings resonate with the literature on motivated reasoning: citizens feel better about their personal and collective futures not necessarily because of material improvement, but because they are aligned with the symbolic and ideological messaging of the ruling party. This dynamic complicates the causal direction often assumed in retrospective voting models and calls for more nuanced analyses of how political loyalty structures perception itself.

The results of our study emphasize the importance of political leadership in the construction of well-being. Leaders in populist or semi-authoritarian regimes, such as Serbia, often present themselves as the embodiment of national progress, using their symbolic power to create a sense of well-being among their supporters. This is consistent with the literature on populism and leadership, which highlights how populist leaders use rhetoric and personal charisma to mobilize public support and create perceptions of national success (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). In Serbia, Vučić has successfully crafted a narrative in which he and his government are the primary agents of Serbia's progress. Through control of media and public discourse, Vučić and his party have framed economic and social policies as successful, even in areas where objective data might suggest otherwise. This framing is particularly effective in generating positive perceptions of well-being among those who identify with the ruling party, as evidenced by the strong association between SNS/SPS leadership and well-being in our results.

This finding is also consistent with the work of Laclau (2005), who argued that populist leaders construct an empty signifier – a vague and flexible idea of national progress or well-being – that allows them to appeal to a broad range of supporters. By framing themselves as the guarantors of progress, populist leaders can create an emotional connection with voters that transcends economic realities. This emotional identification is critical in shaping subjective well-being, as individuals who align with the ruling party's narrative are more likely to perceive their own lives and the country's future positively.

The findings of this study have important implications for understanding political behavior in Serbia and similar contexts. First, they highlight the centrality of political leadership in shaping public perceptions, suggesting that political leaders, more than media or economic conditions, drive public opinion and electoral behavior. This is particularly relevant in semi-authoritarian regimes, where political leaders often dominate the public sphere and use their symbolic power to construct favorable narratives. Second, the results suggest that subjective well-being is not merely a reflection of objective conditions but is heavily mediated by political identification. This has broader implications for understanding how political regimes maintain support

even in times of economic difficulty. By constructing a narrative of success, political leaders can sustain public support and foster positive perceptions of well-being, regardless of objective challenges. Finally, the findings underscore the importance of political framing in the construction of social reality. As political leaders continue to control public discourse, they shape the way citizens understand their own lives and the broader political environment. This has significant implications for both the stability of semi-authoritarian regimes and the nature of political competition, as opposition parties must contend not only with economic realities but also with the powerful symbolic narratives constructed by ruling elites. This reinforces the broader theoretical understanding of how political elites use their symbolic power to shape public perceptions and maintain political support.

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