

CHAPTER 6

Enraged by gender:

Online anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and their offline effects in Serbia

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Introduction

Though the concept of gender is often conflated with biological sex, these are two separate aspects of a person's identity. Gender is a social construct; meaning, it is defined in relation to a given society's norms vis-à-vis the roles of men and women, which result from historic and social processes. From our earliest years, parents, schools, peers, religious institutions, mass media, and other influences shape our understanding of these roles, clarifying and reiterating the expectations and beliefs of our society about how boys and girls, men and women should behave, and what constitutes masculinity and femininity. As early 20th century feminist Simone de Beauvoir famously put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."¹

However, the idea that some people do not identify with the gender assigned by society to their biological sex has been stirred into a controversy by conservative and religious actors, who oppose the rising social acceptance of a non-binary model for gender as well as the feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements they blame for this development. Hence, "anti-gender" activism has arguably emerged in reaction to the conquest of space by these progressive movements. Indeed, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements engaged in international advocacy for the adoption of policy documents that promote gender equality, such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. And in contemporaneous debates over the content of the document, the inclusion of the term "gender" provoked a sharp response from the Vatican, which along with its conservative allies, condemned the use of "gender", linking it "to homosexuality... and accusing feminist groups of promoting five genders."² This alliance succeeded in blocking the inclusion of sexual rights and the term "sexual orientation" in outcome documents.³

According to Françoise Girard, "most governments and feminist activists at the negotiations [in Beijing] were in fact using 'gender' in accordance with contemporary political usage, as a proxy for 'women,' [but] the Holy See recognized the far-reaching implications of detaching social roles, identities, and expressions from biological sex."⁴ The opposition of the Vatican inflamed hostility among conservatives, nationalists, and other right-wing groups to the concept of gender, and these groups quickly formed an international alliance to push back against achievements in women's rights that resulted from United Nations initiatives in the 1990s.⁵ But in recent years, both attacks on "gender ideology" and the number of "anti-gender" movements have increased around the world, alongside a growth of populist and right-wing parties that followed the global financial crisis and ushered extreme right figures into national parliaments and supranational structures like the European Parliament. Over time, this has led to a decline in democracy and threatens the progress made in guaranteeing human and minority rights and freedoms.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Johnathan Cape, 1956), 273.

² Françoise Girard, "Negotiating Sexual Rights and Sexual Orientation at the United Nations," in *SexPolitics: Reports from the Front Lines*, edited by Richard Parker, Rosalind Petchesky, and Robert Sember (Sexual Policy Watch, 2007), 334.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 335

⁵ Conny Roggeband and Andrea Krizsan, "Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash against Women's Rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics," UN Women Discussion Paper No. 35, June 2020.

This organized opposition to “gender ideology” is driven by a fear that “the natural or divine character of the heteronormative family” will be undermined, “that men will lose their dominant positions or become fatally diminished,” and that “children... are being indoctrinated to become homosexuals.”⁶ A broad coalition of right-wing groups has thus mobilized at the transnational and national levels to defend so-called traditional family values and promote “their views about the natural hierarchy between men and women,” to counteract progress on gender equality.⁷ And conservative forces are already reaping the fruits of anti-gender campaigns, as officials in a number of countries have bowed to their pressure (or in some cases, have exploited the political cover it offered), ordering the removal of all language referencing gender and all teaching related to “gender and homosexuality” from public schools, abolishing gender studies at universities, banning abortion, and obstructing adoption of the Istanbul Convention as well as legislation aimed at combating gender-based violence and ensuring gender equality.

In Serbia, where conservative intellectuals, nationalists, populists, and right-wing parties have united politically over the last five years to form new anti-gender social movements, these actors enjoy significant support from religious organizations. Presenting “gender ideology” as a threat to national identity and describing themselves as protectors of “traditional Serbian values,” these actors have developed a significant digital presence, spreading and promoting anti-gender discourse in online spaces, often by sharing misinformation. This resistance against “gender ideology” emerged in Serbia in 2017 after an educational package on preventing sexual violence was introduced into the curricula of the country’s kindergartens and primary schools.⁸ Since then, there has been a steady increase in anti-gender campaigning by actors who direct their discourse and actions against Pride events, in vitro fertilization, and abortion, and who oppose any teaching about gender or the prevention of sexual violence in schools at any level. The rhetoric of anti-gender figures typically relies on discriminatory stereotypes and prejudices about women and the LGBTQ+ community that are already deeply rooted in Serbian society, and the fact that there is no institutional response to these narratives only further strengthens their impact.

This research was aimed at determining how these anti-gender campaigns, built on misinformation and hate speech, are translated from digital to physical spaces in a way that threatens the personal safety and human rights of certain groups. This paper thus offers an overview of the current socio-political context in Serbia, maps anti-gender discourse and misinformation as well as the actors who spread this content most prominently via the internet and media, and explores the effects of these campaigns on human rights and freedoms by attempting to identify the voices in society that have been silenced or marginalized by anti-gender discourse. It also reviews the legal and institutional mechanisms that exist in Serbia to combat these campaigns.

6 Judith Butler, “Why is the idea of ‘gender’ provoking backlash the world over?” *The Guardian*, 23 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>.

7 Adriana Zaharijević, “Dženderizam nesting in Serbia,” *Engenderings* (blog), London School of Economics and Political Science, 8 October 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/10/08/dzenderizam-nesting-in-serbia/>.

8 Adriana Zaharijević, “Dženderizam nesting in Serbia,” *Engenderings* (blog), London School of Economics and Political Science, 8 October 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/10/08/dzenderizam-nesting-in-serbia/>.

Today's digital media space not only comprises the websites of official outlets, but includes numerous internet platforms, portals, social networks, blogs, and more, making it fertile ground for the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation and the mobilization of some online audiences.⁹ This was exemplified by the digital media environment before, during, and after the international EuroPride event held in September 2022 in Belgrade, which is thus analysed here. A considerable number of citizens were mobilized against the event through traditional and social media, with the goal of banning the EuroPride march. This resistance to EuroPride was a useful case in the context of this study, as it allowed researchers to examine the impact of online campaigns on human and minority rights and freedoms – such as the freedom of public assembly and the freedom of speech – and helped them draw direct links between the spread of violent content on the internet and physical violence in the real world. This is especially important given correlations between hate speech in media spaces and an increase in hate crimes reports. For instance, the LGBTQ+ support organization Da se zna! (Let it Be Known!) recorded a spike in hate crimes in the runup to EuroPride, in July and August 2022, during which these crimes were reported at a five times higher rate than in all the previous months of that year combined.¹⁰

In light of these facts, this research sought to answer several key questions:

- What constitute the main anti-gender narratives and misinformation campaigns in Serbia?
- Who are the actors leading the movement against “gender ideology”?
- How do citizens mobilize in support of anti-gender causes?
- What are the effects of anti-gender campaigns on the human rights and freedoms of certain social groups?
- How do anti-gender campaigns and hate speech spill over from digital spaces into physical spaces?
- Which institutions are tasked with monitoring anti-gender campaigns and what institutional and legal mechanisms exist to oppose these campaigns?

Data was collected for this research by reviewing secondary literature, conducting interviews with representatives of civil society organizations, and accessing information from state institutions.

Who's afraid of gender?

Gender equality was never going to come easily to Serbia. This has been evident since democratic reforms took place in 2000; as it still took decision makers nine more years to adopt the Law on the Equality of Sexes (which did not explicitly guarantee “gender equality”) and the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. Even then, these laws were essentially neutered versions of their

⁹ Nevena Krivokapić, Bojan Perković, and Ognjen Colić, *Dobre prakse i regulatorni modeli za odgovorno objavljivanje onlajn komentara: vodič* (Novi Sad: Share Foundation, 2015).

¹⁰ Ana Petrović and Hristina Cvetinčanin Knežević, *Govor Mržnje nije Sloboda Govora: Analiza govora mržnje u javnom prostoru upućenog kvir osobama u Srbiji* (Beograd: Da se zna!, 2023).

proposed form, because the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was dissatisfied with articles in the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination that referred to gender identity and sexual orientation, and initially succeeded in influencing members of the executive and legislative branches of government to withdraw the Law from parliamentary procedure.¹¹ The SOC enjoyed the support of various other religious institutions in this effort, including the Belgrade Archdiocese of the Catholic Church, the Islamic Community of Serbia, and the Evangelical Church. Civil society representatives characterized the withdrawal of the Law as a failure of democracy and proof that non-institutional power centres hold considerable sway over the executive branch in Serbia.¹²

Still, both laws were enacted by the end of 2009, albeit with modifications, because their adoption was a prerequisite to Serbia's entry into a visa-free regime with the European Union (EU). A few years later, however, when the Law on the Equality of Sexes had failed to meet the purposes for which it was enacted, the government began drafting new gender equality legislation. The process lasted almost a decade, culminating in the May 2021 adoption of the current Law on Gender Equality.¹³ During development of the Law, various state and non-state actors tried to eliminate "gender" from the draft Law entirely, proposing for example that the act be renamed the Law on the Equality of Women and Men. This was met by pushback from both the Ombudsman and women's organizations, as this would explicitly exclude gay, bisexual, and transsexual people, as well as those whose gender is not defined according to the male-female binary. But as opposition to the draft Law expanded, cultural and academic institutions such as Matica srpska and the Board for the Standardization of the Serbian Language joined the chorus of contestation, demanding that any provisions introducing gender-sensitive language be deleted.¹⁴

Meanwhile, members of the National Assembly voted in 2014 to abolish the Directorate for Gender Equality, the government's only institutional mechanism for monitoring the implementation of laws and strategies in this area.¹⁵ But gender equality was simply not a priority for parliamentarians, who faced the task of responding to mounting economic challenges; especially given that the opposition to gender equality and women's rights had become louder, better organized, and more extensively networked. The growth of this opposition relied on the spread of disinformation and propaganda through social media and online portals, where key actors in the movement have gained popularity. These include religious organizations, conservative figures, right-wing populists and nationalists, men's rights organizations, and groups formed around anti-gender ideology.

In the Serbian "manosphere" – the online community that promotes masculinity, misogyny, and opposes feminism – some leading influencers have tens of thousands of followers and are seen as role models by young people.¹⁶ These influencers claim that "gender ideology" and feminism

¹¹ <https://pescanik.net/withdrawal-of-the-anti-discrimination-law/>.
March 2009, 2009 "Withdrawal of the anti-discrimination law"

¹² Miljenko Dereta, "Ko upravlja Srbijom," <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/78343/Ko-upravlja-Srbijom>.

¹³ Law on Gender Equality, Official Gazette no. 52/21, 20 May 2021.

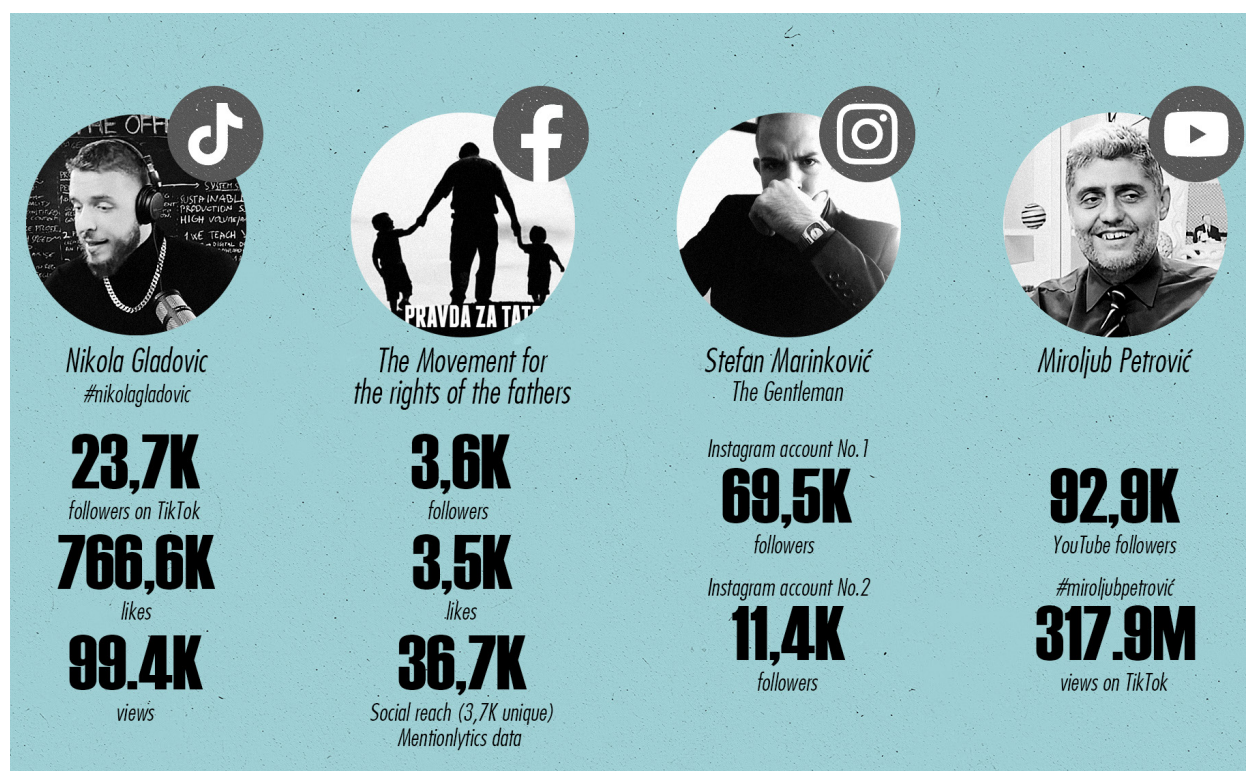
¹⁴ See: Prvi Prvi na skali, "Ovaj zakon treba ukinuti i doneti nov - Matica srpska o Zakonu o rodnoj ravnopravnosti,"

¹⁵ Centar modernih veština, "Reakcija povodom ukidanja Uprave za rodnu ravnopravnost,"

¹⁶ Dragana Prica Kovacevic and Vanja Neškovic, "Endru Tejt: Influencers, 'Incels', and Copycat Misogyny in

(as well as feminists) have been “imported from the West” with the aim of “destroying the family.” As sociologist Aleksej Kišjuhas explains, the implication is that the concept of gender has emerged externally from “an ‘aggressive’ ideology” that espouses “non-traditional roles for men and women, as well as homosexuality among children.”¹⁷

Figure 1. Leading influencers in the Serbian “manosphere”



Source: Ivan Vujičić/BIRN270¹⁸

The anti-gender movement in Serbia is reminiscent of those in places like Spain, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, Italy, France, Hungary, and Russia – all of which have been active for more than a decade.¹⁹ It is not an accident that these movements reflect each other, as religious and extreme right-wing organizations and actors across Europe have been working to unite against laws that permit same-sex marriage, uphold the Istanbul Convention, ensure reproductive rights, and support gender studies or gender-related education content in schools. In fact, anti-gender activism in Serbia pulls almost entirely from Western anti-gender movements in terms of actions and ideology, and must be viewed as part of a wider transnational network of movements. This is something of a paradox, as the same local actors who fight against the imposition of a values system they claim comes from the political West, and which they argue poses a threat to the traditional family and Christian morality, are borrowing heavily from the philosophy, vocabulary, and methodology of Western influencers, including self-proclaimed misogynist Andrew Tate and

Serbia,” Balkan Insight, 21 April 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/21/endru-tejt-influencers-incels-and-copycat-misogyny-in-serbia/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.danas.rs/kolumna/aleksej-kisjuhas/dogadjanje-roda/>.

¹⁸ Prica Kovacevic and Neškovic, “Endru Tejt: Influencers, ‘Incels’, and Copycat Misogyny in Serbia.”

¹⁹ Roggeband and Krizsan, “Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash against Women’s Rights.”

various American “incels” (i.e., men who describe themselves as “involuntarily celibate” and hold very negative views of both women and sexually active men).²⁰

At the centre of anti-gender discourse is a traditionalist view of the family as the union of a man and a woman, depicted as the social and political fabric of the nation. In Serbia, this has revived a model of the family that draws from the early 20th century, when the national identity of Serbs was being redefined and the ongoing process of nationalist homogenization was initiated.²¹ Hence, this process – of redefining and homogenizing Serbian national identity – runs parallel to but is also intertwined with this process of re-traditionalization. From the perspective of reactionary forces, the survival of the nation is linked to the survival of the traditional family, and this is most threatened by the existence of sexual minorities, women’s organizations, and feminists.

Notably, despite undisputed connections between the Serbian anti-gender movement and the SOC, Adriana Zaharijević and Katarina Lončarević claim that the current anti-gender discourse in Serbia is not religious in character and is disseminated primarily by conservative intellectual elites.²² These elites publish in academic journals, and author books and newspaper articles, in order to present gender as “an unscientific, ideological (and therefore political) construct, an import, something that is foreign to us, that is unknown and unnecessary to us and in collision with who we are, or with ‘our’ essential values.”²³ By externalizing the “threat” of so-called gender ideologies, and framing them as imports from the political West, these conservative voices are also asserting that Serbia is being colonized by other means. Women’s rights, gender equality, and equal opportunities are considered achievements of Western democracy and the pinnacle of individualism, and attacking these concepts and principles is a means by which the conservative intellectual elite in Serbia is able to fundamentally challenge democratic values.

This discourse gains support from the general public through its normalization and repetition on the internet and in social networks, where conservative and right-wing groups have become increasingly savvy about how to effectively spread their anti-gender and anti-Western messaging. The popularity of certain intellectuals, as well as right-wing influencers on social media,²⁴ appears to lead a large portion of Serbian society to uncritically adopt and then share this anti-democratic discourse, which has also been mainstreamed by members of the ruling political elite. For example, president of the executive board of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) Darko Glišić stated in 2018 that he has “never understood the concept of democracy in the abstract,” describing it as having been “imposed on [Serbians] from the outside.”²⁵

²⁰ <https://www.oblakoder.org.rs/incel-mizoginija-i-muska-nadmoc/>.

²¹ <https://pescanik.net/lomaca-za-deda-mraza/>.

²² Adriana Zaharijević and Katarina Lončarević, “Rod i ideologija. O pobuni protiv jednakosti,” in *RODNA ravnopravnost: od jednakih prava do jednakih mogućnosti*, edited by Tibor Varadi and Marijana Pajvančić (Belgrade: SANU, 2020).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nejra Veljan, “Extreme Entitlement: Misogyny, Anti-Feminism in Far-Right Recruitment,” *Detektor*, 10 May 2022, <https://detektor.ba/2022/05/10/extreme-entitlement-misogyny-anti-feminism-in-far-right-recruitment/?lang=en>.

²⁵ Vladimir Veljković, “Šansa za opoziciju,” *Peščanik*, 14 October 2020, <https://pescanik.net/sansa-za-opoziciju/>.

How it all began...

Resistance first emerged against “gender ideology” in 2017 when a number of conservative Serbian intellectuals opposed the introduction of a national curriculum on the prevention of sexual violence, which was described by critics as a “school manual for the promotion of homosexuality.”²⁶ Some even suggested that it was bound to “increase the share of homosexuals in society.”²⁷ These scare tactics activated opposition among the wider public when Sputnik published an article about the controversy and referred to “public officials, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and politicians who believe that the alleged prevention of sexual violence... has turned into a declaration of war on the family and family values, and the propagation of LGBTQ+ and gender ideology.”²⁸ This media campaign resulted in a suspension of the introduction of the educational package into school curricula when the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development caved to conservative forces.

Not long after this, the decision of the German, Dutch, and Canadian governments to replace the terms “father” and “mother” on official forms with the term “parent” prompted the Serbian outlet Večernje novosti to publish a series of online articles in 2018 and 2019 meant to convince the domestic public that “the West is attacking the family in the name of protecting vulnerable groups” and that Western governments would eventually “abolish mom and dad” altogether.²⁹ The argument was made that such changes would be implemented in Serbia as well, to bring it in line with accepted standards of gender equality within the framework of European integration.³⁰ Večernje Novosti reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin had defended the traditional family by rejecting imaginary examples of family structures from the West; and thus, while ideas like gender-neutral parenting had never been officially debated in Serbia, they were a priori declared “devastating to the family and the values of the Serbian people.”³¹

Then, during the pandemic, populist governments in some European countries, such as Hungary and Poland, used the fears fuelled by the rhetoric of right-wing groups and church leaders to enact anti-LGBTQ+ policies and laws. At the same time in Serbia, the Law on Same-Sex Unions failed to pass, leaving the LGBTQ+ community feeling betrayed. And while Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced in 2021 that he could not sign the law even if the National Assembly adopted it, citing his obligation to adhere to the constitutional definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman,³² this was a deliberate obfuscation; because the draft Law on Same-Sex

26 Miša Djurković, “Školski priručnik za promociju homoseksualizma,” *Politika*, 13 April 2017, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/378321/Skolski-prirucnik-za-promociju-homoseksualizma>.

27 Slobodan Anđonić, “Seksualno obrazovanje: Postizborna LGBT inkluzija,” 12 April 2017, <https://www.koreni.rs/seksualno-obrazovanje-postizborna-lgbt-inkluzija/>. (Published in Cyrillic at: <https://www.ceopom-istina.rs/politika-i-drustvo/postizborna-lgbt-inkluzija/?lang=lat>.)

28 Mira Kankaraš Trklja, “Hoće li škola učiti decu o oralnom i analnom seksu?” *Sputnik*, 18 April 2017, <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20170418/seks-nasilje-skola-1110816112.html>.

29 J. Matijević and B. Caranović, “Zapad udara na Porodicu: Da li će i u Srbiji ukinuti mamu i tatu,” *Večernje Novosti*, 10 June 2018, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:732078-Da-li-ce-i-u-Srbiji-ukinuti-mamu-i-tat-u>.

30 Milica Stanojković, “Uvode nam ‘treći pol’ i ukidaju mame i tate: Zapad nameće diktat u ime zaštite osetljivih grupa,” *Novosti*, 7 December 2019, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:834736-Uvode-nam-treci-pol-i-ukidaju-mame-i-tate-Zapad-namece-diktat-u-ime-zastite-osetljivih-grupa>.

31 van Čolović, “U ime oca, majke i svetog duha tradicije,” *Peščanik*, 9 January 2020, <https://pescanik.net/u-ime-oca-majke-i-svetog-duha-tradicije/>.

32 Vučić: Ne bih potpisao zakon o istopolnim zajednicama,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 1 May 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-ne-bih-potpisao-zakon-o-istopolnim-zajednicama/31233124.html>.

Unions – which was prepared by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue – did not recognize marriage per se between people of the same sex. Rather, it allowed them to register their unions so that they could exercise certain basic rights, such as the right to divide or inherit property, make decisions in the case of illness, and visit their partners in hospitals or prisons.

This steady drip of reactionary opposition to “gender ideology” finally became more of a flood as EuroPride approached in 2022, and has continued in its wake. When the Ministry of Education made changes to a lesson on “Sex and Gender Identities” in an 8th grade biology textbook in late 2022, it marked a victory for religious forces over science and secularism. The SOC had joined with right-wing actors, scientists, biology professors, and lawyers to dispute that a distinction can be made between sex and gender, that sex and gender are misaligned in some people, that young people sometimes question their gender identity, and that some people consider themselves to be gender-neutral.³³ This has led to a debate over whether gender-sensitive language should be removed from textbooks in Serbia, in contravention of the current Law on Gender Equality.³⁴

Case study: Mobilization against EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade

The mobilization of citizens and conservative forces against EuroPride, which took place in Belgrade in September 2022, marked the largest such mobilization in Serbia thus far and was fostered by the increasing clericalization of Serbian society and a radical shift in politics to the right. Conservative forces relied not only on the power of rhetoric and propaganda, but also collected signatures from people across the country in an effort to ban EuroPride altogether. Although the view of the SOC regarding the LGBTQ+ population and same-sex communities has long been negative, the Church had not previously organized in any official way against Pride events. Hence, it represented a novelty in the behaviour of the Church that its leadership played a role in activating public sentiment in opposition to EuroPride, via the internet as well as both traditional and social media. This followed the appointment of Patriarch Porfirije as head of the SOC in February 2021, and has been omnipresent in his rhetoric ever since.³⁵

Indeed, in a special address to the public made in early September 2022 and published on the SOC website and posted on its social media (see Figure X.2, below),³⁶ the Patriarch endorsed the decision of the government to ban the march that was scheduled at the end of the week-long EuroPride event. While the government claimed the ban was due to security concerns, Porfirije celebrated the cancellation for ideological reasons, contending that the lifestyle of LGBTQ+ people has been “artificially imposed” on Serbians and stands in contradiction to “the system the values of our people, as well as the brothers and sisters of other religions and nations with whom

³³ Jovana Georgievski, “Srbija i obrazovanje: Šta (ne)će biti u novim udžbenicima iz biologije i da li će ‘nastavnica’ postati zabranjena reč,” BBC News na Srpskom, 21 November 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63658998>.

³⁴ Milenija Simić-Miladinović, “Rodno osetljivom jeziku (ni)je mesto u udžbenicima,” Politika, 10 June 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/509378/Rodno-osetljivom-jeziku-ni-je-mesto-u-udzbencima>.

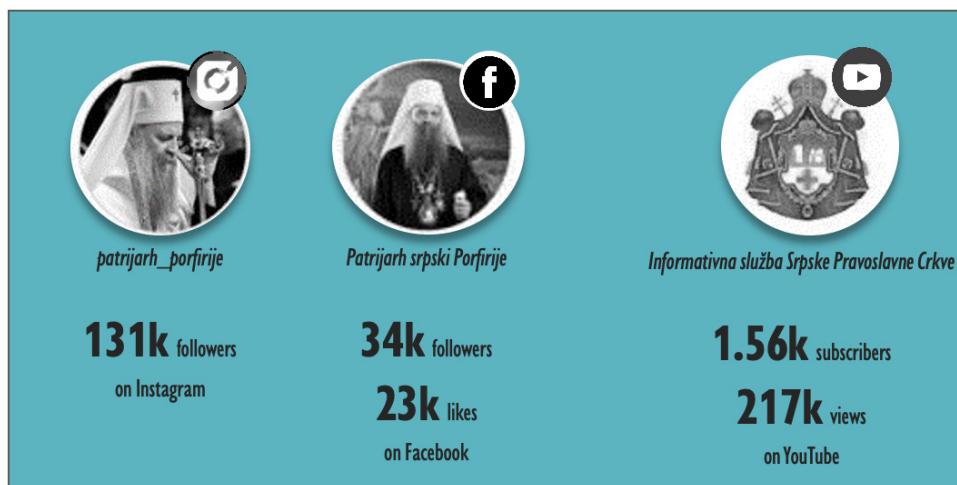
³⁵ See: Nataša Andjelković, “Srpska pravoslavna crkva i Porfirije: Šta je rekao patrijarh u prvom televizijskom gostovanju - u 100 i 500 reči,” BBC News na Srpskom, 3 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-56266813>; and Nataša Andjelković, “Srbija i Srpska pravoslavna crkva: Sva lica patrijarha Porfirija,” BBC News na Srpskom, 19 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-65617426>.

³⁶ The Facebook post of Patriarch Porfirije is available (in Cyrillic) at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=211736534561639&id=100071758814705; a video of the speech he gave is available at the YouTube site of the SOC’s information service, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCpfanRV-PQ>.

we live.” Despite stating that the Church opposed “any form of violence, public branding and persecution,” the Patriarch failed to condemn death threats made by some SOC bishops against members of the LGBTQ+ community.³⁷

In addition, the SOC has supported the organization of “cross processions for the salvation of Serbia,” which have been attended by right-wing party members and public figures, as well as by members of several informal extreme right-wing and pro-Russian groups. In one such procession that took place in the days before the EuroPride event, participants carried religious icons, banners reading “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia,” flags of Imperial Russia and the Donetsk People’s Republic, and photos of Vladimir Putin. They gathered in front of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade, where Porfirije offered a prayer “for the sanctity of marriage and the family.”³⁸ Just days later, on the occasion of the newly established national holiday, the Day of Serb Unity, Freedom and the National Flag, the Patriarch reiterated his views on traditional families and the LGBTQ+ community in a speech that was broadcast live on Radio-Television Serbia, a channel watched by over half the country’s population.

Figure 2. The social media presence of Serbian Orthodox Church leadership



Among those who have taken part in the cross processions of the SOC are sitting or former members of the National Assembly. These include figures in the nationalist right-wing Dveri Party, such as party president Boško Obradović and Belgrade City Assembly councillor Borislav Antonijević. Hence, it is important to note that politicians in the Dveri Party have been key to transferring the demands of participants in these cross processions to the institutional level. For instance, they have called on the National Assembly to adopt a declaration legally prohibiting “homosexuality and transgender propaganda among minors” and to introduce a new national Family Day holiday.³⁹

37 “Moleban” i protest desničara protiv Evroprajda u Beogradu,” Radio Slobodna Evropa, 11 September 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-desnicari-evroprajd-iti-je-moleban/32028614.html>.

38 A video of the event is available at the YouTube site of the SOC’s information service, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dEdAne59E8>.

39 “Dveri od Skupštine Srbije traže zabranu Prajda na 100 godina i da državni praznik bude Dan porodice,” Danas, 5 September 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/dveri-od-skupstine-srbije-traze-zabranu-prajda-na-100-godina-i-da-drzavni-praznik-bude-dan-porodice/>; and “On the Watchlist: LGBTQ+ EuroPride Goes Ahead at the Last Minute as Journalists and LGBTQ+ Activists Attacked,” Monitor (blog), Civicus, 22 September 2022, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/watchlist-lgbtqi-euro-pride-goes-ahead-last-minute-journalists-and-lgbtqi-activists-attacked/>.

Figure 3. The social media presence of the Dveri Party



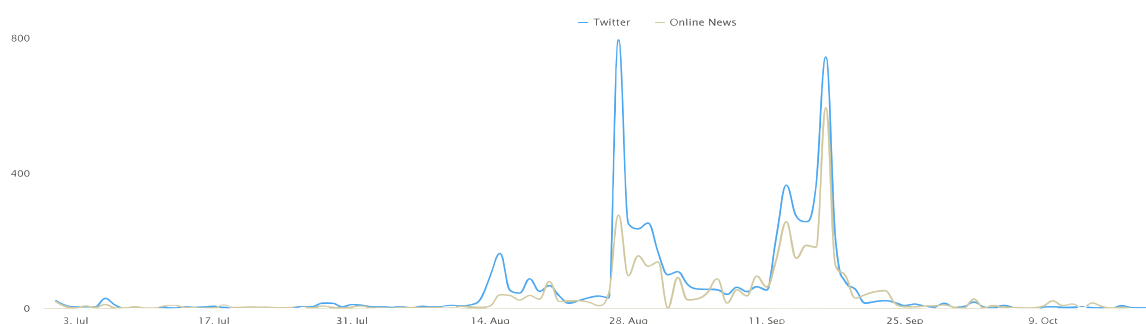
The term “homosexuality” (i.e., homoseksualizam) instead of homosexuality (i.e., homoseksualnost) is often used in the right-wing neologisms promoted by Dveri, implying an ideology and not a sexual orientation. As part of its campaign against the “promotion of homosexuality,” Dveri leaders misled the public as EuroPride approached, using unverified information to assert that the event would cost taxpayers some EUR 40 million, an amount they claimed could otherwise provide 960 apartments to young married couples.⁴⁰ This was rather ironic, given that costs of the event were linked to the need for increased manpower from the Ministry of the Interior; an expense that was necessary because extremists had threatened violence against EuroPride participants.⁴¹

But Dveri did not singlehandedly mobilize citizens against EuroPride. Tabloids such as Informer, and right-wing portals including Sbrin.info, Slavija.info, Vaseljenska, Iskra, and Pravda, also played an important role, as did websites like Vidovdan and Živim za Srbiju (I live for Serbia), all of which have a robust social media presence. As Figure 4 shows (below), online activity related to EuroPride spiked from the beginning of July to the end of October 2022, during which the event was mentioned in over 6,000 posts on Twitter and over 4,000 online news items.

⁴⁰ See: “Odakle pokretu “Dveri” računica od 40 miliona evra za Evroprijd?” Istinomer, 2 August 2022, <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/odakle-pokretu-dveri-racunica-od-40-miliona-evra-za-evroprijd/>.

⁴¹ Ivana Jelača, Executive Director, Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, interview by authors, 23 June 2023.

Figure 4. Twitter posts and online news items related to EuroPride, 1 July to 31 October 2022



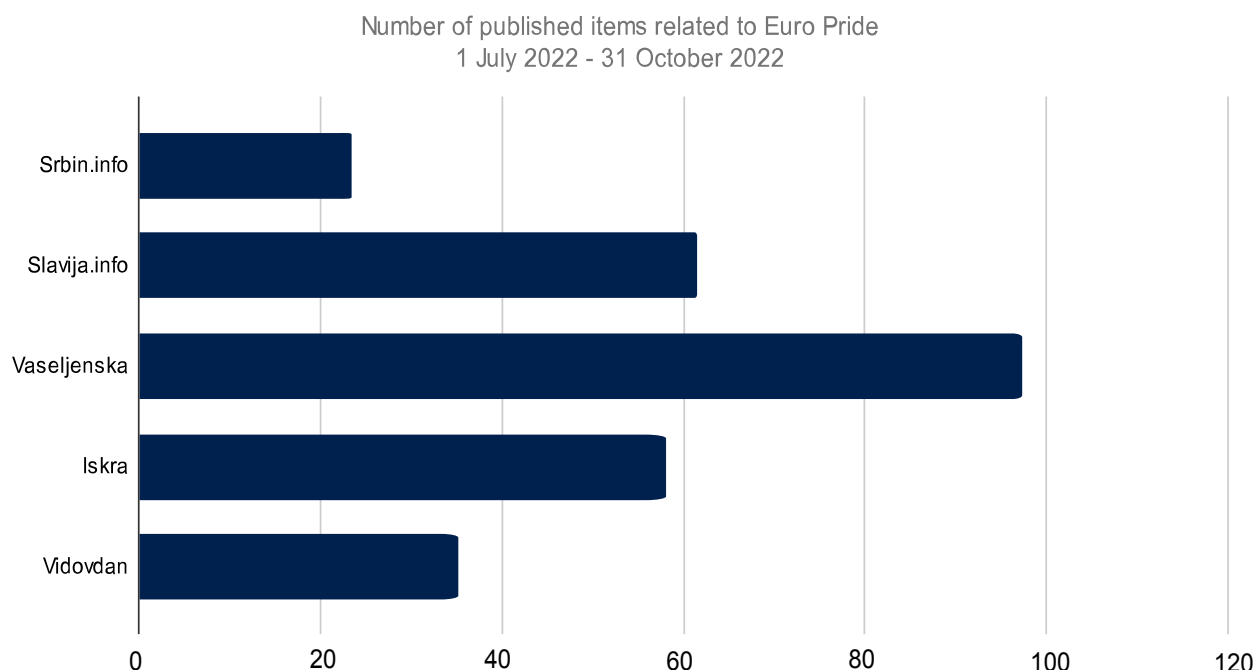
Number of Twitter posts and online news items related to EuroPride, from 1 July to 31 October 2022 (Data gathered using Pulsar, with the support of the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project)

These posts and articles – written by conservative intellectuals, priests, and members of right-wing groups – shared half-truths and disinformation about EuroPride, directed hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community, and propagated conspiracy theories formed around anti-Western rhetoric.⁴² Over four months, just five online portals (see Figure X.5, below) published more than 270 news items concerning EuroPride, conveying the statements of officials, updating readers on whether the event would be held or not, discussing news about monkeypox, and reporting on the cross processions and various incidents that took place during the event. Every news item published on these websites in that period spoke negatively about EuroPride and LGBTQ+ people in general. The editor-in-chief of *Informer* argued for example that, by promoting EuroPride to the Serbian public, the political West and domestic opposition parties were waging a “special war” against the country.⁴³ And on *Iskra*, a text by SOC archpriest Jovan Plamenac was republished, wherein he labelled “LGBT ideology” a part of the “new pagan Western globalist value system of life, which is opposed to the Christian one” and said that “violence by the minority against the majority” was being carried out under the pretext of protecting human rights.

⁴² International Security and Affairs Centre, “Europride 2022: The Target of Anti-Western Narratives,” 3 September 2022, <https://www.isac-fund.org/en/news/narrative-analysis-europride-2022-the-target-of-anti-western-narratives>.

⁴³ Ibid.

Figure 5. Number of items published by leading right-wing portals about EuroPride, 1 July to 31 October 2022



EuroPride and propaganda: Milka from Germany⁴⁴

As the EuroPride controversy took centre stage in Serbia, a video appeared on social media that featured a Serbian woman who said that boys in Germany were expected to attend school dressed as girls, and vice versa. The woman, identified as Milka, was in Niš at the time, but claimed to live in Germany and have an 8-year-old son, and said she had received an official letter stating that, “on Tuesday – so that children can find out whether they are male or female – our sons should wear dresses to school, and our daughters should come dressed as boys.” According to Milka, after she informed the teacher that she “would not be putting a dress on my son because he likes to wear a jersey every day, Ronaldo’s, Messi’s, Mbappe’s... and he knows for sure that he is a boy,” she was made to pay a fine of EUR 263. She ended by saying, “That is why I want to return (to Serbia), because I don’t want my child to be something he’s not.”

⁴⁴ Nemanja Rujević, “Forenzika slučaja “naše sestre” Milke,” Vreme, 1 September 2022, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/forenzika-slucaja-nase-sestre-milke/>.

The “testimony of our sister Milka” was published on the Twitter account of Ivica Božić (@llebozicile), a regular participant in the cross processions of the SOC who collected signatures to ban EuroPride in Niš – where the recording was made. The video was viewed some 135,000 times just from the post by Božić on Twitter, and quickly became viral, leading many in the Serbian public to believe that the German educational system is forcing children to dress according to the gender norms with which they do not identify. Meanwhile, some Serbian media outlets reported that Milka was a Russian spy associated with the Humanitarian Centre in Niš, and this story was shared by Dragan Šormaz – a Serbian Progressive Party member who sits in the National Assembly – on his Twitter account.

Milka, a single mother of an autistic boy, defended herself to Vreme magazine a few days later, claiming to have been exploited twice: once as an example to uphold a narrative about the decadent West, and then by the assertion that she was a Russian spy. She admitted to Vreme that it had not been an obligation to dress her son as a girl. Instead, a suggestion had been made that boys and girls may want to switch roles during the school’s “tolerance week”. Moreover, the fine she paid had not resulted from her son’s refusal to dress as a girl, but from his unjustified absence from school, as the city of Munich is paying for his education.

Monkeypox

The portal Pečat was among the first to inform the public about what it called the “Monkey pox Parade.”⁴⁵ This initiated an online misinformation campaign alleging that monkeypox was likely to spread during EuroPride.⁴⁶ This epidemiological risk was linked only to EuroPride, however, and not to other public gatherings organized at the same time, such as a ceremony to promote new officers of the Serbian Army. On public media outlets Radio-Television Vojvodina and Radio-Television Serbia, local experts (epidemiologists and virologists) expressed conflicting views on the issue. Some said there was no reason to worry about monkeypox and claimed it is easier to get scabies or head lice; while others referred to data from the World Health Organisation indicating that 98 percent of monkeypox cases appear in men who have sex with men, thus contributing to a further stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community and raising fears and mistrust about gay and bisexual men. Opponents of EuroPride centred the opinions of doctors in arguing that the event should be cancelled.

45 Nikola Vrzić, “Parada majmunskih boginja,” Pečat, 29 July 2022, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/07/parada-majmunskih-boginja/?LATINICA=lat>.

46 Lazar Čovs and Slobodan Maričić, “Evroprijd 2022 u Beogradu: Od otkazivanja do obilaska manastira i širenja majmunskih boginja - pet (dez)informacija o Paradi ponosa,” BBC News na Srpskom, 26 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-62680246>.

The unprofessional way in which media reported on the spread of monkeypox and linked it explicitly to the LGBTQ+ population was condemned by Serbia's Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Brankica Janković, and by 19 civil society organizations.⁴⁷ A number of respected public figures also spoke out, condemning some so-called experts and far-right politicians for encouraging prejudice and discrimination. Importantly, the same voices also decried attempts by these actors to limit the constitutional right of all people to freedom of assembly.⁴⁸

Visits to monasteries on Mt. Fruška Gora

As EuroPride approached, members of the Facebook Group "Sremski Karlovci Aktuelni" (which number more than 6,000) – many of whom presumably live in or near Sremski Karlovci, in the vicinity of Novi Sad and the Fruška Gora National Park – shared rumours that EuroPride participants were planning to visit a local elementary school to discuss the problems faced by the LGBTQ+ community, as well as two monasteries located on Mt. Fruška Gora. These allegations were followed by the fabricated news that villagers in Krušedol, Maradik, Velika Remeta, and Čortanovci had announced they would block all the roads leading to the Krušedol monastery, to "prevent the arrival of Pride activists to this holy Orthodox place." While these claims attracted the attention of visitors to popular Facebook Pages promoting Serbian Orthodoxy, and prompted responses that included hate speech, organizers of EuroPride denied that there was any truth to these stories.

Beyond ideological arguments, opponents of EuroPride also raised alarm about the possibility that monkeypox may be spread during the event, calling it a disease of homosexuals.⁴⁹ As Goran Miletić, of the international organization Civil Rights Defenders, has noted, these campaigners sought to rationalize prejudices against the LGBTQ+ population by highlighting their supposedly immoral behaviour.⁵⁰ The already widespread nature of negative attitudes and beliefs about LGBTQ+ people only fuelled these conspiracy theories, and it served the cause of anti-LGBTQ+ activists that long-standing social biases has flourished on social networks and in the media during the pandemic.

Given this context, it was unsurprising that death threats were addressed to activists and organizers of EuroPride via social media. Instagram users also submitted reports about posts on the official Euro Pride account on such a massive scale that they temporarily succeeded in getting it

⁴⁷ "Osudjuje se neprofesionalno izveštavanje medija o širenju majmunskih boginja i dovođenja u vezu sa LGBTQ+ populacijom," Reporting Diversity Network 2.0, <https://www.reportingdiversity.org/osudjuje-se-neprofesionalno-izvestavanje-medija-o-sirenju-majmunskih-bo-ginja-i-dovođenja-u-vezu-sa-lgbtq-populacijom/>.

⁴⁸ Luka Jovanović, "Monkeypox v. EuroPride," Forum for Security and Democracy, 6 September 2022.

⁴⁹ Biljana Srbijanović, "Polemika povodom napada na Europrajd (prvi deo)," Javni servis, 16 August 2022, <https://javniservis.net/komentar/biljana-srbijanovic-polemika-povodom-napada-na-europrajd/>.

⁵⁰ Goran Miletić, Director Europe and MENA Department and Deputy Global Programme Director, Civil Rights Defenders, interview by authors, 3 May 2023.

suspended, negating the organization's freedom of speech ahead of the event.⁵¹ Still, EuroPride organizers were prepared for opposition from the "usual suspects" on the far right, but were surprised and concerned by the appearance of a radical right cloaked in "feminism."⁵² This came primarily from the trans-exclusionary organization, the Lesbian and Gay Solidarity Network, and caused a split to form within the existing LGBTQ+ community in Serbia. At every turn, it seemed the Lesbian and Gay Solidarity Network was working to undermine the efforts of other LGBTQ+ organizations in the runup to EuroPride, issuing counter-statements about the monkeypox epidemic, disseminating trans-phobic content, and more.⁵³ According to the Executive Director of Izadji (Come out), this kind of inter-group conflict has made it even more difficult for the average Serbian citizen – who is likely already homophobic and has not been sensitized to this population – to understand the needs and demands of the **LGBTQ+ community**.⁵⁴ **Be that as it may, LGBTQ+ activists are united in the opinion that it is Serbian state leaders who bear the greatest responsibility for mobilizing citizens against EuroPride.**

Who is allowed to ban EuroPride, and why?

Despite the large number of non-state actors who spread anti-gender narratives and disinformation about the LGBTQ+ community and the EuroPride event, many decision makers in Serbia openly opposed EuroPride and framed it as a step in the wrong direction for Serbian society.⁵⁵ Disregarding the separation of powers, and exceeding his authority, President Vučić was the first to announce that the EuroPride march would be "either cancelled or postponed."⁵⁶ He cited the "difficult situation" Serbia found itself in, due to the energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine and tensions in Kosovo over license plates, and argued that in these conditions, EuroPride "could lead to serious unrest" in the country.⁵⁷ Prime Minister Ana Brnabić reiterated these points and noted that the main priorities of the cabinet would be to preserve peace and stability in Kosovo and in Serbia's energy security. Accordingly, she called on citizens to give their "full support to [Vučić], who will be fighting in the (Kosovo) talks in Brussels so that we can have peace."⁵⁸

References by Serbian politicians to the "difficult" and "uncertain" situation in the country as a result of events in Kosovo are part of an established pattern used by the government to divert public attention from other important issues. As long as a majority of the electorate supports non-recognition of the independence of Kosovo, which preserves this as a "priority" for Serbian leadership, it can be used to justify their marginalization of concerns related to the rule of law or the protection of human rights and freedoms, as these are always less important than the "issue to end all

51 Filip Vulović, activist, Civil Rights Defenders, interview by authors, 3 May 2023.

52 Asja Bakić, "TERF: radikalna desnica u feminističkom ruhu," Vox feminae, 29 December 2020, <https://voxfeminae.net/pravednost/terf-radikalna-desnica-u-feministicom-ruhu/>.

53 Aleksa Savić, Executive Director, Izadji, interview by authors, 28 April 2023.

54 Ibid.

55 Maja Živanović, "Može li država da zabrani Evroprajd?" Radio Slobodna Evropa, 27 August 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/moze-li-drzava-zabraniti-evroprajd/32007108.html>.

56 "Oštre reakcije na najave otkazivanja Evroprajda," European Western Balkans, 27 August 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/ostre-reakcije-na-najave-otkazivanja-evroprajda/>.

57 "Moleban" i protest desničara protiv Evroprajda u Beogradu," Radio Slobodna Evropa.

58 Jasmina Kuzmanovic and Misha Savic, "Serbia's Gay Premier Says Unity Key After Orthodox Bishop Curse," Bloomberg, 17 August 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-17/serbia-s-gay-premier-says-unity-key-after-orthodox-bishop-curse#xj4y7vzkg>.

issues" (i.e. the status of Kosovo).⁵⁹In the context of EuroPride, the highest state officials sought to mislead citizens into thinking that the state was unable to simultaneously conduct negotiations with Priština while also guaranteeing the protection and exercise of civil rights and freedoms on the streets of Belgrade. A false binary was thus presented to citizens, who were told they could opt for civil rights and freedoms or national security, but not both.⁶⁰This framing dovetailed with the rhetoric deployed by some non-state actors who campaigned to ban EuroPride, as the question of Kosovar independence cannot be disentangled from the issue of "Western influence" and Serbian leaders depend considerably on support from pro-Russian, anti-Western voters on the far right, many of whom equated opposition to EuroPride with opposition to the West.

Notably, the Serbian President does not have the constitutional or legal authority to ban public gatherings, nor does the Prime Minister, so it was up to the Ministry of the Interior to prohibit the EuroPride march based on a purported assessment that the event posed "a danger of violence, destruction of property or disruption of public order on a large scale" that would put the safety of participants at risk.⁶¹This was an exception to usual practice, and contravened a 2013 decision of the Constitutional Court of Serbia which had confirmed that the prohibition of a very similar event – the Pride Parade – was unconstitutional.⁶²Hence, many LGBTQ+ people and their allies viewed the ban as a prohibition not only on the march, but also on their right to exercise constitutionally guaranteed freedoms.

Prime Minister Brnabić, herself a member of the LGBTQ+ community, did attempt to strike something of a balance between the rights of that community and the inclinations of the far-right voters who form a key base of support for the ruling party, to which she also belongs. In some cases, this led her to make statements that contradicted the party line, such as when she remarked at the International Conference on Human Rights, after the march in Belgrade had been banned, that marching is a "basic human right" from which no one can be prohibited.⁶³ Still, almost no progress has been made since Brnabić entered office in 2017 in protecting and expanding the rights and freedoms of the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia, in part because she has courted a right-wing electorate and in part because she lacks any real influence in the country. In fact, during her tenure as prime minister, verbal and physical attacks on the LGBTQ+ population have remained quite common and same-sex unions have not yet been legalized. This represents a failure of the current government to provide basic rights to LGBTQ+ people, including the rights to marry, divide or inherit property, participate in medical decision-making or visit hospitalized partners, and adopt children or undergo artificial insemination. Serbia does not even recognize both same-sex partners as the parents of a child conceived by artificial insemination in a procedure completed abroad.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Dubravka Stojanović, "O Kosovu, malinama i gej parade," Peščanik, 16 September 2011, <https://pescanik.net/o-kosovu-malinama-i-gej-paradi/>.

⁶⁰ <https://heartefact.org/biljana-srbijanovic-u-ime-ponosa/>.

⁶¹ "Brnabić posle zabrane Prajda LGBT aktivistima: Niko vam ne može zabraniti da šetate," Radio Slobodna Evropa, 13 September 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zabranjen-evroprajda-beograd-srbija/32031682.html>.

⁶² Vesna Rakić Vodinelić, "Otvoreni Balkan, zatvoreni Beograd," Peščanik, 30 August 2022, <https://pescanik.net/otvoreni-balkan-zatvoreni-beograd/>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ron Synovitz and Gordana Cosic, "Lesbian PM or Not, Serbia Blocks Gays' Path to Parenthood," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 22 August 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/>

Brnabić has acknowledged that little has changed for members of the LGBTQ+ community despite her prime ministership, commenting at the EuroPride conference that she “does not live in a registered partnership and cannot adopt her own child.”⁶⁵ Indeed, the social and political climate in Serbia has arguably worsened in recent years. Just one example of this was the reaction of the current mayor of Belgrade, Aleksandar Šapić, to EuroPride. Šapić, who was elected several months before the event, did not want to open the event because he could not see himself walking at the head of the march.⁶⁶ Yet, the two mayors before him, from the same party as Šapić, supported and participated in marches that accompanied earlier Pride events.⁶⁷ The position of Šapić thus reflects the turn in Serbian politics that has been marked by authorities in Belgrade catering to right-wing voters above all others.

The EuroPride march did eventually take place after it was re-registered, using a different and significantly shorter route than originally planned. Still, it remains unclear why state officials made decisions that ran contrary to Article 54 of the Constitution on the Freedom of assembly, and did not take into account the four decisions of the Constitutional Court of Serbia that declared bans on the movement of people unconstitutional.⁶⁸

Reactions of the legislative branch to EuroPride

It was not only the executive branch that united around a ban on the EuroPride march. A majority of MPs (71 percent) also supported the ban, for “moral, security, economic and health reasons.”⁶⁹ To justify their stance, members of the ruling coalition repeated the message of President Vučić that there were simply more pressing issues than EuroPride, including the situation in Kosovo.⁷⁰

Leaders of extreme right-wing opposition parties alleged, however, that it would represent a “capitulation of the state before Western embassies”⁷¹ and a “suspension of the legal order of Serbia”⁷² if the country hosted EuroPride. Dveri Party President Boško Obradović declared that Serbia had “been suffering constant pressure from the EU and NATO to adjust and adapt our value system and our politics to their world views” for decades, and said that EuroPride was part of “the occupation agenda” being imposed on Serbians by the West.⁷³ Statements such as this, and hate

lesbian-pm-or-not-serbia-blocks-gays-path-to-parenthood/30123813.html.

65 “MUP odbio žalbu, organizatori Evroprajda ne odustaju od šetnje u Beogradu,” Radio Slobodna Evropa, 14 September 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/para-da-ponosa-zabrana-beograd/32033329.html>.

66 Slobodan Maričić, “Evropa, Srbija i LGBT: Sve što znamo do sada,” BBC News sa Srpskom, 17 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-62563643>.

67 “Grafiti mržnje protiv Parade ponosa u centru Beograda,” BBC News sa Srpskom, 13 July 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/europrajd-beograd-grafiti-mrznje-lgbt/31941712.html>.

68 Rakić Vodinelić, “Otvoreni Balkan, zatvoreni Beograd.”

69 Maričić, “Evropa, Srbija i LGBT.”

70 See: “Đukanović: Organizatori da otkazu Evroprajd ili da vlasti razmisle da ga zabrane,” Politika, 15 August 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/514375/Dukanovic-Organizatori-da-otkazu-Evroprajd-ili-da-vlasti-razmisle-da-ga-zabrane>.

71 Ognjen Tubić, “Održavanje Evroprajda kapitulacija države pred zapadnim ambasadama i LGBT organizacijama,” Pokret obnove Kraljevine Srbije, 17 September 2022, <http://poks.rs/2022/09/17/odrzavanje-evroprajda-kapitulacija-drzave-pred-zapadnim-ambasadama-i-lgbt-organizacijama/>.

72 “Đurđević Stamenkovski o Evroprajdu: Vučić i Brnabić suspendovali pravni poredak Republike Srbije,” Danas, 17 September 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/djurdevic-stamenkovski-o-evroprajdu-vucic-i-brnabic-suspendovali-pravni-poredak-republike-srbije/>.

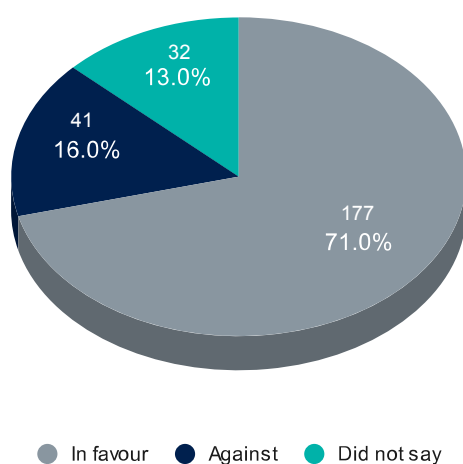
73 See: Boško Obradović, Twitter post, 22 July 2022, <https://twitter.com/BoskoObradovic/status/1551475768647192576>; and Valérie Gauriat, “EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade: A storm over the rainbow flag,” Euronews, 3 October 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/30/belgrade-europride-2022-a-storm-over-the-rainbow-flag>.

speech which included assertions that “transgenderism is a perversion and an unnatural deformation of the human **personality**,” undoubtedly played a role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing citizens against EuroPride.⁷⁴

On the other side of the political spectrum, 41 MPs from centre, centre-left, and left coalitions supported the EuroPride march and recognized it as a protected exercise of freedom of assembly and expression, as well as a manifestation of equal rights for all citizens. This represented just 16 percent of the 250 legislators who sit in the National Assembly, though (see Figure 6, below).

Figure 6. Number of Serbian MPs who supported and opposed banning the EuroPride march

Views of Serbian parliamentarians on banning the EuroPride march



Source: Gordana Ćosić, “Koje parlamentarne stranke u Srbiji su za zabranu Prajda?” Radio Slobodna Evropa, 29 August 2022.

Reactions of Independent Institutions to EuroPride

Online discussions and debates about (Euro)Pride often elicited hate speech against members of the LGBTQ+ community. Yet, in practice, this speech is rarely sanctioned in Serbia. In fact, Serbian courts have adjudicated only seven cases of hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community involving online user engagement.⁷⁵ Among these, in 2011, both the daily newspaper Press was found to have “acted discriminatorily” by allowing comments to be published online despite containing hate speech against the LGBT population; and Dragan Marković Palma, the mayor of Jagodina and head of the United Serbia party, was convicted in a first-instance verdict of “the severe form of discrimination based on sexual orientation,” for statements he made in the media.⁷⁶ In 2014, the High Court of Belgrade issued several more verdicts “against persons who

⁷⁴ “Podnete pritužbe Poverenici za zaštitu ravnopravnosti i REM-u,” Geten, 6 September 2022, <https://www.transserbia.org/vesti/2013-podnete-pritužbe-poverenici-za-zastitu-ravnopravnosti-i-rem-u>.

⁷⁵ “Prva presuda zbog govora mržnje protiv LGBT populacije,” Peščanik, 7 June 2011, <https://pescanik.net/prva-presuda-zbog-govora-mrznje-protiv-lgbt-populacije/>.

⁷⁶ See: Gay Straight Alliance, Freedom is not given, Freedom is taken: Report on human rights status of LGBT persons in Serbia, 2011 (Belgrade, 2012), 42.

used social [media] networks to issue threats of violence and death against members of the LGBT community.”⁷⁷

Hate speech that appears in public information and electronic media in Serbia can also be sanctioned by the independent Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). Among other things, REM regulates the work of media providers by setting “rules related to programme content and in connection with the protection of personal dignity and other personal rights, the protection the rights of minors, the prohibition of hate speech, etc,” in accordance with Article 22 of the Law on Electronic Media.⁷⁸ REM can also issue reprimands and warnings to providers, temporarily ban them from broadcasting content, and revoke their broadcasting licenses.⁷⁹ Even so, statistics show that REM does not respond to complaints of hate speech against the LGBTQ+ population, as a rule. For example, in 2022, it issued only four warnings and none concerned hate speech, despite the fact that Da se zna! had filed complaints reporting hate speech observed on the eve of EuroPride.⁸⁰ Given that REM imposed only 67 measures on media providers from 2014 to 2020, and that 1,030 reports were submitted to the body just from 2017 to 2020 (most of which were rejected as incomplete), it is clear that REM has not protected citizens’ rights by prohibiting hate speech.⁸¹ This reality, combined with the lack of resources and capacity that plagues civil society organizations, has led the number of reports submitted to REM to decrease over time.⁸²

The Press Council is another independent body to which individuals, organizations, and institutions may submit complaints about the content of media, either in print or on websites or internet portals. These complaints can cite text or photographs that appear in content produced by media outlets, as well as the comments of readers who interact with that content, if they cause direct harm to the complainant.⁸³ Practically, this means that organizations which monitor and report on media are not permitted to file a complaint on behalf of a minority group (such as the LGBTQ+ community) that has been harmed by media content, as this must be done by an individual, or by an organization that supports the rights of a specific group. Moreover, the powers of the Council are rather limited, as it does not have the ability to sanction media outlets against which complaints have been filed but can merely issue non-binding decisions; meaning, it is up to outlets to comply or not, and at best, these outlets may correct or retract the content that prompted a complaint or publicly apologize to the complainant.⁸⁴ These remedies often come months after problematic content is published, though, at which point that content has already been viewed

77 See: Gay Straight Alliance, “Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights of LGBT Persons in Serbia for 2014: Report Summary,” 25 March 2015.

78 Law on Electronic Media, Official Gazette no. 129/2021, 23 December 2021, Article 22.

79 Ivana Krstić, Report on the use of hate speech in Serbian media (Belgrade: Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and the Council of Europe, 2020).

80 See: Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, “Measures pronounced,” <http://www.rem.rs/sr/odluke/izrecene-mere#gsc.tab=0>; and “Podnete pritužbe Poverenici za zaštitu ravnopravnosti i REM-u.”

81 “REM: Diskriminacija i govor mržnje obeležili programe nacionalnih televizija u Srbiji,” *Danas*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/rem-diskriminacija-i-govor-mrznje-obelezili-programe-nacionalnih-televizija-u-srbiji/>.

82 Representatives from Geten, interview by authors, 3 May 2023.

83 See: Press Council, “What can we do for” <https://savetzastampu.rs/en/about-us/what-can-we-do-for-you/>.

84 Ibid.

by a considerable number of people, minimizing the impact of any correction.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the Press Council has proven to be quite responsive within its capabilities and competences.⁸⁶

While the Commissioner for Protection of Equality does not address media content explicitly, with a mandate that includes the prevention of all forms and types of discrimination, the bulk of complaints submitted to the Commissioner for hate speech since 2009 have involved speech directed at members of the LGBTQ+ community.⁸⁷ Yet, the Commissioner can exert relatively little influence to fight discrimination against the LGBTQ+ population, as the position is authorized only to issue opinions, recommendations, and warnings to those who violate the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, and to warn the public. LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations are united in the opinion that these kind of public condemnations, and the compulsory apologies they produce, are insufficient sanctions if the goal is to prevent individuals and institutions from repeating similar acts.⁸⁸ And it does not help that recommendations of the Commissioner are usually general in nature, further diminishing their effect.⁸⁹ In the view of LGBTQ+ organizations, the Commissioner should act *ex officio* more frequently, i.e. by issuing concrete recommendations and stricter measures, and by condemning anyone who behaves discriminatorily, regardless of their political and social status.⁹⁰ That said, in the context of EuroPride, the Commissioner did initiate a private lawsuit based on a complaint filed against Dr. Borislav Antonijević, who said during a television appearance that “homosexuality is a disease.”⁹¹

The reaction of the Public Prosecutor’s Office to threats against EuroPride and LGBTQ+ participants was also inadequate, and drew a false equivalence between EuroPride marchers and those who threatened them, by announcing that any citizen could face misdemeanour charges for failing to respect the ban on the EuroPride march.⁹² The reasoning of the Office was that it sought to “protect public order and peace, as well as the physical integrity and tranquillity of citizens,” ignoring that it was thereby denying those citizens their constitutionally guaranteed right to freely assemble. But the response of state prosecutors is also disappointing because the wheels of justice move slowly, even when charges are filed. For instance, the organization *Da se zna!* filed a criminal complaint against Veljko Bogunović (Bishop Nikanor of Banat) in mid-August 2022 for the offence of “racial and other discrimination” after the Orthodox priest cursed LGBTQ+ people, insulted the Prime Minister based on her sexual orientation and ethnic origins, and openly called for an armed confrontation with the LGBTQ+ population at EuroPride, saying “...if I had a weapon, I would use it.”⁹³ The case remains in the pre-investigation phase nearly a year later, while the

⁸⁵ Ivana Jelača, Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, interview by authors.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Krstić, Report on the use of hate speech in Serbian media.

⁸⁸ Representatives from *Da se zna*, interview by authors, 3 May 2023.

⁸⁹ Representatives from Civil Rights Defenders, interview by authors, 3 May 2023.

⁹⁰ Representatives from *Geten*, interview by authors.

⁹¹ Representatives from *Da se zna*, interview by authors.

⁹² See: “Belgrade Pride Activists Conduct Scaled-Down March As Far-Right Opponents Clash With Police,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 17 September 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-europride-march-banned-lgbt-belgrade/32038818.html>.

⁹³ “Više javno tužilaštvo u Pančevu postupa po krivičnoj prijavi protiv episkopa Nikanora,” *Danas*, 18 August 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vise-javno-tuzilastvo-u-pancevu-postupa-po-krivnoj-prijavi-protiv-episkopa-nikanora/>. A video of the Bishop’s address from 12 August 2022 is available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hZhqoL72mA&t=93s>.

Ministry of Interior works to identify the person who made the video of the Bishop and shared it on social networks.⁹⁴ And the Bishop himself will not face legal consequences for his statement, because the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination includes an exemption for “the conduct of... religious officials that is in accordance with religious doctrine, beliefs or goals of churches and religious communities.”⁹⁵

This collective lack of effective response from various state institutions has helped facilitate the transfer of hate speech and threats to the LGBTQ+ population from digital to physical spaces, where the personal safety of LGBTQ+ individuals is at risk. At the heart of this problem lies the fact that all three branches of government in Serbia are controlled by people who – despite their obligation to act in the public interest and based on the Constitution and laws of Serbia – hold biased, stereotypical views of the LGBTQ+ community and other minorities that clearly impact their decision making.

Reactions of civil society organizations

Upon the announcement of the Ministry of Interior that it was banning the EuroPride march, civil society organizations gathered around the “Three Freedom Platform” and issued a statement alleging the decision was a direct consequence of pressure put on the police by the President and Prime Minister, and filed a complaint calling on the Ministry to reverse it.⁹⁶ Instead, the Ministry confirmed the ban in a second-instance decision, and a challenge to the legality of this decision was rejected by the Administrative Court in Belgrade in a judgment issued on 16 September 2022.⁹⁷ Contrary to the earlier decision of the Constitutional Court, the Administrative Court found that the Ministry had made the decision to ban the march in accordance with the law, and had established the existence of a danger of large scale violence, property destruction, or disruption of public order.

But this danger extended not from LGBTQ+ participants in the march, but from those who wished to ban it. In fact, Da se zna! – which has documented cases of violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community over time – reported that 83 unlawful acts were recorded against LGBTQ+ persons in 2021, a rise of 37% from the previous year, nearly a quarter of which involved physical violence.⁹⁸ And the situation had deteriorated further by August 2022, when Da se zna! recorded 30 such incidents in that month alone. There were also 14 incidents reported on the day of the EuroPride march, which officials downplayed by asserting that the state had managed to secure the safety of all participants.⁹⁹ These statements by Serbian leaders discouraged members of the LGBTQ+ community from reporting both physical and verbal attacks to the competent authorities,

⁹⁴ 347 Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Pančevo, Republic of Serbia, response to a request for access to information of public importance, 17 March 2023.

⁹⁵ 348 Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, Official Gazette no. 22/09, 26 March 2009, Article 18.

⁹⁶ Youth Initiative for Human Rights, “Platforma ‘Tri slobode’: Sramotna odluka policije o zabrani EuroPride šetnje,” 13 September 2022, <https://www.yihr.rs/bhs/platforma-tri-slobode-sramotna-odluka-policije-o-zabrani-europride-setnje/>.

⁹⁷ Judgment of the Administrative Court in Belgrade, No. 38615/22, 16 September 2022.

⁹⁸ Da se zna!, “Reported cases of violence,” <https://dasezna.lgbt/en/slucajevi/>; and Miloš Kovačević and Nikola Planojević, Grasp the Truth Based on Facts 5: Report on hate-motivated incidents against LGBTQ+ persons in Serbia in 2021 (Belgrade: Da se zna Association, 2022).

⁹⁹ Da se zna!, “Saopštenje povodom incidenata tokom EuroPride šetnje,” <https://dasezna.lgbt/saopstenje-povodom-incidenata-tokom-europride-setnje/>.

particularly given the experience of many LGBTQ+ people of being secondarily victimized when they have previously reported crimes to the police; who often seem uninterested in pursuing these cases and “usually ask three questions and that’s where the procedure ends.”¹⁰⁰

This makes it even more important to victims to be able to collect proof of harm. When hateful comments are directed toward the LGBTQ+ community in online spaces, especially on social media, they can be saved through screenshots and then deleted to remove the disturbing content; and in the case of death threats made against specific individuals, the High-Tech Crime Department of the Ministry of Interior becomes involved. Still, a relatively small number of online threats are reported. Thus, among the options available to activists are to engage users of their social networks to join together in reporting accounts that spread hate speech or make threats, and to push social media companies to ban such accounts.¹⁰¹

Reactions of the international community

Because EuroPride is a pan-European event, there was a robust response from the international community when Serbian officials announced the ban on the EuroPride march. International leaders condemned the decision, and noted that as a country on the path to EU membership, Serbia was obligated to not only respect but improve human rights.¹⁰² The European Commissioner for Equality also reminded the Serbian government that restricting citizens’ freedom of assembly by prohibiting the march was a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, which is ratified by Serbia,¹⁰³ and also a contravention of the international legal protections of the European Court of Human Rights.¹⁰⁴ Members of the European Parliament’s LGBTI Intergroup appealed to authorities in Serbia to hold EuroPride according to the established schedule and to deploy additional police forces to ensure the safety of citizens who simply wanted to enjoy their right to freely assemble and express themselves peacefully.¹⁰⁵ From the perspective of these parliamentarians, EuroPride is a symbol of the struggle to uphold democratic values that have come under attack across Europe, and it was of special significance and importance that the event was to be hosted by Serbia.¹⁰⁶

The fact that the march did take place in the end revealed that its prohibition was unenforceable (i.e., unconstitutional) and that opponents of EuroPride had spread false information to discredit the event. Indeed, among those who participated in the march were ambassadors from numerous European countries as well as the EU and US, which alone called for very high levels of security and hinted that the initial ban on the march had not been issued for security reasons after all. And

¹⁰⁰ Representatives from Civil Rights Defenders, interview by authors.

¹⁰¹ Aleksa Savić, Izadjji, interview by authors.

¹⁰² “European Commissioner Dalli expects Belgrade to focus on human rights,” European Western Balkans, 12 September 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/09/12/european-commissioner-dalli-expects-belgrade-to-focus-on-human-rights/>.

¹⁰³ Valerie Gauriat, “EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade,” Euronews, 30 September 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Sofija Mandić, “Strogo poverljivo nasilje,” Peščanik, 17 September 2022, <https://pescanik.net/strogo-poverljivo-nasilje/>.

¹⁰⁵ European Parliament, LGBTI Intergroup Bureau, “145 MEPs sign letter to Serbian leadership calling to maintain the organisation of EuroPride 2022 and deploying sufficient police protection”, 31 August 2022, <https://lgbti-ep.eu/2022/08/31/140-meps-sign-letter-to-serbian-leadership-calling-to-maintain-the-organisation-of-euro-pride-2022-and-deploying-sufficient-police-protection/>.

¹⁰⁶ Gauriat, “EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade.”


while allowing the march may have appeared on its face as a political liability for Serbian leadership, the government managed to profit politically by demonstrating to the electorate that it was dissatisfied the event had been organized in Serbia and had tried to prevent it. At the same time, when EuroPride was held with only slight modifications, the government was able to tout to the international community that it had respected the civil liberties and human and minority rights of its citizens. In other words, despite the uproar, EuroPride was a win for the Serbian government. It was members of the LGBTQ+ community – the civil and human rights of whom ought to have been centred throughout the event – who lost out; not only were they instrumentalized for political purposes, but they continue to face discrimination, hatred, and physical attacks on the basis of their identity.

Conclusion

Stereotypes and prejudices about gender and LGBTQ+ people have long been present in Serbian society and are deeply rooted in its male-dominated patriarchal culture. The movement against “gender ideology” is a novelty, however, and has only recently grown in numbers and influence. As in other countries in Europe and North America, the leading actors in the Serbian anti-gender movement are conservative intellectuals, right-wing groups and parties, and men’s rights organizations, all of which enjoy the support of key religious institutions. Still, the biggest surprise to many feminist and LGBTQ+ activists in Serbia has been the appearance of trans-exclusionary organizations within the LGBTQ+ population, and their alliance with anti-gender groups; undermining hard-fought efforts of the country’s LGBTQ+ community.

The robust presence of these actors on the internet and in social networks, where they spread hate speech and promote anti-gender discourse – often by sharing misinformation and conspiracy theories – has increased their popularity in Serbia, helping them to mobilize Serbian citizens against the LGBTQ+ community and feminists. This facilitated a campaign to oppose the 2022 Belgrade EuroPride event and harass and intimidate participants in the EuroPride march. The Serbian establishment also played an important role in popularizing anti-gender discourse and mobilizing many citizens against EuroPride participants, by providing anti-gender actors with access to the public broadcasting service (RTS) and pro-government media.

Although the anti-gender discourse disseminated by Serbian influencers in this movement is essentially nationalist and anti-Western, it is Western anti-gender figures and groups that provide the template for this discourse. Nevertheless, the purpose of anti-gender narratives in Serbia is to discredit the “decadent West” and dehumanize the LGBTQ+ population and women. Moreover, anti-gender rhetoric and actions are skilfully (ab)used by state officials to channel public frustration with government policies towards other social issues, and to marginalize the rule of law agenda and limit certain civil rights and freedoms under the pretext of defending “traditional Serbian values and the family” or national security. In the context of EuroPride, the highest state officials, using social media, as well as online and traditional media, sought to mislead citizens into thinking



that the state was unable to simultaneously conduct negotiations with Priština while also guaranteeing the protection and exercise of civil rights and freedoms on the streets of Belgrade. The ultimate goal of introducing this false binary was to score political points from pro-Russian and anti-Western voters.

But that is just the tip of the iceberg. In order to secure public support and appease the quickly growing anti-gender movement, the government – which is currently led by the first openly lesbian prime minister in Serbian history – has acted over the past five years to exclude gender-related content from school textbooks, has failed to implement portions of gender legislation, and has failed to introduce a law on same-sex unions. Hence, while anti-gender influencers are certainly not without fault, the government bears the greatest responsibility for fostering social conditions in which prejudices against LGBTQ+ are allowed to flourish, and human rights and freedoms are sacrificed for political gain. It is also the government that attempted to ban the EuroPride march, ostensibly for security reasons, in a blatant violation of the Serbian Constitution. Meanwhile, Serbian officials with the greatest power and responsibility did little or nothing to prevent hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community, online threats, and anti-gender misinformation campaigns during the EuroPride event.

Indeed, Serbian leadership managed to profit politically from this episode, when the EuroPride march did take place after all, allowing the government to save face with the international community while simultaneously demonstrating to voters their dissatisfaction with the event. Yet, it has been a collective lack of responsiveness from the various state institutions of this government that has helped enable the translation of hate speech and threats to the LGBTQ+ population from digital to physical spaces, significantly reducing the personal safety of this population. As a result, Serbia saw an increase in hate crimes reports before and even after EuroPride. Meaning, in the end, an event intended to celebrate diversity and elevate the achievements of the LGBTQ+ community represented a risk to many LGBTQ+ people in Serbia – who continue to face online and offline discrimination, hatred, and physical attacks on the basis of their identity.

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