

Gender Equality for Show: Serbian Performative Europeanisation

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1. Introduction

At the moment of writing, in spring 2022, Serbia is headed by an openly lesbian Prime Minister, 45% of her Cabinet is composed of women, with a similar composition of the National Parliament. The international political scene has seen quite some anti-gender frictions in the last five years – most often heartily supported by the relevant local religious actors. Serbia, however, seems to be thriving in gender equality. Our aim in this chapter is to show how gender equality can be used *for* populist purposes, becoming performative in the constitution of façade democracy. In addition, we claim that the state *captured* gender equality, drawing as well the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) – the most unlikely ally in such an enterprise – to its side.

For the largest part of Serbian post-socialist history¹, the state was reluctant to enter into gender mainstreaming processes. Reasons varied. We may list general indifference to issues of gender equality, resistance to the demands of Europeanisation, reluctance to operationalise implemented policies in an attempt to foster stronger ties with the Church. However, in the last five years, marked by anti-gender politics worldwide, the Serbian state has become an international champion

¹ Following the Yugoslav wars for succession (1991-2001), the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was reduced to the republics of Serbia, Montenegro and the disputed territory of Kosovo. In 2003, it was renamed Serbia and Montenegro. On 21 May 2006, Montenegro held a referendum, which culminated in the end of the union with Serbia. Serbia's declaration of independence on June 6, 2006, marks the re-emergence of Serbia as an independent state.

in gender mainstreaming. In 2017, Ana Brnabić took the seat of the Prime Minister. She is, according to Wikipedia, the second female LGBTQI head of government in the world, the first head of government of any Balkan country to attend the Pride march, and the first openly gay PM whose partner gave birth while she was in office.

To fully grasp the paradoxical state of things in the Serbian ‘gender-haven,’ one needs to take into account the use of gender equality *for show*. We will thus first briefly introduce the local actors – the women’s movement, conservative intelligentsia and SOC – who were setting the terms of gender debate prior to 2017. The debate took shape in the general framework of Europeanisation, which we understand as a bundle of processes common for post-socialist countries, that are assuming not only incremental reorientation of the direction and shape of national politics, but also acceptance and promotion of values that are supposed to organize national policy-making. In Serbia, these are often termed ‘European values.’ Depending on the side of the debate, they are either honored or vilified.

In the second part of the chapter we move to 2017, the year in which Ana Brnabić became the Prime Minister, turning into an uncanny emblem of the decade-long regime of the Serbian Progressive Party. Moreover, this year is significant also because it was then that the term ‘gender ideology’ (*rodna/džender ideologija*) emerged for the first time in Serbian conservative discourses. ‘Gender ideology’ may be approached as a political phenomenon continuous with the previous historical forms of antifeminism and homophobia, or as a novel phenomenon pertaining to the particular historical moment in which we live. We believe that anti-gender discourses build on existing modes of resistance to progressive social change, revolving around maintenance of a non-egalitarian status quo. In the case of Serbia, they were strongly emboldened by the war-induced processes of re-patriarchalization and retraditionalization of the society. At the same time, we are

witnessing a profound transformation of the meaning and scope of the importance of matters related to gender. Namely, if gender was for decades a socially troubling issue, today it has strong potential to disfigure and re-figure political life. Most often, the refiguring happens in opposition to gender mainstreaming processes. In Serbia, the opposite is the case. The ‘gender promoting’ state, in a tacit, ‘unnatural alliance’ with SOC, used these issues to configure its European course – leaving civil society actors, both feminists and conservative intellectuals, on the fringes of the gender debate.

Surely, in this framework SOC is the most curious actor. Although it had an uncontested role in the retraditionalization of Serbian politics and society in general, it joined forces with the current government in a theatrical play of democratization and Europeanisation of Serbia. During the last five years, SOC has not been pronounced on matters of gender equality, gender mainstreaming and LGBT+ issues, very much unlike other Orthodox churches. One must wonder how this is possible – especially if we bear in mind that SOC has repeatedly called for an abortion ban since the early 1990s, and will remain remembered for statements such as “a stench poisoned and festered the capital city of Belgrade, a poison far worse than uranium left by NATO bombs,” regarding the Pride parade in 2011 (as cited in Janković, 2011, 97).

To understand this, we end the chapter with a reading of a peculiar type of a catch-all populism. One would be naturally tempted to conjecture that the ‘Serbian double-first’ – the first woman and the first open lesbian – in the most powerful seat in the political system of Serbia was a realization of the feminist dreams. That was, however, not the case. The ‘show’ was not meant for domestic audiences, let alone feminist ones. The capture of gender equality, on which we focus in this chapter, represents only a tiny fragment of the regime’s long march of Serbian state capture.

2. Europeanization vs Retraditionalization: Women's Movement, the Church and the State

Similar to other post-socialist societies, Serbia witnessed a resurgence of conservatism after the fall of the Berlin wall. The restoration of social significance of the Church was integral to socialism's demise. Serbian conservatism was, however, different, as it was largely shaped by the Yugoslav wars for succession, and the role of SOC went far beyond bringing the traditionalism back (Tomanić, 2001; Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava, n.d; Perica, 2014). In the 1990s, SOC championed the idea of the Greater Serbia², which was supposed to preserve the organic unity of the nation (Radić & Vukomanović, 2014, p. 182). SOC's national concerns multiplied in the 2000s, with regard to the territorial disputes over secession of Kosovo, still unresolved. In the context of the gender debate, the pronounced nationalism of SOC is crucial for two reasons. First, the hyper-masculine war discursive frames, articulated or propagated by SOC, reintroduced a complete naturalness of gender inequality (Papić, 2006). Second, since SOC was always concerned with 'serious' political issues revolving around territories and ancestral nationhood, it never really cared to develop a congruent and consistent stance on 'irrelevant' issues, such as gender equality. These were tackled only when the necessity arose, and by rule as part of a larger, more 'serious' political question. The Europeanisation process offered itself as a suitable candidate.

The true 'symphony' between the Church and the state began only after the fall of Milošević's regime. In the 2000s, the Church tightened its connections with civic and military institutions and

² The term Greater Serbia or Great Serbia (Velika Srbija) is the name for the territorial aspirations of a variety of political actors to incorporate all regions in which the Serbs live or have lived into one state. This includes territories which have or have not been part of the Serbian state in historical terms, but were populated by Serbs. The term gained relevance with the imminent collapse of Yugoslavia, understood as the state in which all Serbs lived in one country. The term is generally considered to refer to ultra-nationalist pretensions.

strengthened its presence in public life. Its secular status notwithstanding, the state stood in close proximity to the Church³, which was casually consulted on social, political and cultural matters. The restoration of SOC's position was structural and it was integral to the democratization processes: religious classes returned to public schools, temples were built with the state budget funds, the property of the Church was restituted, exempted from taxes and subsidized. SOC representatives became eloquent on a variety of secular issues, condemning the West, 'Western' or 'European' values such as the promotion of human rights, and European integration. Post-socialist and post-conflict Serbia – a country that lost all wars which it officially never waged (Popov-Momčinović and Zaharijević, 2022, pp. 120-122) – was in search of 'authentic national values,' and SOC provided the language – of *svetosavlje*, of the heavenly nation, of glorious past to be restored in the future by re-establishing patriarchal family and parochial communality.

Institutionalization of gender equality was, however, another important dimension of the democratization processes in Serbia. Before 2000, the women's movement cultivated a non-negotiable antinationalist, but also anti-state and anti-Church position (Blagojević, 1998; Batinić, 2001; Zaharijević, 2015), retaining a consciously peripheral, almost dissident position in society. After the fall of Milošević's regime, a new zeal to mend the symbolically and materially impoverished society and struggle against its profound war-induced repatriarchalization introduced a mercurial partnership with the state. The first steps towards institutional changes in the domain of gender mainstreaming (*urodnjavanje*) were precarious and uneven (Špehar, 2012;

³ In the previous decade, the Church appeared as the true voice of the nation, of 'all Serbs', and was an indispensable element in the nation-building discourses, especially after the dissolution of Milošević's 'chipped' Yugoslavia. In these circumstances, all parties which tended to promote a 'patriotic' program have either openly embraced SOC or at least flirted with it. Relevance of the Church is also reflected in the general population. The last census, from 2011, shows that more than 6 out of 7 million of Serbian citizens identify as Serbian Orthodox. It is, however, important to emphasize that this reflects an ethnic identification rather than a belief, since only 6% of self-declared Orthodox Christians belong to the cohort of regular church-goers (Pew, 2017; cf. Đurić, Tanasković & Lađević, 2014).

Antonijević, 2016; Antonijević, 2018), and sometimes overly reliant on the Europeanization requirements and the notion that ‘we must catch up’ with the world. The state’s reluctance to set a decisive agenda, its lukewarm reaction to ‘catching up,’ and a constant readiness to politically bargain with conservative forces, characterized the first decade of the democratic, post-Milošević’s rule in Serbia.

The landmark moment in the institutionalization of gender equality was the passing of the new Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), which incorporated international human rights standards, obligation of the state towards politics of equal opportunities, and special measures in the domain of gender equality. This allowed for the adoption of a series of anti-discrimination and gender equality measures and policies. The most important among these were, however, two laws, Law on the Equality of the Sexes and Anti-Discrimination Law, in procedure from 2005, but adopted only four years later. The laws had a turbulent parliamentary life and were fiercely opposed by SOC and conservative political actors: over 700 amendments were submitted to the draft of the Anti-Discrimination Law, and significantly, half of them by the Serbian Radical Party, the precursor of today’s ruling Serbian Progressive Party. SOC was adamant to stop their adoption. The law on anti-discrimination was presented as promoting homosexuality or, in SOC’s versing, smuggling ‘mental disorders’ as human rights, and violating freedom of faith and conscience of the majority of Serbian citizens (Pajvančić, 2012, p. 95). However, the laws were pushed through, sponsored as a required step towards EU integration and, even more importantly, a necessary step towards the liberalization of the visa regime, which allowed citizens of Serbia to move freely in the Schengen area for the first time after almost two decades.

Overburdened by its entangled, unresolved past(s), territorial issues, rising poverty and structural inequalities, the state was reluctant to set a one-directional course. It continuously juggled between

Europeanization and retraditionalization, assisting in the production of a highly polarized society. By advocating for gender equality, the women's movement advocated for Europeanization. SOC, on the other hand, was at the forefront of the opposition to the 'European values,' which began to function as a floating signifier for any set of apparently imposed and degrading rules foreign to the local traditions and mores. The Serbian Radical Party, whose former secretary is the current president of Serbia, waged the same battle in the parliamentary arena⁴.

3. Reversal 2017: Gender Ideology vs. Gender Haven

As already noted at the beginning of this chapter, the year 2017 has a peculiar significance with regard to matters related to gender. Prior to 2017 there were three groups involved in the debate on gender equality: women's movement, the Church and the conservative intellectuals who were predominantly concerned with the symbolic – and mainly secular – defense of Serbianhood. Neither SOC nor conservative intellectual circles had an elaborate stance on gender or LGBT+ issues: they disparaged it, trivializing or demonizing it, depending on the situation. In contrast to the Catholic Church, which had by this time fully developed its intricate 'Christian anthropology,' based on the notion of complementarity of the sexes, their natural difference and perfect

⁴ The Serbian Radical Party, founded in 1991, states in its program that the party's main political goal is the formation of Greater Serbia. It opposes Serbia's entry in EU and NATO, promotes cooperation with Russia on a Belorussian model, and internationally cooperates with Austrian FPÖ, French Front National and Russian Just Russia. It was the greatest propagator of war and it remained the staunchest far-right party in Serbia. This bears specific mentioning because the Serbian Progressive Party, now ruling for a full decade, splintered from the Serbian Radical Party in 2008. The current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, was the Serbian Radical Party secretary from its earliest days until he left the party. The Serbian Progressive Party describes itself as the democratic political organization whose goal is to achieve national unity, protection of vital national interests, improvement of the state of human rights, and realistic and accelerated economic progress. They advocate the accession of Serbia into the European Union, maintaining the balanced politics between Brussels, Washington, Moscow and Beijing. With at least 750.000 members as of 2020, SPP is the largest party in Europe by membership.

harmonization in the family (Case, 2016), SOC had no official stance on the matter⁵. The 2010 statement of the Synod shows this quite clearly: this “‘despicable topic’ [LGBT+] is ‘fundamentally irrelevant’ to the Church, having been imposed by the governmental and non-governmental organizations and the media” (as cited in Ivanović and Radulović, 2014, p. 172).

Gender equality was never presented as an issue of national importance. This would, however, change in the spring of 2017, when the notion of *gender ideology* first entered Serbian public discourse. The cornerstone of this reversal was a public scandal on the so-called Educational packages, a hefty volume on the prevention of sexual violence against children and minors, which instructed teachers and carers how to approach the issues of body image, sexuality, wanted and unwanted touch, sexual- and gender-based violence. The Packages were part of the national Campaign against sexual assault implemented by the renowned Belgrade-based NGO ‘Incest Trauma Center,’ and supervised by the Ministry of Social Policy and the National Parliament, in cooperation with the Council of Europe. The ‘scandal’ revolved around the discovery that ‘our children’ would become sexualized and pathologized with the help of the state which, willingly or unwillingly, succumbed to the imposed European tolls, implemented by an NGO led by a ‘lesbian.’ The parrot-phrases about sexualization, repeated in a string of articles written by vocal conservative intellectuals, brought the Packages down in only two weeks (Zaharijević, 2018).

⁵ Prior to 2017, only one article published on the official SOC website discussed ‘gender issues’ (Andrić, 2016). The article reads like a translation, which pretends to present some entirely novel topics never discussed in Serbian language, despite the fact that at the moment of its publication there were two postgraduate academic programs in gender studies in Serbia. Even more importantly, gender is a term with a history in Serbo-Croatian language, which has been sparsely in use ever since the late 1970s, when it first appeared translated alongside sex in sex/gender distinction ([*s*]pol/rod). In itself, this fact tells us something about a genuine presence of feminist thought in socialist Yugoslavia (Zaharijević, 2017), but it also shows that gender was part of language of the women’s movement before Serbia began to, strictly speaking, implement policies which were supposed to bring it closer to the European Union. The creators of anti-gender discourses are mindful of this fact, as they decline to use the term *rod*, and instead use a transliteration, *džender*, which sounds very coarse and specifically foreign.

In hindsight, this media onslaught presented the line-up of the commonplace anti-gender topoi (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018): family is vulnerable; nation is waning; ‘homosexualizm’ and pornography are promoted as desirable to our children by foreign lobbies through manipulated state institutions; this is an attack on the constitutionally guaranteed ‘Christian⁶ and national rights’ in the name of ‘gender violence’! Many of these proclamations featured in isolated and random antifeminist and homophobic conservative performances before, but the consolidated narrative never existed. Ultimately, the ‘scandal’ bore immediate results: the newly instituted Minister of Education ‘confessed’ that ‘Europe’ demanded sexual education, and the Packages were revoked, since they did not reflect ‘our’ values (as cited in Pejović, 2017, 18).

For a moment, it seemed that the state had finally made a decision on the course which would be in line with the politics promulgated by the conservative actors for a long time. Gender ideology offered itself as a symbolic glue that would, at a long last, provide the state with congruence and direction, which was already tried in Hungary, Russia and Poland (see, for example, Grzebalska & Petó, 2018; Edenborg, 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). The forcefulness of the first anti-gender campaign made it appear as only the first in line of events that would push away anything that had to do with gender. However, what happened only two months later defied all expectations. In June 2017, Ana Brnabić took the seat of the Prime Minister, succeeding Aleksandar Vučić, who became the President of Serbia. Up to that point the Minister of public administration and local self-government for less than a year, Brnabić was a curious choice for the most powerful position in the Serbian political system. A non-party personality, politically anonymous, Brnabić was known to the public for one fact only: she was openly gay. The public obtained this piece of information


⁶ The constitution does not mention Christian rights. It guarantees the liberties of faith, but, since it states that Serbia is the country of Serbs and all other citizens of Serbia and since the majority of people declare themselves as Serbian Orthodox, a certain common sense assumes that faith can be equated with Christianity.

not through her directly, but through Vučić, who outed her on the occasion of Brnabić's inclusion in the Government as a new member of his team (he then famously said that although she is “openly gay”, she is a “fine and lovely... professional and diligent person” [as cited in Nikšić, 2016, 13]).

Such developments left many in disbelief, both in women's movement and the conservative intellectual circles. What was, however, even more astonishing was a conspicuous absence of protests from the SOC echelons. Without a doubt, the Church and the state came closest to ‘symphony’ in the era of the Serbian Progressive Party rule, in power since 2012. The words of the late Patriarch Irinej who thanked “the Lord for bestowing upon us such a man [Vučić] to fight like a lion for the Serbian people” (as cited in Vasović, 2019, 126), describe this political union well. However, despite their overt closeness, no one would have believed that an openly gay PM could be welcomed by the patriarchal Serbian Orthodoxy, exceptionally close to the Russian one (Biserko, 2016), and surrounded by neighbors who have already been quite unequivocal on matters of gender ideology (Slavova, 2019; Smilova, 2020; Juroš, Dobrotić & Flego, 2020; Soare & Tufiş, 2021)⁷.

⁷ The fact is that SOC had no official reaction when Serbia ratified the Istanbul Convention already in 2013, which would spark fierce political and Church campaigns in both (Catholic) Croatia and (Orthodox) Bulgaria in 2018. There was equally no reaction to these campaigns, despite their being led in the closest vicinity. The statement of the eparchy of Zagreb and Ljubljana, whose representatives directly witnessed the social upheavals in Croatia, represents a lonesome and timid exception and was rightly described as “the first reaction of the Serbian Church on the *džender* ideology” (Неколико мисли о Истанбулској конвенцији и родној идеологији, 2018). This statement also gives us an opportunity to see with what ease the ‘Serbian Church’ justifies ‘natural inequality’ between men and women, reflecting ‘our’ values in opposition to the ‘European’ ones. In contradistinction to the Catholic beautifications of the Victorian notion of complementarity, the Serbian Church needed no embellishments: Eve sinned and hence became subjected and “given a head” to lead her through life forever. “As there is a healthy hierarchy in everything in the world in order for it to function, there is a hierarchy in a male-female relationship.” Undermining this harmonious equality in dignity and hierarchy in leadership belongs to the workings of “gender ideology which disrespects the boundaries of the healthy, Christian, familial patriarchy, and for Orthodoxy represents sin and rebellion against God” (Неколико мисли о Истанбулској конвенцији и родној идеологији, 2018).

This is what indeed took place. At the inauguration ceremony of the newly elected president, two weeks *before* Ana Brnabić was announced as the new PM, Porfirije – then Metropolitan of the Eparchy of Zagreb and Ljubljana, from 2021 the Patriarch of SOC – greeted Brnabić with warm words of support, on his own and on the behalf of the Church, claiming that he has “nothing but the best to say about her.” SOC immediately made an official announcement that the Church does not interfere with the election of state officials, with an emphasis that it is irresponsible to speak publicly about ‘personal temptations’ because it may expose persons to potential harm (cited in Dondović, 2017, 13, 5, 6, in an article with a significant title: “SOC wants Ana to succeed Vučić”).

The ‘double first for Serbia’ – the first woman, and the first open lesbian Prime Minister – came, to say the least, as a complete surprise (on the state of LGBT+ rights, state-captured and ‘ghost’ Prides⁸ in Serbia, see Mikuš, 2011; Bilić, 2016; Jovanović, 2020). Almost immediately upon her institution, this gesture was described as a purely tactical Europeanization move (Slootmaeckers, 2017) – part of the façade democratization process which would enable President Vučić to continue centralizing his power, by producing puppet figures who serve as a smokescreen to divert attention from Serbia’s diminishing democracy. However, if we accept the notion of ‘leveraged pedagogy’, a hegemonic didactical relation of a homophobic pupil (CEE/SEE) and its sexually advanced and enlightening European teacher (Kulpa, 2014; Kahlina, 2015), we must say that Serbia’s ruling political elite demonstrated that it passed this test with the highest grades. The state not only ceased to play reluctantly in the sphere of gender-mainstreaming, but it set an example to the teachers themselves – drawing, quite explicitly, the Church on its side. 

⁸ ‘Ghost’ Prides refer to prides that take place with surrounding buildings emptied out, empty streets for 500 meters in all directions and heavy police presence, i.e. prides where 200-500 people celebrate, but there is no one to witness it.

4. State Gender Equality: Populism and Gender in Serbia

Serbia began to score ever higher on gender equality lists – in 2021 it ranked 19th in the world (Vlada RS, 2021), a leap from 54th position in 2014. The most significant progress has been made in the domain of power – if the trend of the number of women entering politics and occupying positions of power were to continue, the gender gap would be closed in 2.5 years⁹. Announcing that Brnabić would be the new-old prime minister in September 2020, Vučić declared *it was his dream* to have “50% or close to 50% of the cabinet composed of women. I think that’s revolutionary and that we will show what equality looks like in deeds” (Vučić saopštio: Ana Brnabić mandatarka, više žena u novoj vladi Srbije, 2020, 16). The president’s dream of a gender-equal Serbia, of ‘deeds, not words,’ began to turn into reality in 2021. This reality left feminists in disarray. In their criticism of the foul onslaught of Europeanization and the destruction of Serbian values, the conservative intellectuals began to focus more on the state. The Church decided to remain silent.

What kind of government gave Serbia – previously not exactly known as a ‘gender-haven’ – a lesbian PM? In a very informative article on the current political situation, Laurent Tournois provides a telling footnote, supposedly there to explicate the abbreviations in the text, but in fact grasping one of the major characteristics of the regime that turned gender equality into reality: “In this paper, the terms ‘Aleksandar Vučić’, ‘ruling party’, ‘political elite’, ‘ruling elite’, ‘government’ and ‘political establishment’ are considered synonymous” (Tournois, 2021, p. 588).

⁹ In other domains – labor, money and knowledge – the situation is far from bright. According to the *Gender Equality Index*, in these spheres it will take between 58 and 269 years to achieve full gender equality (Indeks rodne ravnopravnosti, 2021).

These are indeed to be understood as synonyms. There is, as well, a “problem of categorization” (ibidem, p. 592), when it comes to the definition of this type of rule. One is tempted to define it as populist – and in some areas it certainly is precisely that, as it heavily relies on the “unscrupulous use and instrumentalization of diffuse public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment” (Betz, 1994, p. 4). It feeds on – and further produces – a sense of ontological insecurity (Ejdus, 2018; Steele & Homalar, 2019). It constantly constructs multiple polarizations, often drawing on antagonism between people and the elites, where the latter refers to former ruling parties, opposition in general, or oppositional/‘their’ intellectuals¹⁰. This rule is vague, volatile and adaptable. It is less centered on ideologies, and more on a careful crafting of political strategizing organized around a personalistic leadership of Aleksandar Vučić. It depends on economic and cultural crises, some of which have deep roots, while others are – almost daily – constructed as specific ‘failure stories’ (Caiani & Graziano, 2019, p. 10).

Although in power for a full decade, the Serbian Progressive Party regime still paradoxically frames itself using anti-establishment, challenger and ‘outsider’ language. Zulianello (2020, p. 331, 342) classified the Serbian Progressive Party as a positively integrated right-wing/national-conservative populist party, in its mind-set closest to Hungarian Fidesz. However, while in Hungary and, according to Brubaker (2017, p. 18), in East Central Europe more generally, the prevailing nationalist semantics constructs (EU) liberalism as an antinational project subordinating national interests to foreign domination – foreign capital and foreign cultural mores, gender equality being prominent among them – this semantics is in Serbia relegated to the fringe

¹⁰ At one point, president Vučić occasionally wrote ‘opinion pieces’ on the topic, constructing good and bad elites, siding with the poor and the ignorant of the country, etc. (‘Elita i plebs’, Vučić, 2019). Also, in his all too frequent addresses to the nation, Vučić often uses phrases such as “I will say it in such a way that the people, *narod*, understands”, or “*Narod* understands what we do”, even when what is done seems to be going directly against the will or understanding of the people.

conservative actors. The regime does use it at times, when it appears opportune – claiming that the foreign centers of power cannot and will not impose their demands on Serbia – but it also plays on an overtly anti-Hungarian ‘cosmopolitan’ card, which was the case with the refugee crisis in 2016 and its ‘open immigration’ policies (Rujević, 2016). The ruling party is also only ambiguously conservative. According to Oakeshott (1991, p. 408), conservatism refers to a disposition to be concerned with the present, not with the past or the future, “to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible.” Despite his political past, Vučić managed to re-portray the politics of his party as progressive, oriented towards the future (with the key slogan ‘For Our Children’), cosmopolitan, foreign-investments- and gay-friendly, at the same time reframing and redeploying various narratives from the Serbian recent past – from wars to territorial losses – to fine-tune the sense of ontological insecurity.

In this eclectic form of populism, there is no trade protectionism or ‘welfare chauvinism’ – Serbia witnesses its greatest economic/class divide. Equally so, there is no harsh ethnic exclusivism. Internal political crises are framed in terms of efficacious Realpolitik, disregarding normative claims or political ideologies, while, in the external frame, the regime presents itself as vouchsafing regional stability – which substantiates the notion of stabilitocracy, the “exchange of stability for external lenience on matters of democracy” (Bieber, 2017, 13). For both internal and external consumption, Vučić implements an ethnic underbidding strategy, depicting himself “as the only moderate force competent to resolve the political crisis,” creating and then demonizing the more radical groups by qualifying them as extremists (Tournois, 2021, p. 600). This applies to territorial concerns, moneyed elites, or anti-gender rhetoric.

State capture is not this regime’s contrivance. As early as 2007, Vesna Pešić noted that “large-scale and systemic state capture... is acquiring such proportions in Serbia that it may undermine

the success of its transition.” Two major ‘capturing agents’ during the first democratization years were the political party leadership who have seized huge state property, including public companies, public offices and institutions, and the oligarchs, who finance all relevant parties (Pešić, 2007, p. 1, 6). However, in the era of the Serbian Progressive Party rule, the most notable progress was noted precisely in the domain of the state capture, where the party became equated with both the moneyed elites and the people (in 2020, the party had 750.000 members in a country of less than 7 million people), occupying the strategic positions in the state apparatus. With the security sector captured, the media and justice sectors in service of the party, and the Parliament without opposition (from June 2020 until August 2022), the Serbian Progressive Party does not use its “accumulated power only to extract or redirect public resources for private gain... but also to alter balance of power between different social groups, to stifle political opposition and critical voices, and to erase the remaining checks and balances between different branches of government” (Petrović, 2020, p. 12).

The travesty of democracy remained a permanent feature of Serbian political life (Pavlović, 2019), which gained Gargantuan proportions with the appointment of Ana Brnabić. The Prime Minister is formally the most powerful figure in the state, while the President, although an elected function based on popular vote, has constitutionally only very limited governing power and is primarily a ceremonial position. Despite this fact, the Serbian government operates as an executioner of the president’s will – ministers receive direct instructions from Vučić, while Brnabić calls him her ‘boss’ (*šef*), buttressing claims that she was appointed as a head of a ‘surrogate government’ with no actual power. ‘Mr. President’ and ‘Ana’ – an odd couple to parent the nation – masterfully perform their political roleplay.

‘Ana’s’ gender and sexuality are an important part in this performance¹¹. Having been handpicked and outed by ‘Mr. President’ as an openly gay¹² diligent technocrat, the new prime minister carried a strong symbolic value and spoke in favor of Serbia’s Europeanization direction. No one could possibly deny the radicalness of one such choice. However, clever strategizing appealed not only the ambivalent allies of the Serbian Progressive Party, but also scored high with the Russian commentators on Serbian affairs (Babich, 2019). If she was branded ‘gay’ for Europe, for the internal use Brnabić was consistent in declaring that she is not a ‘gay PM’, that her sexuality is irrelevant for her political function, because she is not a ‘demagogue’ or a ‘PC [politically correct] politician’. And if for the Western public she portrayed “Serbia as not that homophobic” (as cited in Wintour, 2017, [11]) – implying that she would have never been chosen to head the government if that were the case – at home she continued to function as the gay head of the state which does not recognize gay rights.

Paradoxically, Brnabić’s appointment could be understood as indicating an unwavering gender-mainstreaming direction of the state and is, at the same time, an indicator of its authoritarian stride. Early on, the feminists were critical of her appointment: “when a woman comes to such an important position by the will of a man who has absolutist pretensions, then this is a pure demonstration of patriarchy” (Gligorijević, 2017, [51]). Her appointment – in a country in which almost half of the citizens believe homosexuality is an illness¹³ – could also be easily interpreted

¹¹ Outside Serbia, Brnabić is perceived as a gender equality role model. In 2019, she was on the Forbes list of the most powerful women in the world. Her face appears next to Angela Merkel and Kamala Harris in Jennifer Aniston’s Instagram tribute to female leaders (Kljajic, 2021).

¹² The term ‘gay’ (*gej*) was and is used as a self-description, and as a description in the media. The PM never refers to herself as a lesbian, and she was outed as ‘gay’. This can be understood as a form of gay-pink washing, as well as a paradoxical lesbophobia (Bilić, 2020).

¹³ According to the Report on research on public opinion and recommendations for communication of the Law on same-sex partnerships, in 2021 41% of the respondents agreed with the statement that homosexuality is an illness, which is, however, a progress compared to 2008 (70%) and 2010 (67%) (Ka boljem razumevanju, 2021, p. 27).

as a dictatorial demonstration of power. Or, in Bojan Bilić fine formulation: “you will choose someone you would never choose – because I say so” (Bilić, 2020, p. 385). The oldest Serbian lesbian human rights organization, Labris, issued an announcement on the occasion of Brnabić’s partner’s childbirth in 2019, reminding (us or her) that without the law regulating same-sex partnerships, Serbia remains a “country where the PM, although receiving congratulatory greetings from the representatives of regime, cannot be registered as a parent in her son’s birth certificate, cannot enroll him in the kindergarten, cannot cross the border to take him on holiday, or visit him in a hospital as a family member” (Labris, 2019, 15). Somewhat ironically, the statement ends with Labris joining in congratulations to the parents, expressing hopes that they will be legally recognized in the nearest future.

The President congratulated ‘Ana’ and her partner on the birth of their son too. And, now that there was a common consensus of congratulatory notes, it seemed that the time was also ripe for the legislation which would actually mainstream what has by then only been performed for the show. State performance of gender equality, almost entirely reducible to the number of women in positions of power – albeit without real power – added an important layer to the façade democratization of Serbia. This gendered layer of Europeanization was without internal substance, which became quite plain at the moment when the lesbian PM termed herself a ‘parent’ of a child she did not give birth to – a designation which is, legally speaking, null and void. Such gender equality was obviously expedient for external purposes and, as such, digestible for the Church representatives, who would still remain silent when Vučić exposed his dream on revolutionizing equality.

5. Reversal 2021: Gender Haven, Only for the Show and Only for the Few

The ‘dream’ turned out to be the announcement of two laws – on gender equality and same-sex partnerships – which would occupy the public throughout the first part of 2021. Up to that point, the only gender-related law pushed during Brnabić’s mandate was the Law on the Unique Citizen Identification Number (2018), which enabled trans people to legally confirm gender reassignment in the registry books. The long-awaited Law on Gender Equality was supposed to succeed the dysfunctional Law on the Equality of the Sexes (2009), which did not provide the appropriate implementation mechanisms, the budget, or penalties. The Law on Gender Equality which aimed to correct these and finally enable proper institutionalization of gender equality at all levels, was proposed already in 2014, but was endlessly obstructed by another minister belonging to the same ruling structure. In January 2021, it appeared in the parliamentary procedure together with the Law on Same-Sex Partnerships. At first, it seemed that both laws would be adopted as a package – in the Parliament without opposition, after five years of an uncontested ‘rule’ of the lesbian PM, who worked in close cooperation with the president who had a dream. The pinnacle of Serbian gender mainstreaming seemed to be within an easy reach.

However, in a country where façades change by the bid of the day, the fate of the laws was not a predictable one. Much maligned, the Gender Equality Law was adopted half a year later, producing an unexpected turmoil around the very notion of gender, which opened the gates wide for the re-elaboration of gender ideology. In an ‘Appeal signed by 212 intellectuals,’ a loose group which for the first time gathered a respectable number of the representatives of the conservative intelligentsia, the renewed attempt to adopt the Gender Equality Law is described as the “new violence over public space” through an “unconstitutional” category of gender, reintroducing the communist “verbal delict” (Апел 212 јавних личности против усвајања закона о истополним заједницама, n.d.). A series of debates on the potential transformation of Serbian language with



the introduction of gender sensitive language – which at one moment seemed the most important, if not the only important issue introduced by the all-encompassing Law – turned gender equality into a *cultural issue* overnight.

The Same-Sex Partnership Law fared much worse. Immediately upon its entry into the parliamentary adoption procedure, the President, the PM's and parliamentary majority's 'boss', who was supposed to confirm the law, unexpectedly declined to do so. His main explanation was that the proposed law contradicted the Constitution of Serbia, which defines marriage exclusively as a union of a man and a woman. Although marriage appears neither in the title nor in the text of the draft law, Vučić seemed to concur with the dissenting SOC stance – the first in years – according to which it is “inadmissible to legally equate same-sex unions with marriage and the family, as stated in the text of the Draft Law, because the marital union is discriminated in this way, as a Christian and legally protected value” (Press release, 2021). This was the only problem SOC officially singled out regarding the Same-Sex Partnership Law. Expected to be at the forefront of this ‘despicable’ debate by both feminists and conservative intellectuals, the Church representatives were unnaturally moderate, choosing rather to express their restrained opinions on the issue of the ‘rape of language’ or its ‘*dženderizacija*’ (Bulović, 2021). Porfirije, now Patriarch, showed understanding, thus repeating the benevolent posture the Church expressed (through him) on the occasion of Brnabić's first appointment. In an interview for the National Broadcasting Service, the Patriarch stated that he “understands the persons with that kind of sexual orientation, their countless administrative problems, challenges and pressures they face, as well as sometimes their need to regulate their status” (RTS Uputnik, 2021). Mild reaction of the first shepherd of the Serbian flock notwithstanding, the law was blocked. It was neither the Church nor the majoritarian

conservative sentiment that put a halt to it, but the President invoking the Constitution which he himself disregards by the very way the office of the President of Serbia is enacted.

6. Into the Future

Our crucial motive for writing this text is the paradox which we, as feminists, often face when we need to explain the situation in Serbia to our friends from abroad, especially those who are facing the rise of anti-gender rhetoric ingrained in the very functioning of their respective countries. On a surface level, Serbia is gender-friendly, it enacts what the women's movement fought for for decades, it keeps the proponents of 'gender ideology' successfully at bay, with the silent consent of the Church. One may ask, what is more to be desired? No feminist in Serbia would, however, claim to be trustful towards the political benevolence of those who turned gender-mainstreaming mechanisms, if only partly and partially, into legal and political reality. We tried to offer a possible explanation: gender equality has been captured by the state for reasons that are not related to the true wellbeing of women and LGBT+ people in Serbia. Rather, we are all reluctant spectators of a political performance of Europeanization directed by the Serbian President, the ultimate broker to whom everyone must appeal, adapting the scene and the script to fit the needs of the regime's expansive catch-all ideology.

At first glance, the future of gender equality in Serbia is secured through adopted strategies, laws and quotas. The realization of a gender-equal society, however, still seems eons away. In this 'gender-haven' in which the Prime Minister and her 'boss' live the dream – he of revolutionizing, she possessed of a reality no other lesbian in the country could possibly have – the number of femicides is exponentially growing, labour rights are crumbling, poverty is on the rise, and the

institutions, especially those dealing with human rights, become ever more meaningless, being among the first to be captured. In a country like this, the façade may change any day: the Church may regain its true voice if and when opportunity arises, and the conservative intelligentsia, which sharpened their pen on gender ideology in the last five years, may appear as a worthy collaborator in some future anti-Europeanization project. With the first change in the populist rhetoric of the regime, anti-gender discourses may resurface, now with the full support of Serbian Orthodox Church. In a travesty of democracy, one can only get travesty of gender equality.

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