



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

Open Forum – Queers and right-wing ideology: Case study of Serbia

Marija Radoman

PhD, Research Associate

Faculty of Philosophy – University of Belgrade

marija.radoman@f.bg.ac.rs

DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 10, Issue 2

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.89995>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons BY

DiGeSt is hosted by Ghent University Website: <https://www.digest.ugent.be/>

Anti-LGBTIQ and theory of conspiracy

The systematic exclusion of trans¹ people from society vividly demonstrates the oppression faced by marginalised groups. These patterns of discrimination are also seen in instances of hatred towards women or non-heterosexual individuals. Within the queer² community, trans people are particularly vulnerable and are often the target of conservative and right-wing movements. It is crucial to acknowledge that the oppression of one group can have a domino effect on the entire LGBTIQ+ community. It is noteworthy that patterns of oppression cannot be observed in isolation, since neoliberal policies tend to fragment solidarity and our common struggles. Despite not being immediately apparent, the entire queer community suffers the consequences of the exclusion of trans people. Similarly, policies of segregation and exclusion based on sexual orientation and gender identity have broader consequences, which may also impact the rights and freedoms of heterosexual cisgender individuals. Right-wing policies and ideology tend to spread, and this can be seen in the example of Serbia, where institutional and non-institutional levels witness increased activity of right-wing groups.

In Serbia, same-sex partnerships and families have yet to be legally recognized due to the absence of a Law on same-sex unions. Additionally, the legal system lacks a key Law on gender identity and the rights of intersex persons, leaving these individuals without adequate protection. The country faces numerous challenges, including poor living standards, deteriorating health and education systems, and widespread crime and corruption. The conservative ruling party in Serbia (Serbian Progressive Party – SNS), and president Aleksandar Vučić (elected in the 2017 election) often use homophobia and transphobia to create panic and polarize people around identity issues. The president's negative statements further strengthen conservative voters and contribute to prejudice against the LGBTIQ+ community. He has declared Serbia a traditional society, is against same-sex marriage and is also unwilling to recognize what he calls "third gender" referring to "gender fluid persons who one day feel as a woman and the next day as a man".³ It is clear that the absence of a legal frame leads to significant biases against the LGBTIQ community in Serbia.

Trans and non-binary people face similar challenges as in other countries, such as poverty, housing and homelessness, discrimination in the workplace, limited access to healthcare, social exclusion, psychological violence, pathologization⁴, issues with bodily autonomy, and physical violence and insecurity in public spaces. Activists who advocate for transgender rights assert that right-wing and fascist policies that target their community threaten not only their safety but also their economic and social rights, as well as the rights of all citizens. Therefore, the struggle for trans rights is a battle for a more equitable society, opposing the emergence of various forms of fascism.

In Serbia, right-wing groups and parties tend to promote heterosexuality as the only natural, acceptable and healthy sexuality, viewing queer sexualities and identities as unacceptable. They believe that gender-nonconforming individuals, particularly trans women, disrupt traditional gender norms that are essential for maintaining heterosexual family structures. In the context of Serbia, "right-wing" is typically characterized by strong nationalism, conservatism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism. It often involves an emphasis

¹ I am using transgender and trans as umbrella terms for various groups like transgender, non-binary, gender-queer, gender-fluid persons, polygender, agender persons, etc.

² The term queer is a descriptive concept that refers to the whole spectrum of non-cis and non-heterosexual identities.

³See: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/566073/Vucic-Dok-sam-predsednik-necu-potpisati-nijedan-zakon-gde-cete-imati-treci-rod>

⁴ Trans organizations in the country aim to remove the pathologization of trans and non-binary identities. However, current legal regulations mandate that initiating the medical transition process is mandatory to alter one's legal gender and related personal ID documents. Transgender individuals are required to undergo at least one year of hormonal therapy under the supervision of psychiatry and endocrinology specialists or to undergo sex-reassignment surgery to acquire a sex reassignment certificate (Simić, 2019).

on preserving Serbian identity, traditional values, and a critical stance towards EU integration and Western influences. Far-right refers to numerous informal groups, including football fan groups, as well as organizations that target specific national enemies (often minority groups in society or other nations) and employ violence (Bakić, 2022), for example, in their participation in the attacks on the Belgrade Pride Parade in 2001 and 2010. But there are significant connections, alliances, and affinities between right-wing and far-right ideologies. In this regard, the Serbian Orthodox Church, specifically certain segments of the church, have also displayed rhetoric resembling far-right rhetoric, particularly when it comes to attacks on LGBTIQ+ people.

The right promotes ideas that are divided into binary categories, such as men/women, heterosexual/homosexual, and normal/deviant. Their rhetoric simplifies reality in a way that discredits certain groups, including those based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or other factors. This ideology often includes conspiracy theories and has been supported by conservative policies, public figures, politicians, and representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church during the late 20th century (Byford, 2006).

Following the period of 1990s and the emergence of nationalism and the war in Yugoslavia, there was a significant increase in anti-LGBT campaigns. During the 2000s, the first Pride Parade in Belgrade was attempted but violently disrupted in 2001 with people being beaten. LGBTIQ+ persons were then seen as a new type of “Serbian enemies”, although they had been also stigmatized before this time.⁵ As the queer community has become more visible in our society, particularly with the emergence of pride parades in 2009 and 2010, homophobia has become a key component of far-right ideology (Radoman, 2013). Additionally, in the past decade, the transgender population has gained greater visibility, resulting in increased discrimination against them on both institutional and social levels (Milanović, 2022).⁶ This is a recurring pattern that often follows when marginalized groups gain more visibility.

Currently, the Church, as well as numerous conservative political parties and members of academia, promote homophobic and transphobic beliefs. They claim that the LGBTIQ+ movement is driven by political interests, such as the “gay lobby”, and view LGBTIQ+ rights as anti-Serbian and/or anti-Orthodox. This belief is based on the idea that the movement is a Western import that seeks to undermine the traditional heterosexual family and the Serbian national identity.

Anti-trans arguments

When discussing anti-trans campaigns, it’s important to recognize them as a subset of broader anti-LGBTIQ policies. Anti-trans arguments, regardless of their origin on the political spectrum—be it from the right or under the guise of “feminist” ideologies—often employ similar rhetoric and focus on the perceived threat to the majority cisgender population, heterosexual individuals, and families. This threat is typically framed as the danger posed by trans women to cisgendered women, particularly in the case of trans-exclusionary radical

⁵ The far-right and anti-Semitic organization *Obraz*, which participated in the disruption of the 2001 Pride Parade in Belgrade, specifically targeted LGBTIQ+ people, often labelling them with the derogatory term *perverts*. Contemporary right-wing rhetoric has evolved to a somewhat more modern and updated approach, but it still remains consistently populist. The highly conservative parliamentary political party Dveri strongly opposes what they perceive as the totalitarianism of LGBTIQ+ ideology and gay lobbyists. They are vehemently against the alleged promotion of homosexuality to children and advocate for a ban on pride parades, citing them as provocations within the context of a distinctively Christian and traditional Serbian environment.

⁶ Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable rise in visibility for organizations focused on promoting and protecting the rights of transgender, intersex, and gender non-binary individuals in the post-Yugoslav space. Alongside existing organizations dedicated to the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community, nine new activist groups have been established (Milanović, 2022).

feminism (TERF).⁷ Within academic discourse, a distinction is made between the anti-gender movement, which is part of the right and the anti-trans movement which is declaratively part of the left, associated with specific radical feminist circles (Milanović, 2022). Some authors argue that we should not label those who hold transphobic views as feminists, as it perpetuates patriarchal logic and power relations (Bobičić, 2023). Others refer to them as proponents of conservative feminism (Bilić, Nord, & Milanović, 2022).

Transphobia is evident in Serbia within both right-wing beliefs and the radical “left” and “feminist” spectrum.⁸ There appears to be an ideological connection between the right and the “left” and “feminist” groups which arose in recent years.⁹ Many activists in the country and the region rightfully recognize TERF as a danger and a threat that requires a response (Bakić, 2020)¹⁰. TERF poses a significant threat to trans and other queer individuals. This is not only because they wrap their views in feminist and left-wing ideas, using concepts of class struggle and solidarity (while simultaneously rejecting the legacy of the left and second-wave feminism), but also because they express support for proposals made by conservative parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church (Radoman, 2023). Historically, it’s not the first time that the right has appropriated left-wing rhetoric and concepts. However, it is a relatively recent development for liberal and self-declared pro-left and pro-feminist groups, who self-identify as “feminists” and are publicly recognized as part of the feminist movement, to employ right-wing arguments and rhetoric. I have the impression that in Serbia, the rest of the left and feminist scene still does not fully acknowledge the issue of transphobia and the exclusion of trans people as a serious problem and a symptom of the crisis within the left.

There are several similar arguments on the right and among TERF currents that contribute to negative attitudes towards trans people:

- Trans people don’t exist, it’s some kind of construct produced by “gender ideology”. This argument essentially aligns with the rhetoric of conspiracy theories, suggesting that there is an “evil” conspiracy or “forces” (Byford, 2006) behind transgender identity. For the right, trans identities are viewed as something “imported” from the outside, purportedly part of policies driven by anti-Western forces that threaten the Serbian people (as exemplified by the position of the president). TERF employs a

⁷ As researchers and activists advocating for the protection of transgender rights, we have been using the term “TERF” for years. These groups also use this term but consider it a kind of attack on them, claiming that it delegitimises and offends them (these are mainly comments on social media). Bojan Bilić explains the use of the term: “While ‘TERF’ is widely used by trans supporters, it is perceived as a misogynist offence by trans-exclusionary activists” (Bilić, 2022).

⁸ I use quotation marks because these groups do not genuinely represent left-wing or feminist ideologies; rather, they employ these labels as a guise to promote extremely conservative and essentialist concepts that ultimately amount to transphobia. Author Bojan Bilić provides examples of organizations and groups from Serbia and explains their ideology (Bilić, 2022).

⁹ TERF began as a global phenomenon that gradually infiltrated local contexts around 2017-2018, initially appearing sporadically. In the subsequent years, it became a more noticeable shift to the right within some leftist and radical feminist circles (in the sense of an escalation of anti-trans hatred and arguments). It predominantly involved informal groups, movements, leftist organizations, and individuals affiliated with feminist NGOs. However, I lack a precise assessment of how transgender people were simultaneously treated within the far-right spectrum. Trans hostility was part of a general anti-LGBT sentiment through the years. Nevertheless, in recent years, as the transgender movement has gained increasing visibility, and the trans community have become more distinct as a separate marginalised group, the right has also started perceiving and targeting them as such. This is best exemplified by textbook censorship, statements from political leaders, remarks from some parts of the church, and the positions of right-wing conservative parties like Dveri.

¹⁰ The activities of the radical right and TERF activists are not only related to Serbia, but examples can be found in neighbouring countries (Čolović et al., 2020; Hodžić, Poštić, & Kajtezović, 2022; Bilić & Milanović, 2022).

similar argument to justify its belief, claiming that the acceptance of trans identities is a result of the spread of gender ideology or the influence of postmodern theory. According to this perspective, trans people are seen as pawns in the ideological manipulations of certain groups, denying their authentic existence and dismissing their real identities. Right-wing and TERF activists believe in only one “reality”—the sex a person is assigned at birth. This argument not only denies the existence of trans people but also echoes conservative claims from the not-so-distant past that denied the presence of gays and lesbians in our country.

- The argument that a trans identity is a form of deviation or disorder, something pathological. This point of view does not outright deny the existence of trans people. Instead, it interprets them as suffering from a “disease” or “mental disorder”, labelling trans individuals as less healthy elements of society. Both the right-wing and TERF currents align in viewing the adjustment of sex as impossible, asserting that gender and sex are fixed categories assigned at birth. These ideologies effectively deny the existence of gender, recognizing only biological sex. This perspective led to an alliance in 2022 between the conservative segments of academia, the Church, and parts of the “left” and “feminists” with right-wing campaigns. They advocated for various changes, including the censorship of some parts of 8th-grade biology textbooks. Their goal was to prevent what they perceived as the indoctrination of children, intending to avoid educating them about the distinctions between gender and sex. This type of argument perceives society through a binary hierarchy in which trans people occupy a lower position. Trans individuals challenge the “natural division” into men and women, making it more than just a matter of different sexual orientations but rather something more fundamental and inherent. Consequently, this categorization results in the denial of trans people’s ability to claim the same rights as cisgender individuals, including the right to express themselves as they wish. This imposition is predetermined by birth, echoing the rhetoric used by the right and fascists when discussing ethnicity and race. The argument that pathologizes transgender people leads to increased control over the lives and bodies of trans individuals, as well as other marginalised groups, who are perceived as “inferior” (Sajzor, 2023).
- The trans movement is viewed by some as a threat to the rights of others, including the majority, women, and children. This argument portrays trans people as an “enemy within”, a concept often associated with conspiracy theories. Right-wing politicians find the *promotion of homosexuality and transgenderism to minors scandalous*¹¹, while TERF proponents argue that trans people, particularly trans women, pose a threat to the rights of other women. This argumentation follows a principle akin to modern forms of racism, where an incident involving a member of a marginalized group, whether true or not, is generalized to the entire population, fostering panic and fear of that group. Some theorists refer to these as “quasi-arguments” (Bobičić, 2023). Furthermore, both the right-wing and TERF movements perceive school programs that educate on the distinction between sex and gender, as well as those that support transgender children in living according to their gender identity, as forms of indoctrination and child abuse (Milanović, 2022).

¹¹ This is a quote from one of the well-known anti-LGBT and anti-gender political parties called Dveri. It is mentioned that Bosko Obradovic, the leader of this party, called for a revision of the 8th-grade elementary school textbooks because the textbooks state that “the right to gender identity and sexual orientation is a legally guaranteed right for everyone.” The Dveri movement argues that this statement violates the Constitution. Additionally, the leader of Dveri wrote on Twitter that the fact that foreign entities are printing textbooks in Serbia suggests the “beginning of an occupation of the country”. Source: <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/dveri-objavile-rat-biologiji-traze-da-se-menjaju-udzbenici/>

Using these arguments and rhetoric, both the right and TERF activists isolate trans people, especially trans women, pushing them into invisibility and denying their identity. Both narratives, whether from the right, the “left”, or the “feminist” spectrum, have the effect of spreading fear and panic among the broader population.

In Serbia, radical feminists often overlook the essential connection between transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny. They fail to recognize that the hate directed at diverse and targeted minority groups is a tactic employed by conservative and nationalist parties and movements to isolate and marginalize them. Paradoxically, by not acknowledging the interconnection between the hatred faced by trans people and the rest of the queer community, the TERF movement betrays both cis lesbians and gays within its ranks.

References

- Bakić, A. (2020, 29 December). TERF: Radikalna desnica u feminističkom ruhu. <https://voxfeminae.net/pravednost/terf-radikalna-desnica-u-feministic-kom-ruhu/>
- Bakić, J. (2022). Politička upotreba homofobije navijačkih plemena prilikom “Parada ponosa”. *Sociologija*, 64(3), 454-472. <https://doi.org/10.2298/SOC2203454B>
- Bilić, B., Nord, I., & Milanović, A. (2022). *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*. Bristol University Press.
- Bilić, B. (2022). "(Post)socialist gender troubles: transphobia in Serbian leftist activism." In B. Bilić, I. Nord, & A. Milanović (Eds.), *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*. (pp. 155-176). Bristol University Press.
- K1 Televizija. (2023, April, 11). Trans osobe i feministkinje u sukobu. Zašto? Nađa Bobičić, Matija Stefanović | Mi danas [video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MM8ujQIZSo>
- Byford, J. (2006). Teorija zavere: Srbija protiv 'novog svetskog poretka' [Conspiracy theory: Serbia vs. the New World Order]. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42792741_Teorija_zavere_Srbija_protiv_novog_svetskog_poretka Conspiracy theory Serbia vs the New World Order
- Čolović, N., Gonan, L., & Gonan, M. (2020). Feminizam i transfobija. *Slobodni filozofski*. <https://slobodnifilozofski.com/2020/12/feminizam-i-transfobija.html>
- Hodžić, J. Poštić & A. Kajtezović. (2022). (Ne)vidljivo T: Trans aktivizam u Hrvatskoj (2004.-2019). Eds. B. Bilić & A. Milanović (Eds.), *Postjugoslo/avenski TRANS životi aktivizmi kulture*. (pp. 473-493). Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut.
- Milanović, A. (2022). The Influence of Print and Online Media on Spreading the Transphobia in Serbia. *Sociologija*, 64(3), 473-493. <https://doi.org/10.2298/SOC2203473M>
- Radoman, M. (2013). Analiza homofobije i diskursi o homoseksualnosti u Srbiji. In M. Lazić, & S. Cvejić (Eds.), *Promene osnovnih struktura društva Srbije u periodu ubrzane transformacije*, (pp. 347-363). Institute for Sociological Research, Belgrade.
- Radoman, M. (2023, April, 17). Prebrojavanje hromozoma: desnica, nauka i transfobija. *Bilten*. Bilten Regionali Portal. <https://www.bilten.org/?p=44482>
- Sajzor, S. (2023). Telesna autonomija kao zajednički cilj pokreta za oslobođenje. Transcript of the lecture given by Sajzor. Held at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IFDT) in Belgrade. https://sonjasajzor.wordpress.com/2023/10/01/telesna-autonomija-kao-zajednicki-cilj-pokreta-zaoslobodenje/?fbclid=IwAR2a7XJSjleNFA9qYiTWPzwRoixM2SAu_gG-Lo5n-ltsQXgTr6Rbobixapk
- Simić, J. (2019). Life in Legal Limbo – Trans* Persons in Serbia. In L. Čičkarić & Z. Mršević (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues and Perspectives on Gender Research*. (pp. 154-173). Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade. <https://idn.org.rs/wp->

[content/uploads/2020/01/Contemporary_Issues_and_Perspectives_on_Gender_Research_sajt.pdf](#)