

## PRIDE AND PUNISHMENT: THE CHURCH, THE STATE, AND PRIDE PARADES IN SERBIA (2012-2024)

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**Abstract:** *A process of desecularization, sacralizing the nation, and retraditionalizing gender roles has been ongoing in post-Yugoslav Serbia since the late 80s, but has gained new steam since 2012, when a new government of a coalition similar to the 1990s politics was formed, albeit this time with the ostensible aim of joining the EU. Against the backdrop of these processes, Serbian identity has been constructed in a particularly masculine way. And although the use of homophobia to Other the ‘Enemy within’ is not new in Serbian nationalism, a notable shift has been observed as Serbia has been pushed to accept LGBT bodies as part of its Europeanisation process, which is now further complicated by the war in Ukraine. The pride parades, which Serbia has had to endure due to its European integration process, and the tactical decision to appoint a lesbian prime minister, have contributed to the impossibility to openly rely on stereotypical homophobic means of othering. As such, the focus of the ‘enemy’ within shifted from the homosexual to other ‘Others’: Albanians, migrants traversing the Balkan route, non-maternal women, and most recently, ‘gender ideology’ in biology textbooks and gender-sensitive language. Tracing the debates in the Serbian media, especially with regard to the discursive chasm between LGBT communities/feminisms and the Serbian Orthodox Church, but also with changes in the dominant media discourse, this paper contends that nationalist othering in Serbia is consistently reshaped in order to accommodate the changing political climates. It demonstrates the moving boundaries in the construction of the nation, which constantly fluctuating representations of identities stereotypically associated with LGBT communities, masculinities and femininities, ‘Serbhood’, and Orthodoxy.*

**Keywords:** *the postsecular, religion, gender, sexuality, nationalism, Pride Parades, Serbia, public space, media discourse analysis.*

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## Introduction

Reporting on Gay Pride Parades in Serbia, viewed by many as a necessary step on the road to EU accession, their holding perceived in the general public as the Government caving to outside pressure, is an interesting indicator of where public opinion stands on domestic and international politics, definitions of gender roles and family constellations, as well as how the community of the nation is imagined. Especially interesting is the reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church, seen as a strong keeper of national values (Blagojević, 1995, p.24), whose discourse has since 2000 increasingly been shaped in direct opposition to that of LGBT activists, represented primarily not as sinful, but as a Westernized *traitor* to the nation (see e. g. Ilić, 2014). The Church is viewed as aligned with Russia rather than the 'West', and 'first' rather than 'other' Serbia.

The trope of the "two Serbias", fully revived in the 1990s but present in some form prior to that – the 'first' Serbia being authentic, heavenly and Orthodox, and the 'other' Serbia being modern, European, cosmopolitan (Naumović, 2009, p. 57-58) – includes other dichotomies frequently attributed to those factions in public discourse, if lazy and stereotypical. Some of these are the binary pairings of Russia/EU, Orthodox/secular, public masculinity, private femininity and strict gender roles leading to maximum procreation/feminism, homosexuality, and trans bodies and identities. (Igrutinović *et al.*, 2015; Igrutinović, 2015).

Public space is usually colored nationalist and gendered masculine (cf. Connell, 1990, 1992; Peterson, 1999), and this is quite persuasively applicable in the context of post-secular, post-Socialist, post-Milošević Serbia. Serbian religio-sexual nationalism, decidedly heterosexist (Sremac, 2015), is in this respect difficult to distinguish from constructed identities such as "nationalist masculinity" (Greenberg, 2006) and "hegemonic masculinity" (Peterson, 2000; Nagel, 1998). Hegemonic masculinity requires a feminine Other (Connell, 1990), and this Otherness has in Serbia frequently been projected onto the LGBT community, most notably gay men, feminized for this purpose (Connell, 1992; Veličković, 2012). With Vučić deciding to take a firm stance towards ensuring Pride Parades to appease the EU, and Brnabić's appointment, new Otherings had to take place to appease 'first-Serbia' representatives, at least in official media discourse.

The very first Pride Parade in Belgrade was attempted in 2001. The slogan "There is Room for Everyone" under which it was organized proved tragically unbecoming when it was violently attacked by right-wing groups and football hooligans, many of its participants badly beaten. The next Parade did not take place until 2010, when the consistently pro-EU DS-led government finally decided to allow the walk to happen. Though the participants remained safe this time, the city was ransacked by organized groups of hooligans and resembled a war zone for much of the day, as the police fought back and many officers were injured. The Parade of 2010 remains in the shadow of these events.

The years selected for the brief overview below (2012-2024) are intriguing for various reasons, the most important one being that the EU accession process has increasingly focused on human rights, culminating in the European Commission's Enlargement Strategy of 2013, which explicitly emphasises the holding of Pride Parades. In 2012 a new government, popularly termed the 'Red-Black Coalition' (comprising Dačić's Serbian Socialist Party, formerly led by Milošević, and Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party, ceded from Šešelj's Radical Party) similar to the one gracing the 1990s, was formed, but this time paradoxically with the ostensible aim of joining the EU, and it is interesting to observe how political agents usually seen as epitomizing 'first Serbia' values would discursively deal with arguably 'other Serbia' pet issues. I argue that a hybrid nationalism/masculinity is formed in an attempt to encompass most potential points on the political spectrum. In the Serbian media, the selected years showcase the gradual but relatively precipitous preparation for the eventual acceptance of the Parade as an inevitable event (reversed in 2022 when a geopolitically relevant EuroPride was slated to take place) but also ways in which opposition to them is channelled by the state through the

media – from openly siding with proponents of rigid masculinity and nationalism, through invisibilizing the participants and occluding the Parade by way of hypermasculine images (vaguely) associated with it, to devising other Others that could more appropriately serve as a foil to the heteronormative, masculine ‘us’ of the nation. Whether or not – and how – the Church presents its opposition to the Parade reveals both its current relationship with the state and geopolitical positioning.

## 1. (I) 2012-3 (PM Ivica Dačić): ‘A victory for Serbia’

### 1.1. 2012: *Inside out*

The year 2012, apart from being interesting as the first time the new ‘Red-Black’ coalition was to face the Parade, also marked the first Pride Week planned for Serbia, projected to culminate in the Pride Parade. The entire manifestation was apparently envisaged as a kind of a challenge directed at the Serbian Orthodox Church. Pride Week commenced on the day the SOC celebrated Holy Martyrs Faith, Love and Hope, and their mother Sophia, and a panel entitled “Who do Faith, Love and Hope belong to?” was held during the manifestation. The most provocative event by far was the exhibition *Ecce Homo* by Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin. In this exhibition, Ohlson depicts twelve moments from the life of Jesus Christ, mixing the imagery and symbolism of church art and queer culture while positioning Jesus in present day Sweden. The exhibition was first held in Stockholm in 1998, and Serbia was the first and to date only Eastern European country to have the photographs on display. (cf. Igrutinović & van den Berg, 2020)

Patriarch Irinej, prompted by the right-wing group Dveri, gave an interview in which he said he was “waiting for the state to do its part, for the officials to react” (*Alo!*, 29 September 2012) to the scandal of the exhibition and the parade. Then, in an open letter published on the official church website, he appeals to Ivica Dačić in “the name of the Serbian Orthodox Church” to “use the authority of the Prime Minister to bar” the pride parade, “whose real name is ‘shame parade’”. (Irinej, 2012)

The Prime Minister heeds the plea and claims that the ban on the Parade was a ‘victory for Serbia’, as the imaginary community of the nation can be said to control the public space: “no one will be telling anyone what should take place in Belgrade – not the European Union, not any other countries in the world, not any extremist or radical organizations, either” (*Blic*, 3 October 2012). Consequently, the Parade was symbolically held inside, within the four walls, while the social media was paradoxically inundated by photographs of the contested exhibition, shared mostly by those opposed to it.

### 1.2. 2013: *And stay in!*

Patriarch Irinej, asked about his position on the impending (and later banned) Pride Parade, said for the daily *Politika* that “[n]othing is as endangered in these tragic times we live in as marriage and the family. Both marriage and the family are being destroyed intentionally, especially by way of the gay parade”. The Patriarch added that the last thing the Serbian people would need to finally disappear off the face of the earth would be for this “plague” to befall us and that something should be done instead to stimulate the falling birth rates (*Politika*, 26 September 2013). The Patriarch’s statement can fully be placed within the discourse of religio-sexual nationalism – the imposition of ‘proper’ gender roles in Serbian public space apparently contributes to more ethnic Serbs being born and that is the extent of the Church’s concern. Once more, we see fully secular, pro-natalist discourse coming from the head of the church.

Anti-Pride sentiments and extreme security threats were widely reported on, allegedly leading to a ban on the Parade. The ban inspired several hundred activists to instead organize an ad hoc protest walk at night (*DW*, 28 September 2013). During this night walk, the gates of Vaznesenjska church in

Belgrade were crashed. Some unofficial reports at the time stated that the staunchly anti-LGBT priest Arsenije rang the church bells to express his opposition to this midnight parade, and that it was the participants of the walk who crashed the gates in response to this. Another battle between the SOC and the LGBT had thus apparently been fought.

## 2. (II) 2014-16 (PM Aleksandar Vučić): “I am not going to the parade”

### 2.1. 2014: Can one be ‘out’ in Serbia?

The Patriarch once more felt compelled to personally sign a statement on the topic of the Pride Parade in 2014, a prominent portion of which consisted of the assertion that those taxpaying citizens of Serbia who also happened to be LGBT activists organizing the Parade had no right to burden the “entire state apparatus” and cause the state significant material expenses in order to secure their safety from violence: “one thing is certain: you have the right to parade, but only at your own expense and the expense of those giving you orders [...] not at the expense of Serbia” (B92, 23 September 2014). Those giving you orders’ probably referred to the EU or the US – the outside Other instructing and commanding the Other within, clearly juxtaposed to Serbia and its ‘good’ citizens.

National identity was even more clearly opposed to LGBT identities in then deacon Nenad Ilić’s article entitled “The False Narrative of Pride”, published in *Sabornik*, bulletin of the Belgrade Metropolitan Church on the day of the Parade. Ilić contends that the “pride” parade is a calculated attack on national pride, and that the rainbow flag, symbolizing the LGBT community worldwide, is problematic mostly because it “defies” nations (Ilić, 2014)

Finally, after the Parade had been successfully completed, the SOC endorsed yet another symbolic juxtaposition of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. Organized by Dveri, a nationalist right-wing political party, an “all-national procession celebrating the sanctity of life, marriage and birth” received open support from the clergy. Commencing in St. Sava’s Temple, the prayer procession followed the route that the Pride Parade had passed. In order to “purge” the city of the Parade, the participating priests reportedly used censers throughout the route. The rift between the Church and LGBT communities – but also, symbolically, between what is perceived as “traditional” Serbian and “liberal” Western values – was arguably exacerbated by the 2014 battle for public space headed by the Church. The prayer procession in particular demonstrates an imagined community of the “pure” in terms of religious nationalism. Defined by intentionally excluding the unruly Other (in legal and social, not only religious terms), this community is ironically *predicated* on excommunication. Exclusion as the defining trait of religious/sexual nationalism is thus paradoxically illustrated by the use of the *communal* prayer (Igrutinović *et al.*, 2015).

There were also more secular reiterations of ‘us’ as opposed to the parading ‘them’. One common strategy was constructing an oppositional pairing between the Gay Pride Parade and the grandiose Military Parade unabashedly prepared in Putin’s honor, announced on September 25, exactly three days before the Pride Parade was to take place, and occupying much of the media space featuring the word “parade” for the following fortnight or so. Instantly deflecting attention from the Pride Parade, the military parade was placed in clear juxtaposition to it from the moment it was announced by the Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić. Reporting from the press conference where the announcement was made illustrates this strategy well. Blic for 26 September features a spread entitled “Vučić: We’re expecting Putin on 16 October”, while the very first subheading quotes the same PM as saying “I’m not going to the [Gay Pride] parade” (Blic, 26 September 2014: 4-5). On the same date – which is two days before the Pride Parade and twenty days before the military one – Informer, as this tabloid often does with many topics, uses more bombastic language to accentuate the contrast. Its front

page declares in big letters: “Putin is coming! A military parade for the first time in Belgrade after 1985!” immediately followed by a quotation from Vučić saying “I’ve no intention of going to the gay parade”. The front page text continues inside in the same constantly contrasting vein: entitled “Putin and the military parade are coming”, it includes subheadings such as “Proud of our military” and “I’m not going to the gay parade” (*Informer*, 26 September 2014: 2-3) (see Igrutinović, 2015).

The Pride Parade in physical public space was itself enclosed by the four hyper-masculine walls of the police guarding its participants, who were themselves de facto hidden from the public eye. All that remained for their representation and visibility was media space, which was largely denied by way of a similar mechanism – occluded by various hyper-masculine concerns vaguely associated with the Pride Parade, its participants managed to stay “in” while being “out”. (Igrutinović, 2015) This allowed PM Vučić to have his cake and eat it too – hold a Pride Parade to appease the EU while pandering discursively to ‘first-Serbia’ nationalists through state-controlled media.

## 2.2. 2015-2016: the other Other

In 2015, after the Pride Parade appeared to have become an inevitable and officially established annual event, there were few officially organized anti-Pride actions. Remarkably, the Serbian Orthodox Church decided to remain completely silent on the issue, which did not prevent some media from representing clerics of the sectarian ‘True’ Serbian Orthodox Church, who did organize a walk to cleanse the streets after the Parade, as members of the SOC, thus exacerbating the LGBT/SOC rift once more (Kurir, 20 September 2015). Right-wing organizations were apparently mainly pre-occupied with a new ‘other’, raising panic about the perceived ‘invasion’ of refugees, and no longer interested in Pride events. On the other hand, solidarity for refugees was explicitly expressed at Pride events (RTV, 20 September 2015). The ‘two Serbias’ were thus consistently divided on the refugee issue as well.

## 3. (III) 2017-2023 (PM Ana Brnabić): “Ana is here”

### 3.1. 2017-2019 Ana Is (Not) Here

The appointment of Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister – as the first out lesbian to serve as a PM in the Balkans – garnered quite a bit of positive attention in the Western media. The fact that she had previously been outed from without, as it were (it was President Vučić that declared her sexual orientation, adding that it does not matter to him) did not seem to dampen the celebration. That the appointment was made official on 29 June 2017 – the day after Vidovdan, the church and national holiday dedicated to the memory of the battle of Kosovo, the heart of the Serbian national myth – was widely seen on social media in Serbia as symbolic, and largely not in a good way, especially as the Kosovo issue had been gaining prominence in the public eye. The new national leader so at odds with religio-sexual nationalism and hegemonic masculinity appointed on Vidovdan among talks of Serbia renouncing Kosovo was regarded as a deliberate provocation.

Serving a liturgy in Kosovo, Bishop Atanasije gave a sermon in which he called the new PM a ‘non-birther’ (*nerotkinja*, an existing Serbian word usually derogatorily meant to denote a ‘barren woman’) and ‘anti-birther’ (*antirotkinja*, a neologism apparently meant to denote a lesbian). “They want to take away our right to have children” and “push on us not only barren non-birthers, but anti-birthers, those who are against Serbian children”, he opined on the Serbian government. A slew of negative comments from other bishops follows, in the same pro-natalist vein – but focusing on abortion rather than on the new Prime Minister. This is followed by a large-scale pronatalist shift, both in the government and the SOC, moving away from debates on Pride Parades.

Participating in Pride Parades since 2016 when she was a minister in the Government, and occasioning the “Ana is here” banner in 2017, Ana Brnabić once more makes an appearance on September 16, 2018. She is cited as saying that the manifestation “proves Serbia is not a Balkans, homophobic country” (*Blic*, 18 September 2016), indicating a burgeoning homonationalism. Pride Parades in this period became largely uncontested annual events, but arguably ‘defanged’ as generators of true social change. The Pride Parade of 2018, for instance, entailed fewer police with less riot equipment than ever, it was longer than ever and included a party afterwards – but this time some activists openly refuse to participate in the manifestation because of concerns around its depoliticization. Azdejković, for instance, claims that “the Parade has lost its political tone, there wasn’t a single banner present, it has instead turned into a carnival in Rio. What I’d like to know is how much all of this cost” (*Republika*, 17 September 2018). Compromises were made with the heteronationalist status quo, and various vents found in controlling women, football hooliganism, and anti-Albanian sentiments, which were pushed in the mainstream media. For instance, a series of fabricated incidents concerning ethnic Albanians living and working in Serbia began to occupy public attention after a succession of usually old photographs found on FB profiles of various bakery owners around Serbia, where various persons can be seen showing the symbol of Albania with their hands, were published in the media. An article in the magazine *Vreme*, a rare piece of investigative journalism, discovers right-wing parapolice structures connected with the government are behind this spate of scandals (*Vreme*, 8 May 2019). This particular Othering was thankfully in no way supported by the SOC.

### 3.2. 2022: *The Russian Factor*

When it was decided in 2019 that Belgrade would host EuroPride 2022, no one had expected that the reluctant acceptance of annual Pride Parades would take a sharp downward turn consequent to the growing geopolitical tensions further exacerbated by the escalation of the war in Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill, in his sermon on March 6, 2022, denounced the ‘West’ for issuing a “test of loyalty” to its power. This test is, in his words, “very simple and at the same time terrible: it’s a gay parade” (Larin, 2024). This may have been interpreted as a nod to Serbian actors, as processions and protests against EuroPride were numerous and contained a plethora of pro-Russian imagery, including a 600-meter long Serbian-Russian flag.

On September 11, Patriarch Porfirije surprisingly leads a public prayer “for the sanctity of marriage and family” preceded by a “procession for the salvation of Serbia”. In his sermon, the Patriarch expressed his “opposition” to the EuroPride parade which Belgrade “does not need”, while issuing a “request” that the state withdraw the disputed textbooks mentioning gender and homosexuality (*Kurir*, 11 September 2022). Doing this, he changes the topic – from the more explicitly pro-Russian anti-gay rhetoric to the anti-gender rhetoric also widely present in the EU as well. A public campaign of the Church in opposition to the new Gender Equality Law follows, and homosexuality is rarely mentioned. The official Church offers no commentary on further Pride Parades, but in 2024, in a fascinating repetition of history, a man behind the gate of the Ascension Church once again purged parade participants with incense (*Danas*, 7 September 2024).

## 4. Conclusion: wounded Serbian masculinity and the interchangeable paradigm of Othering

In 2012 and 2013, under PM Ivica Dačić, the parades were banned, which was explicitly encouraged by the Church. In 2014, after a reshuffling of power and yet another new government, this time wholly controlled by PM Vučić, the first fully successful Pride Parade was held amid much conniption

– but surprisingly little organized resistance – from various sides. The Church was explicitly opposed. The Parades of 2015 and 2016 took place in a more tranquil and accepting media atmosphere. The discourse surrounding them also shows a new us/them dichotomy, with refugees traversing Serbia at the time being placed in the category of Other.

In 2017, Ana Brnabić, the first openly lesbian Prime Minister in the Balkans came to power and participated in the first three Pride Parades. This appointment caused a furore among certain Church dignitaries – but this was later diverted, both in the Church and the state, away from LGBT issues and towards general misogyny, enforcing more rigid gender roles, and blaming women for falling birth rates, especially among Kosovo Serbs.

In 2022, tensions were heightened amid a geopolitically fraught situation – EuroPride was held in Belgrade following political protests and prayer processions that were pro-Russian in tone, and the Church joined in the opposition, but diverted it into animosity towards a more abstract and palatable – and less geopolitically determined – ‘gender ideology’.

It was after the first successful parade in 2014, during a football game against Albania, where the national sanctum of the stadium was penetrated by a drone carrying a “Greater Albania” flag including the disputed territory of Kosovo, that the since then oft used homophobic slur “Vučiću pederu” [“Vučić, you faggot”] was first reported in mainstream media as being chanted – but the report omitted the second part of the chant, accusing Vučić of having “betrayed Serbia”. ‘Faggot’ is a slur that has a connotation of ‘traitor’, similar to the slur used against Milošević after the expulsion of Serbs from Croatia: “Slobo pizdo, Krajinu si izd’o” [Slobodan, you pussy, you’ve betrayed Krajina]. In both cases, the feminized Other is being projected, with a national shame of being defeated, humiliated, penetrated. Interestingly enough, a chant “Vučiću, Šiptaru, izdao si Srbiju” [Vučić, you shqiptar<sup>2</sup>, you’ve betrayed Serbia] directed at Vučić and containing an *anti-Albanian* slur was heard at an *anti-Pride* protest in 2019 – showing that using the paradigm of Othering as interchangeable is seamlessly intuitive.

It can thus easily be used by the powers that be as well. If Pride Parades need to be held for EU accession, then instead of LGBT communities, other groups can be othered and used as a foil: feminists or all women, migrants, Albanians/Croats/Bosnians – all, interestingly enough, also seen as EU-aligned. The current foil is often based on current (geo)political considerations and is mercifully not always taken up by official Church discourse, which tends to remain within the confines of religio-sexual nationalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Originally the ethnic name for Albanians in the Albanian language, but generally perceived as very derogatory when used by other ethnic groups in the Balkans.

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